

Vernon Lee

Satan the Waster

*A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes &
Introduction*

Appendices:

Peace with Honour (1915)

The First Ballet of the Nations (1915)

PROTEUS or The Future of Intelligence (1925)

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Editor's Foreword

Satan, the Waster speaks of the Great War in a radically pacifist and radically rationalist perspective: but although it is a militant book, it is neither a sermon nor a book of good intentions; it is a ruthless analysis of what happened, built on the basis of the original vision of a writer with a unique personality. It is unique in its kind, and was written in an intentionally rough way to force the readers to think overcoming the instinctive solidarity with their country at war, an attitude which was dominant at that time, and which still remains today. In the book we find a tragicomic comedy centred on the traditional metaphor of Satan, which makes use of a whole repertoire of hell images which in the hands of Vernon Lee are best exploited to express the very modern situation of the war, and then a set of short essays commenting the comedy. Also the essays make intense use of metaphors, but not at the expense of the result: the effect is wholly methodical and coherent. The two components depend on each other: after reading the comedy, which is not difficult to decode, the readers have a first impression of having understood everything there was to understand; then as they go on reading the notes, they realize many fundamental suggestions that had passed under their eyes unnoticed; then it is worth returning to the comedy, which becomes infinitely richer in meaning and more involving. After a hundred and more years, we find in the whole of the book a perspective on the Great War, the war that then seemed the most enormously cruel act humanity had ever committed, which deserves to be known, meditated, and compared with what has been written in one hundred successive years on the twentieth century, on the irrational dimension of politics, on the era of the masses and mass culture, and on every other character of the century that many have thought having begun in 1914. The prose, quite complex syntactically, uses elegance as a tool to achieve intellectual clearness, and the thought expressed is deeply coherent, even if it may not appear such at the first glance. But it is not an easy book, and it is so roughly hostile to any complicity with the war that when it appeared it could have met approval only in the little number of the rationalist and non-ideological pacifists that had been preserved all over the world. But among the few potential readers then it was necessary to isolate those who had been the attentive audience willing to follow the difficult writing of Vernon Lee, an elderly author who had flourished in the Victorian generation long since retired, or “superannuated”, as she says of

herself in the Notes to *Satan*: and this intersection is enough to imagine how few surviving potential readers remained.

The title of this book, *Satan the Waster*, was to suggest the idea of a perverse and immense size of dissipation, as foolish as radical, and was intended to provoke everyone considering the 1918 victory to deserve celebration. Given these singularities, the book had no success. It came out in 1920 and had some malicious reviews (except one by G. B. Shaw), to be immediately forgotten. Vernon Lee warns us in the preface of the 1930 edition¹ that in that year attempts were made to spread the unsold copies printed ten years earlier, but the rarity of this book seems to witness that the operation was again unsuccessful.

Vernon Lee

To appreciate *Satan, the Waster*, a sketch of Vernon Lee's biography is indispensable. Vernon Lee was the *nom de plume* of Violet Paget (1856-1935), who was born in France to a family of Englishmen who were quite well-off but not very rich, who used to live in different places in Europe and to change the place to settle down every now and then, every a few months or years: a family that belonged to the number of the so-called cosmopolitans of the Victorian era. Violet Paget was educated by her mother and some German nannies between France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy, and the years of her childhood were spent mainly in Rome in the company of John Singer Sargent, the painter, born in the same year, who later in 1881 painted a portrait that expresses effectively the impetuosity of Violet's character. The country where Violet Paget lived the longest was Italy, and in the 1880s the family settled in Florence abandoning cosmopolitanism. In Florence, Violet Paget then lived always, with long summer trips to Europe. In August 1914 the war met her in London, and for this reason she spent the war years in her country before returning to Italy, a circumstance relevant to *Satan*, as we will see. Very precocious in intellectual interests, in 1875 Violet Paget published some articles in the magazine *Rivista europea*, adopting the male pseudonym of Vernon Lee who then she always kept, and with which she liked to be called even in

¹ The 1930 edition does not actually appear to be a reprint. The sheet with the 1930 note seems inserted before the title page, without renumbering the following pages.

private conversations. From then on she wrote about many subjects, with a literary production vast in interests and quantity: but what she wrote in large part is condemned to be considered inessential, ornamental, by our culture and throughout the twentieth century, and this is a strong reason for which the most complex products of her writing and thinking have remained in the dark. To get a knowledge of *Satan's* ingredients, it is useful to keep in mind a list of the different genres encountered in the literary production of Vernon Lee, who always had a certain audience among English-speaking readers, but never great successes, to whom moreover she did not aspire, or perhaps to whom her always too complex prose was not destined. The genres are the following, and for each of them I will limit myself to give some examples, referring to the literary biography² of Vernon Lee for details.

1) Vernon Lee wrote about art and music criticism, starting in 1880 with the volume *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, which according to biographer Gunn “has many of the abiding qualities of a minor classic”³, which is focused on interests quite unusual for a very young woman and moreover not Italian: the music of Pergolesi and Porpora, which adolescent Vernon Lee went to listen in certain churches in Rome where it was performed despite being out of fashion, the text for theatre by Metastasio and some other minor aspects of an Italy that in the post-Risorgimento years was out of fashion and considered of little interest. This eccentric preference gives us an indication of the vastness of interests and independence of judgment of Vernon Lee: especially since many years later, in the 1930s, the critic Mario Praz recognized that in order to get a knowledge of the culture of eighteenth-century Italy, the semi-amateurish book of Vernon Lee was richer and more alive than many professional philologist searches. Among many other works, as an old woman, Vernon

² The biographical and bibliographic information mentioned here comes from *Vernon Lee* by Sondeep Kandola, 2010, e from *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, by Vineta Colby, 2003 (available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15961>), which gives information about all the writings of Vernon Lee, as well as from the more detailed biography on a personal level, which is *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935*, by Peter Gunn, 1964.

³ Gunn, p. 75.

Lee produced more mature writings on literature and music; in the 1920s she published a collection of essays on writing entitled *The Handling of Words*, where she anticipated themes of the Russian formalists, of Michail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes,⁴ and later a detailed analysis of the psychology of music listening in *Music and its Lovers*.

2) Vernon Lee wrote numerous volumes of historical and fantastic stories, generally set in Italy in past centuries. Many of them are stories where the ghosts come into action as fantastic entities to reveal human frailties and impulses (without any connection with the interest for “psychic” and spiritualist research common in the nineteenth century), and where the overall taste is decidedly Victorian. This part of her production is the one which was most successful, and which still retains some readers, and of which editions and translations are still made today. The tenor of these stories, however, is such as to be devoid of interest for the mainstream of the twentieth century taste, so that readers can only be a niche. To understand what we are talking about, let us see the story “Dionea” of 1890: in a village of Liguria the wreck of a Greek ship takes to the shore a girl, Dionea, the only survivor. She grows up in the village raised as a servant, but becomes a fatal beauty. Bewitched by this beauty and persecuted by temptations, a young priest commits suicide with the poisonous fumes from the stove of his room. A compliant doctor signs an autopsy that makes it seem like an accident. Then comes the turn of an artist, who goes to ruin to portray Dionea, and so on... Such is the tenor of the story, and it is clear why Virginia Woolf wrote in 1907: “I am sobbing with misery over Vernon Lee, who turns all good writing to vapour with her fluency and insipidity — the plausible woman! I put her on my black list, with Mrs. Humphry Ward.”⁵ To be precise, this reference was to the volume *The Sentimental Traveller*, which is part of the fourth group in our classification, but Woolf’s modernist refusal also fits well this narrative by Vernon Lee.

