

*Vernon Lee*

*Gospels of Anarchy*

*Essays on True and Sham  
Spirituality*

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*Contents*

**EDITOR'S FOREWORD: VERNON LEE'S ESSAYS ON TRUE AND SHAM SPIRITUALITY**

*Notes for the 2020 electronic edition*

**ORIGINAL TITLE PAGE**

*Dedication*

**I. GOSPELS OF ANARCHY**

**II. EMERSON AS A TEACHER OF LATTER-DAY TENDENCIES**

**III. DETERIORATION OF SOUL**

**IV. TOLSTOI AS PROPHET – NOTES ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ASCETICISM**

**V. TOLSTOI ON ART**

**VI. NIETZSCHE AND THE “WILL TO POWER”**

**VII. PROFESSOR JAMES AND THE “WILL TO BELIEVE”**

**VIII. ROSNY AND THE FRENCH ANALYTICAL NOVEL**

**IX. THE ECONOMIC PARASITISM OF WOMEN**

**X. RUSKIN AS A REFORMER**

**XI. ON MODERN UTOPIAS – AN OPEN LETTER TO H. G. WELLS**

**XII. A POSTSCRIPT ABOUT MR. WELLS AND UTOPIAS**

**BACK COVER**

*Vernon Lee*

## ***Editor's Foreword: Vernon Lee's Essays on True and Sham Spirituality***

In 1909 Vernon Lee published in a volume, whose title was *Gospels of Anarchy*, some essays she had written between the end of the century and 1907. It is an unusual book, which requires sympathy and interpretation by the reader already when reading the title, because the book doesn't speak at all of anarchy in the sense one would expect: there is no mention of Bakunin, nor of any other theoretical or practical anarchist, and instead it speaks of Stirner, and also of Ruskin and William James who are also classified as anarchists, not without surprising the reader at first sight. To orient ourselves and to understand what this book is about, even the subtitle by Vernon Lee (*Other Contemporary Studies*) does not help, and if anything we could try to invent a new title, something like: *Essays on Positivism and a few Anti-Positivism*. Because the book speaks of this: what was the culture of the Victorian age and the era of positivism, what remains of it in the author's present, around the year 1900, what could be born tomorrow. Except that the word "positivism" never occurs in the text: it does not belong to Vernon Lee's vocabulary, and also the anti-positivist reaction finds no mention except in the personal philosophy that Vernon Lee was building for herself in those years, and that probably has gone unnoticed by the world.

*Gospels of Anarchy* speaks of nineteenth-century culture under a double facies: it hints at the obvious one of the spirit of gross scientism, and focuses all attention on the less obvious one of the post-romantic and unrealistic restorations of spirituality that carry within themselves a kinship with positivism as well as the key of their failure, which are both revealed in the persistent intellectualism that imprints all forms of alleged religiosity, rediscovered or founded from scratch: this judgment falls mercilessly on Emerson, Tolstoy, Ruskin, William James with his "will to believe", and finally on what seems to Vernon Lee the latest version of this spirit, the planning attitude of the future of the new socialist Utopias, targeted through H.G. Wells, which "think about the future" instead of "taking care of the present", that is to say they plan the future with abstract thought and unrealistic velleities rather than accepting what could be prepared by taking thoughtful care of the present. This is the meaning of the *Anarchy* label: the obtuseness of the nineteenth century, which by claiming to restore the mythical spirituality which it longs for through the

artifice dominated by the intellect, falls into “disorder”. Here are two cases:

Disorder that one of the most unflinching discoverers of social untruth, Tolstoi, condemns not one century’s art, but nearly all the art of all the ages, because it does not point the moral like “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” And if—I may re-state my perhaps audacious opinion—when an illustrious psychologist like William James preaches the *Will to believe*, there is not merely disorder postulated in the dislocated universe, but disorder actually present... (*Gospels of Anarchy*, p. 361).