3) Vernon Lee experimented very young with the novel on contemporary topics, publishing *Miss Brown* in 1884. This novel usually is not liked even by the estimators and biographers of Vernon Lee, and perhaps it could be worth investigating the reason for this. At least the context deserves

⁴ Cfr. Colby 2003, p. 199.

⁵ Cfr. Colby 2003, p. 248.

mention: Vernon Lee had been introduced into the society of literary London by the family of her friend Mary Robinson, had collected gossip of all kinds, and from here she collected the material for this voluminous novel, whose subject is the development of the acculturation and personality of a young woman of the people, beautiful and profound in thought, who is given the opportunity to become a member of the London society of the aestheticism era. Literary London is described in a way that makes each character recognizable, and is judged from the point of view of a severe criticism of the ostentatious amorality of the aestheticism of the time. This was perhaps a mischievous or perhaps a naive operation, but anyway it gained Vernon Lee numerous enmities, including that of Oscar Wilde, maliciously satirized. But those who invest some time in reading *Miss Brown*, discover that the story, full of acute human observations, on the one hand loses part of its value on account of the presence of implausible romance elements, but on the other hand has a disturbing and oppressive background that perhaps touches some deep sensibility of the readers and orients us against it for our cowardice in the face of the self-sacrifice of the protagonist. Vernon Lee then wrote some other novels (including *Penelope Brandling* published in 1903, *Louis Norbert* in 1914) which were unsuccessful.

4) Vernon Lee wrote numerous collections of light essays and travel impressions, about current interests or about various subjects in humanities, of Victorian taste. A very rich production which is probably far from the sensitivity of our present. Here too, as in the fantastic tales, the non-Victorian reader is often kept away from the tone, so to speak, of doll house and floral decoration that pervades the topics and the style. But underneath there is always a depth of gaze and a complexity of reasoning that give a non-trivial personality to all these essays. The last of *Satan, the Waster's* explanatory notes, refers to this part of Vernon Lee's production by continuing the floral metaphor, but reversing its sign. The war forced thoughts to come to light which are an "unexpected crop of plants, unlovely, harsh to the touch, sometimes even stinging, and nearly always rank and bitter, which replace the cherished flowers and fruit of some devastated garden." The light tone of Victorian-style nonfiction is a component of her way of thinking that Vernon Lee never forgets, even if where the subject is terribly serious, the style becomes complementary, harsh and unpleasant to the extreme.

5) Vernon Lee attempted to elaborate after 1890 a general aesthetic theory, which was to serve to support her critical activity with a strong conceptual basis, collaborating with her friend Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, to whom she curiously wanted to attribute the authorship of ideas that instead in all probability were hers (so it seems by reading the biographies, but it would be necessary to enter the question in detail). It seems that the contorted personality of Vernon Lee always exercised a sort of plagiarism on her female friends making them believe they were authorities in terms of aesthetics and establishing possessive friendships on this basis.⁶ The general aesthetic theory is of the physiological and empiricist type, and did not escape the irony of Benedetto Croce, who classified the theory in the genre of the “natural science superstition”, and hinted at it thus:

Physiological processes considered as causes of pleasure in art are presented under other aspects by later investigators [Lee e Anstruther], who assert that such pleasure arises not only “from the activity of the visual organs and the muscular systems associated with them, but also from the participation of some of the more important functions of the organism, as for instance breathing, circulation of the blood, equilibrium and internal muscular accommodation.” Art, then, indubitably originated in “a prehistoric man who was habitually a deep-breather, having no call to rearrange his natural habits when scratching lines on bones or in mud and taking pains to draw them regularly spaced.”⁷

After 1900 Vernon Lee abandoned this extreme empiricism, while continuing to think that sooner or later it would have borne fruit in someone else's hands,⁸ and attempted to elaborate a theory of art as fantasy, without ever being able to reach a satisfactory concept of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere. Art is conceived as a sort of producer of consoling illusions, therefore as something ancillary to life; however it has a fundamental cognitive function because it teaches and obliges to

⁶ Cfr. Colby 2003, p. 175.

⁷ B. Croce, *Estetica*, 1902. P. 391 of the English translation (*Aesthetic as science of expression and general linguistic*) by Douglas Ainslie. Croce's quotation is from “Beauty and Ugliness” by Vernon Lee and Anstruther in *Contemporary Review*, October–November 1897.

⁸ Cfr. *Gospels of Anarchy* of 1909, p. 142.

distinguish fantasy and imagination from reality. This latter aspect is fundamental in *Satan*.

6) Some volumes of Vernon Lee engaged seriously in questions of philosophy, with detailed analyses of some issues debated in their time. One of them, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations*, published in 1886, is still a young-age work, continued in *Althea* in 1894. But for two others, the lighter (but not easy) *Gospels of Anarchy* of 1909, and the more methodical *Vital Lies* of 1912, the speech is complex: Vernon Lee ambitiously examines the philosophical and social issues in the limelight around the turn of the century, and according to biographer Colby⁹

... reviewers complained about her verbosity, and the more perceptive ones identified flaws in her logic (especially in her attacks on pragmatism). Overall, however, the two collections were well received, though often patronizingly praised for “cleverness,” “masculinity of thought and femininity of expression”, and “feminine commonsense”.

The literary success of these two collections does not seem to have been great. Yet in them, apart from the interest that this female presence in the philosophical debate should arouse for itself, we find a discussion of the dominant themes of the positivist and Victorian, antipositivist and post-antipositivist generations by a mind capable of an original and unprejudiced synthesis. In these two collections we find the philosophical background of *Satan*, which with the experience of war adds something also to the periodization of the pre-war culture. 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,

⁹ Cfr. Colby 2003, p. 275.

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.

With this we have an idea of the breadth of the interests of this writer, who had readers in her time and is remembered today almost only for the lightest part of her production, which was considered the least important even by herself, with regret.¹⁰

The war years in London

As already mentioned, Vernon Lee used to travel to Europe and the United Kingdom every summer, and in August 1914 she was caught by war in London, where she spent the war years. Her pacifist and anti-imperialist views had already been formed since the time of the Italian colonial wars and the Boer war (in both cases Vernon Lee had not shied

¹⁰ Cfr. Gunn, p. 221.

away from controversy with friends in both countries who adhered to national enthusiasm for these enterprises), and therefore it was natural for her to militate from the beginning in the *Union for Democratic Control* (UDC), a pressure group founded in 1914 with the purpose of promoting a more rational foreign policy and of supervising the involution of internal politics as a consequence of the war. Numerous Liberal and Labour politicians joined it, and it was an important presence in English life throughout the war.¹¹ As a militant member of the UDC Vernon Lee took part in several public meetings and (under the guidance of a friend of hers, a veteran Labour militant, Emily Ford) learned the art of dealing with controversy with the belligerents who intervened, and for the UDC she wrote a 64 pages pamphlet, *Peace with Honour: Controversial Notes on the Settlement*, published in 1915¹², which testifies how Vernon Lee had a full and mature knowledge of the situation of international relations both historically and politically. The UDC was not exactly a pacifist association, but rather a pressure group whose aim was to bring democratic methods into international politics, and therefore hosted within it more or less radical pacifists. Among the most intransigent, there was obviously Vernon Lee, for whom the war was an explosion of the irrational dimension, and whose conscious and rational justifications were derisory. The war “was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless”, says simply the Introduction to *Satan, the Waster*. Before coming to *Satan*, I remark that in the context of militancy in the UDC, the original analytical contributions on the war of at least two other radical pacifist writers were born, also without success and forgotten and also probably penalized by being women. They all saw the Great War as a collapse of a system whose origins were to be found in the conflict between the living conditions of the contemporary world and the cultural institutions that were not adequate to it that been had inherited from the long past. One of these writers was Caroline Playne, same aged as Vernon Lee, and a friend of Vernon Lee within the UDC, who wrote four volumes

¹¹ Per quanto segue, cfr. Phyllis F. Mannonchi, “From Victorian Highbrow to Anti-War Activist: The Political Education of Vernon Lee, Woman of Letters”, in *Violet del Palmerino*, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Firenze, 27-28 settembre 2012.

¹² Reproduced in Appendix I in this edition.

in which she attempted to develop a political anthropology of English society in the Great War: an auroral attempt, promising, which is sometimes mentioned by the historians of the Great War, but whose value has certainly not been recognized in proportion to the originality of the outlook.¹³ The other writer was Irene Cooper Willis, younger than a generation, and who was later the beneficiary of Vernon Lee. Irene Cooper Willis analyzed in some essays that were collected in a volume¹⁴ in 1928 a singular but important aspect: the metamorphosis of the British liberals from neutralism based on rational analysis to enthusiastic bellicism through a constant practice of self-deception, which is a detail aspect of the reality revealed by *Satan, the Waster* (which is quoted as a primary conceptual reference in the book of Cooper Willis).

The first Ballet of the Nations (1915)

In 1915 Vernon Lee wrote straight away the short *Ballet of the Nations*, which, although completely rewritten, occupies pages from 31 to 57 of *Satan, the Waster*¹⁵. The *Ballet* is a symbolic representation whose immediate meaning is obvious: Satan has summoned the Passions to play in the Orchestra of Patriotism, and the Nations to stage the Ballet of war. As a comment, what Vernon Lee herself tells us in the Introduction to *Satan, the Waster* is valid: the ballet published in a small volume was the first nucleus of the idea of *Satan*, but alone it has no value and does not reach the expressive result desired: “once written, I began to see its shallowness”. The small book was published with the illustrations of an artist friend of Vernon Lee, Maxwell Armfield, and overall it is inadequate: it has the appearance of a precious publication,¹⁶ with an aestheticism taste, which appears improper compared to the seriousness of the drama, unless this inadequacy should not be considered as an ironic value, with a forced interpretation. The reader of today, without placing the

¹³ The four volumes by Caroline Playne are available in an unique ebook with the title *Society in the First World War*, GogLiB, 2018.

¹⁴ *England's Holy War - A Study of English Liberal Idealism during the Great War*, 1928, disponibile in ebook, GogLiB, 2020.

¹⁵ The 1915 text is reproduced in Appendix II in this edition.

¹⁶ *The Ballet of the Nations* with its illustrations is available on the site archive.org.

Ballet within the whole of *Satan*, would probably share the author's judgment by qualifying it as "shallow": there is no possibility to derive from it the universe of unprejudiced ideas of *Satan, the Waster*, although in retrospect it can be confirmed that they were contained in it *in nuce*. But under this immediate reaction from the first reading, there is something revealing, and it is that the *Ballet* is overall symbolist in style, as Armfield's illustrations are conspicuously so. And symbolism is a style and a taste that died precisely in 1914, which can express the Great War only when it is used by the official rhetoric of monuments, of monumental hypocrisy like all the other expedients with which European society has always avoided looking at the Great War as a collapse of its system, and instead tried to identify determinable culprits, be they individuals or social components or economic dynamics. So here is how the Great War, in the case that interests us, killed the Victorian woman in Vernon Lee and freed in her the inventive resources that made her discover, among other things, the right style, expressionism, which we will find among the components of *Satan*.

Structure of Satan, the Waster

The book was designed in order that the comedy part and the comment part should clarify each other. *Satan, the Waster — A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes & Introduction*, has a 43-page Introduction, which performs the function of preparing the readers for what awaits them, and therefore in this sense it is a part of the work, but which also contains some elements of further retrospective critical reflection by the author on the work.

Follow the three parts of the Ballet, which take a little more than a hundred pages overall. There is a Prologue in which Satan explains his reasons, the Ballet in which first the Passions and the Nations come to take place where required (first act), and then dance the ballet, or fight the battle to the point of exhaustion (second act), and finally there is an Epilogue, in which Satan uses the latest technology tools (black and white cinema and gramophone) to reveal and illustrate the absolute triviality of the mundane realities that have altogether been conniving to the Ballet. For precision's sake, remark that *Satan, the Waster* has the subtitle of "Trilogy" because the Ballet consists of three parts, namely the Prologue in Hell, the actual

Ballet and the Epilogue. Then the whole is in turn a trilogy on another level, including Introduction, Comedy and Philosophical Notes.

After the Comedy, for about two hundred pages we find a collection of notes and short essays written by Vernon Lee between 1916 and 1919, arranged to comment first on the Prologue and then the Ballet of Nations.

Let us now introduce these elements in some detail. The Introduction leads us to know a little the history of the gestation of the entire book and gives us some ideas to reflect about: first of all the suggestion of the “shallowness” of the first *Ballet of Nations*. Vernon Lee reports, in a perfectly plausible account, that the Ballet was formed in her mind in a few days of 1915, when

... a European war was going on which, from my point of view, was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly “Grand Guignol” performance (p. vii).

A few words that define the author's constant attitude: the war is the product of a system that has lost its ability to manage its own complexity, and any traditional explanation of the phenomenon is inadequate. So *Satan, the Waster* will have this aim: to be the beginning of the search for a key to this unacceptable event, without ever giving any priority status to traditional explanations and rationalizations. We are faced with a phenomenon that requires completely unprejudiced thought, and consequently radical innovation in the way of expressing it. This is why the 1915 Ballet was unsatisfactory: the key to talk about the war was still to be found, and *Satan, the Waster* would propose one, in which the illuminating metaphor interacts with the analytical language of the discussion.

Another expression, a single sentence, of the Introduction is an important key for the whole book: the universality of consent to the war, in which even those who are not animated by aggressive intentions are nevertheless involved in solidarity with their country, since everyone is sincerely convinced that his or her country is being attacked and not aggressors. Vernon Lee does not attribute to herself any qualities of particular clairvoyance (p. xiv), and attributes her uncompromising rejection of the war Grand Guignol to her particular experience as a person raised according to the cosmopolitan lifestyle, which allowed her to thoroughly understand, not as a traveller but as a dweller, more than one European country. But there is a fault which Vernon Lee attributes to herself too, and

it is not something that is easily thought of. Of her friends, consenting to the war for any reason, everyone of them sincere in their beliefs, she says:

During four long years of our short human life, they have been killing and mutilating, starving, ruining and widowing their thousands and hundreds of thousands; devastating the world no less with hatred and hatred's falsehoods. For that is war (p. xv).