“Disorder”, this is the author’s key word, is the state of mind for which a connoisseur of men such as Tolstoy arrives to profess a childish, though admirably disinterested, pedagogical aesthetic, for which a masterpiece of universal literature is not his *War and Peace*, but *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; for which a psychologist like William James preaches the artificial restoration of belief through acts of the will, as if such an idea were not an obvious absurdity, as if men were not condemned to believe what seems true to them in sincerity, and to do what seems right to them given what their education and life experience has been. Why this “disorder” is called *Anarchy*, is explained to us by Vernon Lee in the first of the essays: because relativism and anomy of the contemporary age, the irremediable and not to be regretted loss of the set of certainties of our ancestors, would require an adequate philosophy that is not yet there: but in the meantime the men try to build one with artificial operations in which everyone puts himself or herself at the centre of the world, and in this sense the resulting “disordered” thought is anarchist, that is, individualistic to the extreme and devoid of love; for this reason the first of the *Gospels of Anarchy* discussed in the book is that which we can read in Stirner’s work, whose version of the anarchist Gospel is very literal. The other *Gospels* are not as literal: they come from authors who are eminently “disordered” because they have given much and produced so much as they have loved, known and concretely understood the multiplicity and variety of the world, but then have not been able to find the redemption they sought in the love for Reality which they have also taken care of, and have sought it in utopias of restoration that all their philosophical presuppositions destroy as soon as they are born. There are certain aspects which are common to all the anarchist *Gospels*: first of all, ostentatious and sterile asceticism, but logically necessary for self-centeredness which can only scorn the world outside of itself. And there is no lack of comic aspects, highlighted by Vernon Lee with irony not easy to match, and which cruelly reveal the poverty of thought of the prophets of the *Gospels*: who are basically people

who think that Evil is what they do not like, so bicycle rides are immoral for Tolstoy, and being monomaniacs they are people like hypochondriacs, “valetudinarians who press the pills or waters which have relieved their liver or their spleen on all the people of their neighbourhood”.

There is a personal reaction of Vernon Lee to positivism, a complex and unusual line of thought that can be extracted by meditating these Gospels, but above all by reading their fruit in the masterpiece on the Great War, *Satan the Waster*, that Vernon Lee published in 1920. The tragic and mocking farce played by Satan who directs the macabre Ballet of Nations and the long commentary that we find in that book contain the opening both artistic and philosophical to the themes of the twentieth century, and has its foundations in the thought of the *Gospels*, much more good-natured because it is still far from the universal trauma that matured the rough and unpleasant art and philosophy of Satan. But it is in *Satan the Waster* that we find some mention of the theme of positivism and anti-positivism which allows us to summarize the spirit of the *Gospels* in a few words. On the culture of anti-positivism we find a liquidating judgment through an ironic note on Bergson, treated as an unsuccessful botanical graft, followed by a demanding gnoseological statement:

But, interrupts one of the crossbreed (*Bergsonia hybrida*), between metaphysics and mysticism, you have no right to speak of your empirical reality as a continuum of cause and effect, for not only perception, but thought, science, breaks it up. True. Single perceptions, fragmentary thought, at any given moment, and each science taken separately, certainly break up the continuum into aspects dependent upon points of view. But perception as a whole, thought as a continued process, and science in general as distinguished from any single science, build up that selfsame continuum we believe in. (*Satan the Waster*, p. 175).

According to Vernon Lee, but in 1920, not at the time of the *Gospels*, the pre-war period had seen the promising beginning of an anti-anti-positivism, which eventually would walk in the direction of the necessary dialectical mediation (a term that Vernon Lee would never have used) between the era of Victorian repressive seriousness and that of the irrationalism that reacted to it. It was necessary, and it was starting to happen,

as a consequence of wider scientific interests, a reaction against the fashions of thought—pragmatism of William James, vitalism of Bergson, obscurantism of the Modernists; likewise against that tendency *à la* Nietzsche, but also (derived from Renan) *à la* Sorel the Syndicalist, to make life minister to aesthetic desire

for dramatic or “distinguished” posturing, and for crimson and azure backgrounds; all of which *modes* (in the French sense also!) were themselves, like their accompanying nationalism and imperialism, only so much reaction against the crude though insufficient lucidity of the days of Mill, Spencer and Taine. (*Satan the Waster*, p. xlix)