And she is not talking about third parties: she is talking about her personal friends, whom she holds jointly and severally responsible for the war as a result of their acquiescent blindness in the face of total absence of purpose. But to herself, who has never granted consent for a single moment to reasons and pretexts of the "most abominable calamity of all historical times", what can she have to reproach? This: to have kept silent, sometimes, in the controversies with her warlike friends, out of cowardice before the possibility of hurting their feelings and their good faith. In fact, as regards beliefs in general, and especially religion, in an era of freedom of thought, it happens that:

... the unbeliever, no longer maltreated for his unbelief, hurts those who do not share it, and shrinks with reverent cowardice from inflicting the pain he may see in the believer's face, and may almost feel in his own sympathizing nerves.

What changed in war?

Similarly with the war, only much more so. Those whose opinions and attitude are orthodox about it have, in my eyes, been abetting, fostering and sometimes bringing about, the most abominable calamity of all historic times. I recognize this all quite clearly, unhesitatingly. But I recognize at the same time that their own multifold sacrifice, and their consequent belief in that sacrifice's holiness, renders them sensitive to the smallest show of impiety or even scepticism towards a belief thus consecrated by their prodigious willing martyrdom.

And it is the respect towards her friends, due to this empathy, that Vernon Lee reproaches herself. Faced with their sensitivity, she says of herself:

I have feared to hurt their feelings; and I grieve to have done so (p. xv).

This is how the satanic mechanism has been so pervasive as to spare no one. But here there is also the Socratic philosophical background, of ethical intellectualism, which pervades the work: there is no other solution and other hope than the clear awareness of the relationships among things, which reflection builds up little by little, and that every book that is written, *Satan, the Waster* among others, is piling up. There is no rhetoric, there are no voluntaristic proclamations in *Satan, the Waster*, a book

devoted to the objective power of reality; of appeals to the will we find some hint just where it is impossible to do without them.

In the Prologue (in Hell), we read a philosophical dialogue between Satan and Clio, Muse of History, who are alone in a Hell of recognizable symbolist style, and discuss pleasantly spending the little time left before the Ballet performance. Satan, Vernon Lee's spokesman, expresses a judgement on the culture of the nineteenth century and the era of the war through the dialectic that he institutes with the Muse of History, who, when she dares to express any opinions, is always wrong and is always contradicted by Satan. The Muse is a compound of the classicism of humanistic education of all times, as well as of positivism and anti-positivism hybridized in such a way as to end ingloriously in a mixture of banality and absurdity, symbolically concentrated in her allegorical figure, of which Satan says that "although she is a fool of the first water, she has rubbed shoulders in her professional capacity with so many celebrated persons that she may pass muster as intelligent." This quality of the Muse is not without implications, if it expresses the condition to which European culture was reduced at that time: something that deserved to be destroyed was present in it, but men were unable to see it in terms of reality, and so they squandered themselves in hatred towards the national enemy projected by their fragile imagination.

After the Prologue, the two acts of the ballet, rewritten with respect to the 1915 version, where however many of the images are found in a nutshell, become sensible and coherent. The first act prepares the war situation through a Brechtian-style representation, a sort of a comedy of masks transformed into a Threepenny Opera, of the miserability of passions, which take their places in the orchestra in a long and meticulous ceremony that highlights the character of each of them, and leads the reader to get used to each of them as old acquaintances. Together with the Passions, the Nations who will dance the Ballet take place on the stage, and among the public take place the Ages-to-Come, a very important element, which represent the whole world of mean ambition within us, the result of the accumulation of cultural stereotypes accumulated in the historical epoch and of universal human frailty. They are classically dressed and "veiled in the stuff that dreams are made of", as befits those who have the task of raising the highest expectations and providing the pretext for the Dilapidation of present well-being for the chimeras of the future; further on

an image particularly effective will surprise us with the representation of their meanness: in the Epilogue the Ages-to-Come come to light and

... are revealed to be, not the classic veiled figures they had previously appeared, but old ladies with long eyeglasses, and old gentlemen, dignitaries in lank black coats and spats and half-pay colonels with white moustaches, all carrying lending-library volumes of memoirs under their arms, alongside of their tucked-up Grecian draperies (p. 62).

The preparation of the event continues meticulously, bringing to the attention of the reader the specific qualities of all the passions, with a wealth of psychological details in which nothing is superfluous. And we also get acquainted with Ballet Master Death, around whose direction the performance of the ballet will revolve like the system of metaphors.

Then the second act triggers with the power of the words alone an integral show made of lights, sounds, smells, flavours, repugnance and pain, that will be perfectly understandable to today's readers who have fixed in their memory the images of this fundamental catastrophe of our way of being, not to mention the readers who made their pilgrimage to Verdun, to the Somme or to any other battlefield. So it all starts, spoiling a beautiful summer landscape:

... whereas the Ballet had begun with the tender radiance of an August sunset above half-harvested fields, where the reaping-machines hummed peacefully among the corn-stooks, and the ploughs cut into the stubble, the progress of the performance had seen the deep summer starlit vault flushed by the flare of distant burning farms... (p. 50).

The writing style turns completely into expressionism, and the readers can understand the stylistic metamorphosis by leafing through the first version of the Ballet, and observing how inappropriate and inexpressive the graphic part was, still completely symbolist, and how pointless and mechanical, although of clear meaning, all the metaphors appeared in the first formulation. In the first idea of the Ballet, the Passions were conceived as if they were masks of the ancient Italian comedy, each wearing its conventional costume and the appropriate symbols, which was a historical interest that Vernon Lee had always cultivated: but the effect in that context was futile, so *Satan, the Waster* gets rid of it, leaving space instead, quite the opposite, to an extreme realism in the representation of physical decomposition. So the representation continues with a crescendo of cruelty and physical repugnance until the parts are exhausted, until we

have obviously arrived to the autumn of 1918, a time which at the beginning of the Epilogue is represented with a metaphor that perfectly describes the moral climate which appeared to an eye disenchanted and unwilling to acknowledge any reason for feast and victory to anyone (except Satan). The battles are over and

HEROISM is lying on the ground asleep, with BALLET MASTER DEATH lying across him, dead drunk, his skull propped up on HEROISM'S chest. ... The last of the other PASSIONS are collecting their instruments in the Orchestra. PITY, INDIGNATION, IDEALISM, and ADVENTURE have vanished, ... PRUDENCE, TEMPERANCE, FAIRNESS, and TRUTHFULNESS exchanging horrified remarks (p. 61).

In the Epilogue, to which perhaps the epithet of "terrestrial" would suit (given that the Prologue had been an infernal tête à tête among demigods, and instead men act autonomously here), which however Vernon Lee did not think of giving it, the instrument of expressionist writing is used to paint a fresco of the pre-war world through the evocation of many images that were then in everyone's eyes through the primitive cinema that everyone had seen, and through fragments of speech equally well-known from political newspapers accounts. Satan offers to show Clio and the Ages-to-Come the background of the war by means of a selection of his collected cinematographic and sound recordings, and at the beginning a misunderstanding occurs whose symbolic significance is relevant, and of which it is difficult to say whether it belonged to the conscious intentions of Vernon Lee, or whether it is a collateral product of the intuition that guided her, times being not yet ripe for her to realize it. After having enticed and aroused the enthusiasm of his guests, Satan stages an accelerated visual and sound potpourri of commonplaces of the social and political life of the pre-war period: this is on pages 64 to 66, and probably today's readers would have no difficulty in recognizing the motivation of each word. But the Muse Clio and the Ages-to-Come do not understand. Clio is offended believing that Satan wanted to make her a foolish joke, and pretends wanting to take leave. But Satan foresaw this, and understood:

SATAN. It is not a joke. What you have seen and heard is the most serious thing in the Universe. It is *Reality*. Only you couldn't recognize it (p. 66).

The Muse and the Ages-to-Come, that is the culture of the pre-war world, are completely unfit with respect to the time in which they live, and in

order for them to understand it, it is necessary to simplify the discourse for their benefit. Thus continues Satan:

I will, to please you, transform Reality, which seems to have no point, into bare Caricature, which *has*. Here is a little selection from pre-war years. Look, Clio, and listen! (p. 67)

Now to Clio, who, so to speak, would not have been able to understand Joyce's *Ulysses*, things are represented in a way that reduces them to order and scheme, to comedy, which even Clio can understand: metaphor of the condition of the culture of that time. As for today's readers, understanding presents some difficulties in the details. Vernon Lee had always followed international politics, and was able to write about it professionally. We have seen that in 1915, in the context of the work of the UDC, she wrote the booklet *Peace with Honour*, which the UDC published with the preliminary warning that it did not necessarily reflect the line of the association, but the opinion of an individual member, and which however was part of the materials that the UDC made use of to organize study meetings on foreign policy and the war. In the booklet, the situation is analyzed with knowledge of the political history of the nineteenth century, with remarkable precision and clarity of style.¹⁷ All of this is found in the form of a farce in the Epilogue to the Ballet, and it remains difficult for today readers to determine whether all the metaphorical references of the Epilogue correspond to something real and precisely determined, or if sometimes the allusions are generic. For example, p. 98 refers to the Italian aims on the cities of Gog and Magog, and it is obvious that these are Trento and Trieste. Then there is mention of a city named Maraschino: the reference is to Rijeka (Fiume), but this is a little less obvious (probably we must also take into account a burlesque reference to the Slivovitz liqueur). Then there is a mention of the kingdoms of Croesus and Polycrates, and these why? The reference is to the general ambitions of France, England and Italy to put the entire coastal part of today's Turkey under protectorate, an ambition little remembered because it was nipped in the bud by the political rise of Kemal. But do the kingdoms of Croesus and Polycrates stand for two specific cities on the Ionian coast, or is the allusion generic?

¹⁷ Cfr. Phyllis F. Mannocchi, "From Victorian Highbrow to Anti-War Activist", cit.

Difficult to say, and perhaps a special research would be an opportunity to recall various interesting historical details.

Finally, after the images of the cinema and the sounds have become frenetic and the whole mechanical apparatus stops for the last time, the last pages of the Epilogue, from 106 to 110, return to the theme of the Ballet, and we see its ending, to which the notes will refer several times, making it clear that the heart of the book is there. On the one hand, Satan expresses good hopes for a new ballet: as for Ballet Master Death, "a democratic wig, a complete suit of newest idealistic cut, may make him still pass muster for a while" (p. 109). But on the other hand, humanity, through knowledge of itself, could also give itself no more so anachronistic institutions and learn to defend itself from Satan and from Ballet Master Death, to whom Satan addresses these closing words:

You vile, old-fashioned scarecrow, do you now understand that Heroism has almost found you out for the preposterous, indecent anachronism that you are? And if, by any chance, that Blind Boy should really be surgeoned into seeing... why, then, this will have been the last of our Ballets of the Nations! (p. 110)

It is only an apparently light discourse: it contains in itself the whole conceptual problem of the distinction between politics, which we could say classical, capable of acting with rationality of purpose, and the loss of all control that the twentieth century experienced in the Ballet of 1914 and in the other Ballets, whose character was completely unpredictable when Vernon Lee wrote in 1919, and whose possibility rests on the heads of us men today.

The Notes to the Prologue and Ballet

As we know, the notes take more space than all what preceded them, and lead to see the Ballet in a very different light, sometimes in a perspective that surprises the readers for not having thought for themselves of the same consequences. Let us first see the author's ideas. According to biographer Colby, "In one thing Vernon Lee was consistent throughout her life. From her early twenties to her death she was a liberal with socialist leanings"¹⁸ and inherited nothing of the political education she had received from her mother, who, born in 1815, had been imprinted with the restoration mentality. From the lesson of the restoration, Vernon Lee learned,

¹⁸ Colby, p. 271.

however, to be wary of progressive political rhetoric: sometimes in her judgments we hear some echo of Burke and the English anti-Jacobinism of the Napoleonic period, which does not mean a reactionary residue, but on the contrary a statement of non-ideological humanism. Vernon Lee's liberalism, open to current ideas of social reform, was a political belief with minimalist principles: it consisted in thinking that every man has the right to live and play the opportunities offered by life and experience, and in aversion to aimless destruction. In *Satan, the Waster* she says this in two words, speaking seriously of herself: "But as to me, my political creed daily narrows itself more and more to a single article, viz. *Satan is the Adversary*." (p. 120). Very simple words: all political belief is resolved in the principle that evil is the aimless suffering that humanity inflicts on itself. But not at all generic words, given the wealth of determinations behind Satan's metaphor. The liberal background of Vernon Lee's political profile is manifested in the refusal of easy economicist generalizations, which comes from the belief in the falsity of economicist attitudes as they claim to be easy universal and objective descriptions of historical situations and events. In the reconstruction of the anthropological context of the Great War, the economic theme is obviously present, but always within judgments that must find legitimacy in the concrete reconstruction of situations, never becoming cheap fulfilment through simplistic generalizations. Where the analysis touches on the theme of the existential condition of modern cities and the way of life of the industrial working population, and therefore where the readers would be inclined by themselves to easy conclusions, clarification intervenes, a warning also to today's readers:

And here some of my friends will at once recognize in this description the apocalyptic monster Capitalism.... Alas, that is not what I am alluding to. I say "alas," for *Capitalism*, the entirely wicked and marvellously simple monster they talk about, would long ago have had its neck wrung, belonging as it does to the race of dragons made of printed paper (p. 127).

It is the overall historical and anthropological condition of our present time that determines the possibility of self-destructive and aimless events such as the war just fought, and understanding and judging it is an open problem of immense complexity. Knowing this, in 1919, without any notion of the totalitarian regimes to come, Vernon Lee warns against easy generalization, with a partial foresight, at least of the potential of the future:

Whereas the automatic monster I am describing could flourish equally under, say, the scientific socialism of the Webbs; and will, unfortunately, survive, by dint of applied science and scientific organization, through a great number of political transformations, using them up, indeed, like the much-boomed transformation of the France of the Monarchy into the France of the Third Republic, and the England of Cobbett into the England of the Harmsworths. I even suspect that the very belief in what those friends of mine call Capitalism, and the belief that you need only seize the accursed Jabberwok by the neck, and after a brief snick-a-snack of Democracy's worple-blade, that mankind will arise free and rejoicing — I even suspect that this cry against Capitalism, though undoubtedly beneficial as representing criticism and revolt, is largely machine-made — another shoddy, standardized product of that application of Science to material problems only, and to those, above all, which *pay* (p. 127).