So overall even four components of the culture at the turn of the two centuries are distinguished and called into question: the “crude though insufficient lucidity” of the time of the Victorian Fathers, then the reaction to it still within the Victorian spirit, and this is the one of the authors of the *Gospels*, be they fully positivists (like Nordau) or restorers of artificial spiritualities and overturned positivists; third the reaction of those who occupied the scene of anti-positivism under the watchword of vitality, Bergson probably being the first of them, all unloved, all avoided, all detested after the Great War, of which Vernon Lee feels the link with anti-positivism as an obvious data. Finally there is mediation, the anti-anti-positivism that Vernon Lee sought within herself and had probably seen in a nutshell in the work of those to whom she felt closest in the world before 1914. *Gospels of Anarchy* main content is a long-term discussion of the second component, with variety of details, with richness of interests and also with an incursion into a central issue for its time but marginal compared to the book: that of female emancipation, towards which Vernon Lee was unexpectedly wary, but because from the beginning she was made suspicious by the unilateral and ideological tone of the suffragist movement. This suspect will prove prescient in 1914, when the suffragist movement converted immediately, surprisingly and with very few exceptions, to unbridled warfare and nationalist hatred.

In the meantime, in the variety of critical discussions, Vernon Lee’s philosophy is built piece by piece, in an unsystematic way, which could be summarized with caution as a religion of respect for the infinite variety of Reality, and respect for the humble and useful work that takes care of the present and its needs. With the necessary caution to avoid any rhetoric and not to disrespect a writer who was so fond of the refined form that serves to express the complexity of things as she was ironic, irreverent and caustic towards any rhetorical complacency, the writer who will use the metaphor of Satan, his “spokesman”, with all the harshness that she will be able to get out of it, just to refrain from calling into question God, sufficiently abused by the blasphemy of the bellicists and of true and false heroes. So, to know the philosophy of Vernon Lee, resistant to formulas and built on

the variety of Reality, there is no other means than to read the whole book. As an epigraph, let us read this fragment, whose syntactic complexity corresponds to the depth of thought:

... should there really exist, immanent and hidden in this world of phenomena, of humanly perceived and interpreted appearances, an *Ens Realissimum* in any way resembling the creatures who worship and burn, turn about, the images they have made of him, if there be such an One is it not justifiable to suppose that, having created such various moral soils and climates and germs, the unknown First Cause might love to watch the different growths of soul, and cherish the diversity of his spiritual garden? (*Gospels of Anarchy*, p. 201).

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Vernon Lee, née Violet Paget (1856-1935), was educated in the environment of what were then called the cosmopolitans in a literal sense, well-to-do families who chose to live in different cities of Europe to attain knowledge of their cultures thoroughly and therefore changing frequently the place where to live. As an adult she chose to live in Florence. At a very young age she published some critical essays for which she assumed the male pen name which she always kept. She wrote numerous stories of fantastic or historical theme in a clearly Victorian spirit marked by the ideal of a stylistic perfection that often prevailed over the content, under the sign of the aestheticism of the time, continued in the critical work maturing her ideas and methods and also tried to build a general theory of aesthetics on an empirical basis: this is the most extravagant and questionable component of her work, which kept her occupied in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and which Vernon Lee herself later seemed to recognize to be scarcely successful. Politically a liberal, during the Great War she lived in England and was in the group of founders of the *Union of Democratic Control*, constituted with the aim of active militancy in the name of a rationalist and non-ideological pacifism: a pacifism that did not accept the human degradation of the war, but saw the Great War as a systemic crisis in which its proponents did not want to introduce further conflicting components, to go in search only of the restoration of a condition of law effective in protecting the integrity of human existence. After the war she wrote *Satan the Waster*, a grotesque farce in which Satan is the metaphor of the system crisis without winners (and without culprits) of the War, and in which Vernon Lee poured all the experience of her life into creation of an innovative and brilliant expressionist representation from an artistic point of view, and in an unprejudiced philosophical

discussion in the search for the foundations of the destructiveness of the most absurd of all wars, which are found in universal components of the nature of the human soul, but also and above all in the persistence of decrepit institutions that come to us from the past, first of all our automatic habit of rhetorical sanctification of self-sacrifice without taking into account the gain of those who take advantage of the sacrifice of others.

Alberto Palazzi

March 2020

*Notes for the 2020 electronic edition*

This e-book has been composed on the basis of the 1909 printed edition of *Gospels of Anarchy*. The scanned text was carefully controlled, in order to make available to the readers a good quality electronic version of this works. The page numbers of the original edition have been preserved in [square brackets].

The few footnotes are all by the author. The subtitle *Essays on True and Sham Spirituality* has been added by the editor in order to give an idea of the content on the book.

*Original title page*

GOSPELS OF ANARCHY  
AND  
OTHER CONTEMPORARY STUDIES  
BY  
VERNON LEE  
NEW YORK: BRENTANO'S  
LONDON: T. FISHER UNWIN  
1909  
(All rights reserved)

*Dedication*

To  
H. G. WELLS

## *I. GOSPELS OF ANARCHY*

[13] In such of us as not merely live, but think and feel what life is and might be, there is enacted an inner drama full of conflicting emotions, long drawn out through the years, and, in many cases, never brought to a conclusion.

It begins with the gradual suspicion, as we pass out of childish tutelage, that the world is not at all the definite, arranged, mechanical thing which the doctrine convenient to our elders and our own optimistic egoism have led us to expect; that the causes and results of actions are by no means so simple as we imagined, and that good and evil are not so distinctly opposed as black and white. We guess, we slowly recognise with difficulty and astonishment, that this well-regulated structure called the universe or life is a sham constructed by human hands; that the reality is a seething whirlpool of forces seemingly blind, mainly disorderly and cruel, and, at the best, utterly indifferent; a chaos of which we recognise, with humiliation turning into cynicism, that our poor self is but a part and a sample.

Thus we feel. But if we feel long enough, and do [14] not get blunted in the process, we are brought gradually, by additional seeing and feeling, to a totally new view of things. The chaos becomes ordered, the void a firmament; and we recognise with joy and pride that the universe has made us, and that we, perceiving it, have made the universe in our turn; and that therefore “in la sua volontade è nostra pace.”

The following notes display this process of destruction and reconstruction in one particular type of mind; embody, for the benefit of those who constitutionally tend to think alike, and still more of those who are constitutionally bound to think otherwise, the silent discussions on anarchy and law which have arisen in me as a result of other folks' opinions and my own experience of life's complexities and deadlocks.

### *I*

The intellectual rebellion and lawlessness of our contemporaries have been summed up by Mr. Henry Brewster, in a book too subtle and too cosmopolitan ever to receive adequate appreciation.

“On the one hand, a revolt against any philosophical system of unity, which many would call a revolt against all philosophy, genuine scepticism. Then the denial that the feeling of obligation can be brought to bear on any

fixed point.... Morally, we must content ourselves with the various injunctions of wisdom and with distinct, independent ideals. Something beyond them is, indeed, recognised; but, whereas we were accustomed to place it in the obligatory character of [15] certain prescriptions, we are now told to understand it as a perpetual warning against all dogmatism.”<sup>1</sup>

This is, as I have said, the modern formula of scepticism and revolt. But similar doubts must have arisen, most certainly, in all kinds of men at all times, producing worldly wise cynicism in some and religious distress in others. Such doubts as these have lurked, one suspects, at the bottom of all transcendentalism. They are summed up in Emerson’s disquieting remark that saints are sad where philosophers are merely interested, because the first see sin where the second see only cause and effect. They are implied in a great deal of religious mysticism, habitually lurking in esoteric depths of speculation, but penetrating occasionally, mysterious subtle gases, to life’s surface, and there igniting at contact with the active impulses of men; whence the ambiguous ethics, the questionable ways of many sects originally ascetic. Nay, it is quite conceivable that, if there really existed the thing called the *Secret of the Church* which Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s gambling abbé staked at cards against twenty louis-d’or, it would be found to be, not that *there is no purgatory*, but rather that there is no heaven and hell, no law and no sin.

Be this as it may, all dogmatic religions have forcibly repressed such speculations, transcendental or practical, upon the ways of the universe and of man. And it is only in our own day, with the habit of each individual striking out his practice for himself, and with the scientific recognition that the various religiously sanctioned codes embody a very rough-and-ready [16] practicability—it is only in our own day that people are beginning to question the perfection of established rules of conduct, to discuss the drawbacks of duty and self-sacrifice, and to speculate upon the possible futility of all ethical systems, nay, upon the possible vanity of all ideals and formulas whatever.