The thesis underlying it all is that the aimless self-destruction of the Great War is the product of European society in its present state, with its economic equilibrium and its long-history institutions. So what is the sense of refusing economic explanations? It is that they are too easy: how European society has reduced itself to a Grand Guignol without purpose is an open problem, in front of which it is necessary to start a completely unprejudiced gaze, and with the premise of not looking for culprits of any kind, because given the enormity of the events, the search for faults would be nothing more than an absolute expedient for the part with which each contributed. Speaking of the judgment on the pre-war ruling class, she noted:

... in such a context the words *guilty* or *innocent* mean only how long or short a time any of these elderly persons will be permitted to survive a mock-trial by his enemies; or else how well or ill each of them shall sleep, thanks to the verdict of his own accommodating or uneasy conscience. But to posterity our present talk about the responsibilities for this war and for its *sequelae* will afford no interest save as added proof of the inadequacy of our intellectual and moral habits to cope with the vastness and intricacy of the many-dimensional Reality whereof applied science has placed the switch in our ignorant and thoughtless hands (p. xl).

And with regard to the pre-war political and intellectual ruling class, there are interesting pages dedicated to the description of its miserable inadequacy (from p. 288 onwards) in the past, and especially in the post-war present. Politicians, journalists and writers, some, the original bellicists, swollen with vainglory, and others, the pacifists converted in

1914, hesitant but persisting in hypocrisy, so they all appear in the autumn of 1918:

The pachydermatous ones go on as heretofore, splash and tumble, rearing (scripturally) their rhinoceros horn. Those thinner-skinned and clearer-sighted no longer deny that however incommensurable the enemy's guilt, yet the ways even of the Nations confided to their guidance do show seamy sides: inordinate greediness, furtive paying of blackmail, sharp practice, and rather disgusting symptoms of victory — let alone intoxication; horrible affairs, famine and anarchy in the future and already the present. Being thus distressed in their good taste and good feeling, these sensitive and sad-eyed among (at least) *this* Nation's guardians, have made and duly published a dreadful yet not inconvenient discovery: that this war now barely over is *not* the war they wisely and virtuously inaugurated those four odd long years ago (p. 289).

There are two components of the human soul of particular importance, in the service of Satan, which continue to be recalled in the Notes. One is a constant and universal human psychological component, while the other is a historical institution with a long past, and perfectly alive in the world of the Great War, but which could be destined to fade and disappear in the future.

The human and universal component at the service of Satan is the interaction between the forces of Illusion and Confusion, to which two chapters (from p. 140) full of brilliant and often witty pages are dedicated, and which enrich the readers with some thoughts to which they probably had not paid attention in their own life: often readers encounter in the book considerations that seem to them a good, effective expression of something that they have always thought of, and immediately after further clarifications that reveal some unusual, unexpected aspect, embarrassingly for the readers, who are forced to face their own conventional judgment. The struggle against ambivalent Illusion, which leads to ruin but also to creation, and against the abject Confusion, always and only sterile, is a perennial and inexhaustible task, and it is the task of intellectual cleanness capable of clearly distinguishing.

The historical component, perhaps useful in ancient times but certainly anachronistic today, and perhaps destined to no longer exist in the world of tomorrow, is the subject of a rather original interest of Vernon Lee (and an ancient one: after all, it is the subject of the unfortunate novel *Miss Brown*, which indeed speaks of anything but war). This component is the institution, the habit, to heroically glorify self-sacrifice, it is the set of

automatic attitudes that inhabit inside ourselves to accept the sacrifice of others for our purposes, and to sometimes demand it by exerting pressure on those we are going to sacrifice. A lot of emphasis is given to this component everywhere in the Notes and in particular in a chapter dedicated to "Self-sacrifice" (from p. 191). The glorification of heroes, the celebration of others' sacrifice and self-sacrifice, is par excellence the anachronistic institution that must cease to exist, because the modern world no longer needs it. Here too, as in the analysis of Illusion and Confusion, we find considerations that seem obvious to us immediately followed by others that reveal to us dimensions of sacrifice to which our egocentrism refused to think. On the one hand, extinguishing this institution is another task of conscious thinking; with the usual intellectualist inclination, the most important thing is distinction of ideas, and if there is this, you can also have some confidence in your conscience:

... let us therefore keep clear in our mind, and in whatever conscience we may have, that *a sacrifice made is a sacrifice accepted*, and nine times out of ten demanded, exacted, by other persons (p. 200).

An almost self-evident consideration, but which in the meantime we forget every time we visit a sanctuary of heroes, at least of those appreciated by our political inclinations. And therefore:

... this much the war has shown: it is high time to insist as a rule of honour and decency upon one thing, namely, that all men and women should scrutinize with the most hostile scepticism any act of self-sacrifice before, on any score of ideals, programs or principles, they *accept*, they *demand* it, from others (p. 208).

There is, however, another force perhaps more effectively destined to work in favour of the abolition of the sanctification of self-sacrifice: the fact in itself that for the conditions of life of modern humanity it is anachronistic, and therefore a different cultural form could automatically evolve, as a kind of attitude of the individual to protect himself:

... the world needs rather than such altruism as is expressed in self-sacrifice, a different kind of altruism which is recognition of the other (for *alter* is Latin for *other*), sides, aspects, possibilities and requirements of things and people. That humble, but, alas, by no means always common, altruism is at the bottom of such barter of good for better as is abhorrent to Satan the Waster (p. xlvi).

And again, on the theme of the possible evolutionary process, she suggests that we could develop some ad hoc quality for the useless sacrifice:

... and [man] would, I may venture to add, be better off if he were to develop this

sense of *Waste*, and oftener think out his valuations in reference to it, not holding on quite so dully to the valuations which may (or not) have been suited to past, but are no longer suited to present circumstances... (p. 185).

The theme of replacing the cult of self-sacrifice with something less idealized and more suited to human needs, a substitution that could be an automatic process and a consequence of the mechanism of evolution, recurs throughout *Satan, the Waster* by frequent hints. This other too, for example:

... among the many surprises of the future (the real future which will have become the present) there may arise out of increasing possibilities and habits and purpose of tolerable existence, and out of a gradual better understanding of Man and Nature and their relations, a new faith, justified or not, but like the old faiths mainly unreasoned, rule-of-thumb, intuitive, emotional, made out of the repeated experience, the vague expectation, *that happiness breeds happiness and misery breeds misery*. Such would be the faith of fairly happy men. But our past and present faiths are born of wretchedness; they are the justification of misery, the consolation for misery (p. 217).

Now, if we think about this without prejudice in the present year 2020, and if we abstract from the current catastrophic literature that describes the evils and problems of our today's world in a state of amnesia with respect to the enormity of the events that occurred between 1914 and 1945, we could ask ourselves: could not be true, that the extreme childish and coarse individualistic narcissism that shapes our times, with conspicuous negative consequences, nevertheless is also a survival strategy that has some relationship with the need to defend ourselves from the anachronistic institution of sacrifice that we can touch with our hands in all Great War monuments that infest the soil of all Europe with falsehood?