But the champions of moral anarchy and intellectual nihilism have made up for lost time, and the books I intend discussing in the following notes contain, systematically or by implication, what one might call the ethics, the psychology, and the metaphysics of negation. These doctrines of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Theories of Anarchy and Law,” p. 113.

school which denies all schools and all doctrines are, as I hope to show, not of Mephistophelian origin. *The spirit which denies* has arisen, in our days at least, neither from heartlessness nor from levity. On the contrary, and little as the apostles of anarchy may suspect it, it is from greater sensitiveness to the sufferings of others, and greater respect for intellectual sincerity, that have resulted these doubts of the methods hitherto devised for diminishing unhappiness and securing truth. And for this reason, if no other, such subversive criticism ought to be of the highest use to the very notions and tendencies which it attacks: we want better laws, better formulas, better ideals; we want a wiser attitude towards laws, formulas, and ideals in general; and this *better* we shall get only by admitting that we have not already got the best.

Leaving alone the epic feats of the old spirit of duty, the tragedies of Jeanie Deans and Maggie Tulliver, the lesser, though not less astonishing, heroism shown us in some of Mary Wilkins's New [17] England stories, we have all of us witnessed the action of that moral training which thwarted personal preferences and repugnances, and victoriously silenced their claims. We have all of us heard of women (particularly in the times of our mothers and grandmothers) refusing the man they loved and marrying the man of whom their parents approved; we still look on, every day, at lives dragged along in hated companionship; at talents—nay actual vocations—suppressed in deference to family prejudice or convenience: acts of spiritual mutilation so thorough as often to minimise their own suffering, changing the current of life, atrophying organic possibilities in such a way that the victim's subsequent existence was not actively unhappy, and not even obviously barren. Such things still go on all round us. The difference now is that the minor sacrifices are no longer taken for granted by all lookers-on; and the grand, heroic self-immolation no longer universally applauded. There has arisen (it began, not without silly accompaniments enough, and disgusting ones, in the eighteenth century) an active suspiciousness towards all systematic tampering with human nature. We have had to recognise all the mischief we have done by always knowing better than the mechanical and spiritual forces of the universe; we are getting to believe more and more in the organic, the constitutional, and the unconscious; and there is an American book (by the late Mr. Marsh) on the disastrous consequences of cutting down forests, draining lakes, and generally subverting natural arrangements in our greed for immediate advantages, which might be taken, every chapter of it, as an allegorical

exhibition [18] of the views to which many people are tending on the subject of religious and social discipline.

We have had to recognise, moreover, that a great deal of all the discipline and self-sacrifice hitherto so universally recommended has been for the benefit of individuals, and even classes, who by no means reciprocated towards their victims; and we cannot deny that there is a grain of truth in Nietzsche's contempt for what he calls the "Ethics of Slaves." And, finally, we see very plainly that the reasonableness and facility of thorough-going self-sacrifice is intimately connected with a belief that such self-sacrifice would be amply compensated in another existence: it was rational to give up the present for the future; it is not rational to prefer a future which is problematic to a present which alone is quite certain. In this way have all of us who think at all begun to think differently from our fathers; indeed, we feel upon this point even more than we actually think. We warn people not to give up their possibilities of activity and happiness in deference to the wishes of others. We almost unconsciously collect instances of such self-sacrifice as has entailed the damage of others, instances of the tissues of the social fabric being insidiously rotted through the destruction of one of its human cells; and these instances, alas! are usually correct and to the point. We even invent, or applaud the invention of, other instances which are decidedly far-fetched: for instance, Mrs. Alving producing her son's hereditary malady by not acquiescing more openly in his father's exuberant *joy of life*; and Pastor Rosmer destroying, by his scruples, the resources for happiness of the less scrupulous Rebecca.

[19] I have chosen these examples on purpose, for they have enabled me to give a name to these portions of the anarchical tendencies of our day: we are, all of us who look a little around us and feel a little for others, more or less infected with *Ibsenism*; conscious or unconscious followers of the Ibsenite gospel which Mr. Bernard Shaw<sup>2</sup> preaches with jaunty fanaticism. This seems, on the whole, a very good thing. Except perhaps, in the question of manners, of courtesy, particularly between the sexes (aesthetic superfluities, but which help to make life liveable), I feel persuaded that even the most rabid Ibsenism will be advantageous in the long run. The more we let nature work for us, the more we employ our instincts and tendencies, instead of thwarting them, the less will be the waste, the greater

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<sup>2</sup> "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" and implicitly wherever else Ibsenism is not itself being attacked by G. B. S.

the achievement. But in all similar reactions against past exaggeration there is apt to be a drawback; alongside of a great gain, a certain loss; and this we should do our utmost to minimise. The old conception of duty was warped by the fearful error of thinking that human nature is bad; or, as we moderns would express it, that the instincts of the individual are hostile to the community. This was, calmly looked at, monstrous. But are we not, perhaps, on the brink of a corresponding error, less enormous of course, but large enough to grow a fine crop of misery? The error, I mean, of taking for granted that human nature is already entirely good; that the instincts, desires, nay, interests of the individual are necessarily in accordance with the good [20] of the community. The Ibsenian theory is right in saying that there are lots of people, a majority, even, who had much better have had their own way. But is the Ibsenian theory right in supposing that certain other persons (and there may be strands of such in the best of us), persons like Captain Alving, or Rebecca West, or Hedda Gabler, or the Master Builder, would have become harmless and desirable if no one had interfered with their self-indulgence, their unscrupulousness, their inborn love of excitement, or their inborn *ego*-mania? Surely not. There is not the smallest reason why the removal of moral stigma and of self-criticising ideals should reduce these people's peculiar instincts (and these people, I repeat, are mere types of what is mixed up in most of us) to moderation.

Nor is moderation the remedy for all evils. There are in us tendencies to feel and act which survive from times when the mere preservation of individual and of race was desirable quite unconditionally; but which, in our altered conditions, require not moderating, but actually replacing by something more discriminating, less wasteful and mischievous. Vanity, for instance, covetousness, ferocity, are surely destined to be evolved away, the useful work they once accomplished being gradually performed by instincts of more recent growth which spoil less in the process. Improvement, in the moral life as in any other, is a matter of transformation; if we are to use our instincts, our likings and dislikings, to carry us from narrower circles of life to wider ones, we must work unceasingly at reconstituting those likings and dislikings themselves. Now, the evolution by which our *ego* has become less [21] incompatible with its neighbours has taken place, largely, by the mechanism of ideals and duties, of attaching to certain acts an odium sufficient to counterbalance their

attraction, till it has become more and more difficult to enjoy oneself thoroughly at other folks' cost. And this Ibsenites are apt to forget.

Ibsenites ask whether it was not horrible that Claudio should be put to death because Isabella stickled about chastity; that an innocent Effie Deans should be hanged because Jeanie had cut-and-dried ideas of veracity; that Brutus's son should die because his father was so rigidly law-abiding. But it would have been far more horrible for the world at large if people had always been ready to sacrifice chastity, veracity, or legality to family feelings; indeed, could such have been the case, the world, or at least humankind, would probably have gone to pieces before Claudio, or Effie, or the son of Brutus had been born. Cut-and-dried notions of conduct are probably exactly commensurate with moral slackness. We do not require to deter people from what they do not want to do, nor to reward them for what they would do unrewarded. The very difficulty of acting spontaneously in any given way demands the formation of more or less unreasoning habits; the difficulty of forming desirable habits demands the coercive force of public opinion; and the insufficient power of mere opinion necessitates that appeal to brute force which is involved in all application of the law. The oversight of Ibsenian anarchists (whatever Ibsen's individual views on the subject) is that of imagining that duties, ideals, laws can be judged by examining their action in the [22] individual case; for their use, their evolutionary *raison d'être*, is only for the general run.