One aspect of the Notes that should be pointed out, and which perhaps represents the most striking limitation of Vernon Lee's elaboration, is the lack of attention to the component of active consent towards the war. The automatic and passive consent of the whole society is the background of the whole book, and it is universal: and given this universality, the active consent of those who desired and promoted the war appears as a secondary feature, absorbed by the fundamental one. The reason why passive and automatic consent seemed universal to Vernon Lee was that in the highly literate society of England at the time, in 1914, there was a strong neutralist and pacifist opinion (soon defeated), but there was no popular resistance to war, a cleavage defined by class distinction. Indeed, precisely

because it was politically literate (however minimally), popular opinion inclined to an instinctive and gross nationalism rather than a class interpretation of war. Popular self-defensive resistance to war was a strong phenomenon in countries where there was a rural world still linked to oral culture, politically if not absolutely illiterate. The evidence of this from the Italian rural world, and even more so from the Russian popular and rural world, is well-known and it is the phenomenon that has led a lot of historiography to see in the Great War a class conflict in the canonical form of bourgeoisie against proletariat, which instead was quite absent everywhere before the wave of politicization of the internal life of all countries from 1917 onwards, and if anything it can be seen just in the form of a conflict between political alphabets and illiterates in countries where political illiteracy was relevant. Absent this conflictual component in England, that of popular self-preservation resistance is a dimension that neither Vernon Lee nor her pacifist colleagues Playne and Cooper Willis, whom I have mentioned above, realize, and they do not realize it because it was absent in their field of observation. Suffice it to recall the fact that in the UK conscription came in 1916, and that for the first two years of the war the supply of volunteers was sufficient to fuel the immense losses of the Franco-German front (with volunteers, as is known, coming even from the U.K. Dominions of Oceania, whose public opinion felt a very strong pact of solidarity towards the motherland considered under attack). But on the other side, Vernon Lee (and the same can be said of Playne, considered that we have mentioned this writer connected to Vernon Lee), whose interest was to focus on the universal mechanism that led to war and that won the subjective resistance of each by producing a consensus devoid of critical analysis, first of all because each country appeared to everyone in good faith to be attacked and not an aggressor, was embarrassed by the evidence of active consent from those to whom the war appeared a sort of occasion for redemption. It is the crucial theme of the great enthusiasm of August 1914, still mysterious, and of which we have infinite minute and some monumental testimonies. To cite a monumental example, let us see Freud's main biography:

Freud's immediate response to the declaration of war was an unexpected one. One would have supposed that a pacifist *savant* of fifty-eight would have greeted it with simple horror, as so many did. On the contrary, his first response was rather one of youthful enthusiasm, apparently a reawakening of the military ardors of his boyhood. He said that for the first time in thirty years he felt

himself to be an Austrian.¹⁹

Whether the Great War was desired and wished by men and women perhaps precisely for the reason that the way of life developed by the nineteenth century, by the century of the rational repression of instinct par excellence, had reached a critical threshold of intolerability, is an immense question of which nothing can be said here. Nor can *Satan, the Waster* help us to reach a judgment, because the problem is only posed, in particular through the phenomenology of two cases of active consensus towards which Vernon Lee is strongly controversial, because for the protagonists she does not find extenuating circumstances to concede. One case is that of H. G. Wells, the rationalist and socialist writer converted to bellicism with the speed of lightning in August 1914, an event which was followed by the personal rupture with Vernon Lee. Wells is mentioned several times sarcastically, as a man who wanted to take deliberately artificial and absurd positions, and once he is mentioned for a small testimony on active consent in a work of his:

Moreover, as is expressed in the extremely suggestive last conversations in Mr. H.G. Wells' *Joan and Peter*, war gives the life-enhancing and power-multiplying feeling of purpose to men ordinarily at a loose end, or idly pulled hither and thither by their own appetites; it affords an outward aim for those whose energy is too intermittent or whose innate organization is too rudimentary to give them an inner aim of their own. Thus war, which destroys so many of the finest, of the most highly organized, individuals, oddly enough nurses into satisfaction with life a perhaps equal number of mediocrities or semi-failures. And in war's invisible shrine there hang, like ex-votos, rows and rows of moral crutches (p. xxx).

The difficulty of conceiving the reasons for active consent less generically is reflected in the use of the effective, but generic, metaphor that concludes this quotation. The difficulty is to connect similar reasons of evident subjective character with the universal social fact of war.

The other case of active consent to the war against which Vernon Lee is ruthlessly controversial is discussed in the chapter "Love of adventure" (from p. 256). This chapter attempts to establish a relationship between the active consensus of individuals from the simple people who enlisted in the

¹⁹ Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Chapter 23, "The War Years", p. 327 of the 1963 Anchor Edition.

war simply because it seemed to offer an opportunity to get out of economic and existential mediocrity, and the active consensus of the privileged youth, exemplary represented by Frederic Keeling, a social reformer who enlisted and became enthusiastic about the war on the basis of superficial motivations, connected with the philosophical vitalism of the beginning of the century, and of which there are numerous testimonies in each country, and not a few in the Italian interventionist youth literature. The favourite slogan of Keeling, who was killed in 1916, was that the war allowed him *to bite into the apple of life*, and Vernon Lee uses this expression as a leitmotif and treats it with even malicious sarcasm, after admitting that she had a hostile prejudice, while she tries to place the formants of war-like and interventionist youth in conceptual coordinates, recognizing that she does not have a strong satisfactory response (p. 259). The problem is obvious: whether it is the dissatisfaction of the lashed youth of the workers' suburbs, or that of the turn of the century *jeunesse dorée* to which characters such as Keeling or the French poet Peguy (also mentioned in the text) belonged, we are dealing with concerns typical of a given existential condition and of a given epoch of human life. But given that it is a constant experience to which the growth of the human person is subject at all times, in this case generational dissatisfaction has relationship or does not have with war in general, and with the phenomenon of consent to the present war in particular? *Satan, the Waster* is prudent:

... I suspect that the person who has curiosity to spare for *biting into the Apple of Life* must, for one reason or another, be at a loss for problems, interests, jobs, and let me add the old-fashioned word, *duties*. Also, for what is as necessary in, and for, life: at a loss for tastes, preferences and those impulses to thought and action bringing the human creature into contact with the Otherness, and, little as he may suspect it, freeing him from himself. It means being at a loose end. That such was the case, and with a resultant desire to *Bite into the Apple of Life*, among the generation which the war has decimated or perhaps cured, seems to me evident. Also, that this quest for intellectual and emotional Adventure (Adventure of which their own soul was the field) made many, just like Keeling, welcome the war, and welcoming, justify it. I do not pretend to know what led to the existence of this state of mind (p. 259).

But why is Vernon Lee sarcastic and ruthless towards Keeling, a fallen volunteer, and towards the human type he represents? The answer lies in the closing of the chapter, which contains a probably unusual consideration even in the eyes of today's reader, who has some knowledge of the

memorials of the Great War and of the insistence on the human value of the war experience that imprints that kind of literature:

In the revelations which Keeling and his war comrades, living and dead (alas, mostly dead!), are furnishing more and more, there is a frequent and curious harping upon the circumstance that the war and its miseries had opened their eyes to comradeship and love. Had they then, one may ask, been closed to them before? Had these youths lived in what mystics would have called a condition of *aridity*? Aridity, non-participation, not towards other men and women only, known or unknown, but aridity towards the vast impersonal brotherhood in which, when giving himself with joy or bitterness, effort or exultation, man shuffles off his little self, and receives in return a share of the inexhaustible living plenitude of things (p. 261).