The champions of the *Will of the Ego*, whether represented by bluff Bernard Shaw or by ambiguous Maurice Barrès,<sup>3</sup> start from the supposition that because the individual is a concrete existence, while the species is obviously an abstraction, the will of the individual can alone be a reality, and the will of the species must be a figment. They completely forget that there is not one concrete individual, but an infinite number of concrete individuals, and that what governs the world is, therefore, the roughly averaged will of all these concrete individuals. The single individual may *will to live* as hard as he can, will to expand, assimilate, reproduce, cultivate his *moi*, or anything else besides; but the accomplishment of that Will of his—nay, the bare existence of himself and his Will—depends entirely upon the Will of the species. Without the permission of that abstract entity which he considers a figment, the concrete and only really

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<sup>3</sup> “L’Ennemi des Lois,” “Le Jardin de Bérénice,” “Un Homme Libre.”

real individual would never have realised his individual existence at all. This is not saying that his own will is not to react against the will of the species; for the will of the species is merely the averaged will of its component individuals, and as the individual will alters, so must the averaged will differ. The opinions and ideals and institutions of the present and the future are unconsciously, and in some cases consciously, modified, however infinitesimally, by the reactions of every living man and woman; and the [23] more universal this atomic individual modification, the higher the civilisation, the greater the bulk of happiness attained and attainable. Meanwhile ideals, commandments, institutions are, each for its own time, so many roads, high roads, if not royal roads, to the maximum of good behaviour possible in any given condition. Without them, people would have to carry their virtuous potentialities through bogs and briars, where most of them would remain sticking. Succeeding generations, knowing more of the soil and employing more accurate measurements, making, moreover, free use of blasting powder, may build shorter and easier roads, along which fewer persons will die; roads also in a greater variety of directions, that every one may get near his real destination. And the more each individual keeps his eyes open to the inconveniences and dangers of the existing roads to righteousness, and airs his criticisms thereof, the better: for the majority, which is as slow as the individual is quick, is not likely to destroy the old thoroughfares before having made itself new ones. The Ibsenite anarchists are right in reminding us that there is really nothing holy in such a road; for holiness is a quality, not of institutions, but of character, and a man can be equally holy along a new road as along an old one; alas! as holy along a wrong road as along a right one. But we, on the other hand, must remind the Ibsenites that new or old, right or wrong, such high roads are high roads to the advantage not always of the single individual at any given moment, but of the majority at most times, or, at least, of the majority composed of the most typical individuals.

## *II*

[24] After our doubts ... *end of preview* ...

## ***Back cover***

In 1909 Vernon Lee published in a volume, whose title was *Gospels of Anarchy*, some essays she had written between the end of the century and 1907. The book doesn't speak at all of anarchy in the sense one would expect: there is no mention of Bakunin, nor of any other theoretical or practical anarchist. It speaks of nineteenth-century culture under a double facies: it hints at the obvious one of the spirit of gross scientism, and focuses all attention on the less obvious one of the post-romantic and unrealistic restorations of spirituality that carry within themselves a kinship with positivism as well as the key of their failure, which are both revealed in the persistent intellectualism that imprints all forms of alleged religiosity, rediscovered or founded from scratch: this judgment falls mercilessly on Emerson, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Nietzsche, William James with his "will to believe", and finally on what seems to Vernon Lee the latest version of this spirit, the planning attitude of the future of the new socialist Utopias, targeted through H.G. Wells, which "think about the future" instead of "taking care of the present", that is to say they plan the future with abstract thought and unrealistic velleities rather than accepting what could be prepared by taking thoughtful care of the present. This is the meaning of the *Anarchy* label: the obtuseness of the nineteenth century, which by claiming to restore the mythical spirituality which it longs for through the artifice dominated by the intellect, falls into "disorder".

In the meantime, in the variety of critical discussions, Vernon Lee's philosophy is built piece by piece, in an unsystematic way, which could be summarized with caution as a religion of respect for the infinite variety of Reality, and respect for the humble and useful work that takes care of the present and its needs. A philosophy resistant to formulas and built on an original notion of Manifold Reality and its needs.

### ***Vernon Lee***

Vernon Lee was born Violet Paget in 1856. Although best remembered for the bewitching ghost stories she wrote between 1881 and 1913, she was also a fervent pacifist who wrote extensively and innovatively on the art of writing and the morality of art itself. She died in 1935. She built a personal philosophy resistant to formulas and built on an original notion of Manifold Reality and its needs.