All of the above has the only purpose to give a first idea of the content and stimuli that an attentive reader can derive from the neglected and forgotten masterpiece that is *Satan, the Waster*, which is a kind of atlas of the (dirty) conscience of Europe with respect to the Great War, and which gives inexhaustible suggestions to reflexion. I also point out that Vernon Lee attempted to give a more compact and systematic form to the thoughts elaborated in the Notes to *Satan* in a small volume of 1925, *Proteus, or the Future of Intelligence*²⁰, whose object is no longer war, but is generally the challenge of intelligence to adapt itself to the form of reality in the human condition of our time.

Alberto Palazzi

May 2020

Notes to the 2020 electronic edition

This e-book has been composed on the basis of the 1920 and 1930 printed edition of *Satan the Waster*, and the printed editions of the texts included here as Appendices. 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 editions have been preserved in [square brackets]. The same as regards the Appendices.

To facilitate the reading of this electronic edition, the author's footnotes containing remarks that add some contents to the main discourse have been marked with an asterisk '*'. The other footnotes contain references to

²⁰ Reproduced in Appendix III in this edition.

Editor's Foreword

the author's sources or minor remarks by the editor, and should be read only by those who have an interest in identifying the author's sources.

SATAN, THE WASTER

SATAN, THE WASTER

Original title page

SATAN THE WASTER
A PHILOSOPHIC WAR TRILOGY WITH NOTES &
INTRODUCTION

BY VERNON LEE

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A Preface Ten Years After Publication, 1920-1930

My war trilogy ends with the angry warning of Stage-Manager Satan to his, by this time, unrepresentable Ballet-Master Death: *Do you now understand that Heroism has almost found you out for the preposterous, indecent anachronism that you are? And if, by any chance, that Blind Boy should really be surgoned into seeing, why this will have been the last of our "Ballets of the Nations."*

What Heroism, temporarily restored to sight, thought of that performance in which he had played the star part, was expressed some years later by Mr. Galsworthy's young poet in the *White Monkey*. And Heroism, with the voice of real young poets and novelists, from Sassoon to Remarque and Hemingway²¹, Williamson, Aldington and Graves, has been repeating, bitterly or sorrowfully, the same thing ever since. And people have listened without being scandalized, except with the war itself and its former promoters.

But this book was originally published ten years ago, when such things could not be said without impiety. So, with the generous exception of Mr. Bernard Shaw, *Satan the Waster* was boycotted by reviewers; my own friends turned away from it in silence; and I myself felt rather ashamed of having written it.

Now that its heresies have turned to commonplaces, it may perhaps find a few of my usual readers. So, pending a possible relapse of Heroism's constitutional cataract, I have asked my publishers to reissue the unsold edition instead of using it to make parcels of other people's books.

VERNON LEE.

1930.

²¹ The text has "Hemmingway" (Editor).

To the Reader

[v] The whole of this drama is intended to be read, and especially read out loud, as *prose*; the passages which scan conforming as much as the rest to the vocabulary, the punctuation, the syntax, and the essential logic which differentiate prose from verse. And whatever rhythmical elements have been intentionally introduced, should be merely felt as an indefinable quality, so to speak a *timbre*, of what is in other respects ordinary speech.

Introduction

I

[vii] The Ballet of the Nations, which constitutes the nucleus of the following drama, was written, in narrative shape, at Whitsuntide of the first year of the war; and published that same Christmas as a picture book in collaboration with Mr. Maxwell Armfield. It was in its origin merely such an extemporized shadow-play as a throng of passionate thoughts may cast up into the lucid spaces of one's mind: symbolical figures, grotesquely embodying what seems too multifold and fluctuating, also too unendurable, to be taken stock of. A European war was going on which, from my point of view, was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly "Grand Guignol" performance. It could, as it seemed to me, have been planned and staged only by the legendary Power of Evil; and the remembrance of mediaeval masques naturally added the familiar figure, fiddling and leering as in Holbein's woodcuts, of a Ballet Master Death.

The bleeding Nations evidently danced to an Orchestra of Passions, of whom the noblest were the most efficacious in keeping up the hideous farandole which they had not forbidden; and Pity and Indignation themselves — I wrote at the time of the *Lusitania* episode — were called in by the Devil when the rest seemed flagging.

This crude emblematic improvisation at first satisfied my need for expression. But the thing once written, I began to see its shallowness. Surely this visible performance was not the only one; human affairs, although at times attaining the grandeur of tragedy, are, after all, of common, prosaic human quality and origin; nay, in themselves not more dignified than [viii] the haggling and elbowing of the hucksters of Vanity

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Fair. And Heroism and the Great Passions, terrible or lovely, would not have been called in with their various instruments, nor Ballet Master Death given his great Benefit Performance, if Self-Interest, instead of turning on his side to sleep his Sunday's sleep, had kept an eye on the little doings in embassies and public offices and in the sanctums of armament-mongers and concession-hunters and newspaper-trusts.

Recognizing this, it became necessary I should add to Satan's glorious and terrible public exhibition, which I had called the *Ballet of the Nations*, those cinematograph and gramophone records of private realities, which the Waster of All Kinds of Virtue revealed as a favour to the Ages-to-Come, and that fatuous sycophant of his, the classic Muse of History.

After that arose the question of what would happen in the future? Was it destined all to begin again, once the performers had repaired their disarray? Would Ballet Master Death recover from his drunken slumbers pillowed upon his weary, but ever faithful, follower the blind youth Heroism?

My first answer to myself was *yes*. For so indeed it seemed when I wrote the first draft of that epilogue in the second year of the war. But the third and the fourth ended, and with constant increase of the unimaginable horrors and follies, there came signs that the very excess of them may prevent their renewal in the future. My first sketch of the epilogue concluded with the triumphant exclamations of Ballet Master Death, pulling himself together for a fresh performance and whistling to that docile dog-like Heroism. I ended the second version with Heroism's cutting short Death's drunken self-gratulations, and with Satan's sudden anxiety lest, should Heroism ever be cured of blindness, this present one might have been the last of such Ballets of the Nations. Alas, correcting that epilogue after the Armistice and the signing of Peace, I have had to end once more with a more hopeful view on the part of Satan.

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Back cover

“To the modern conscience in time of peace, war is a monstrosity complicated by an absurdity; hence no one can believe himself to have had a hand in bringing it about.”

Satan, the Waster, published in 1920, is an essay on political anthropology of the Great War in a radically pacifist and radically rationalist perspective: but although it is a militant book, it is neither a sermon nor a book of good intentions; it is a ruthless analysis of what happened, built on the basis of the original vision of a writer with a unique personality. The book consists of a symbolic comedy focused on the traditional metaphor of the devil and a collection of essays that clarify its infinite meanings and suggestions. It is unique in its kind, a masterpiece of writing and intellectual clarity, and was written in an intentionally rough way to force the readers to think overcoming the instinctive solidarity with their country at war, an attitude which was dominant at that time, and which still remains today.

The First World War is the product of a system that has lost its ability to manage its own complexity, and any traditional explanation of the phenomenon is inadequate. So *Satan, the Waster* had this aim: to be the beginning of the search for a key to this unacceptable event, without ever giving any priority status to traditional explanations and rationalizations. We are faced with a phenomenon that requires completely unprejudiced thought, and consequently radical innovation in the way of expressing it.

The attentive readers will be enriched by this masterpiece, which is a kind of atlas of the (dirty) conscience of Europe of the Great War, with an infinite number of suggestions for their own reflection, and will gain a radically changed vision of the whole phenomenon.

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.