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AESTHETIC TRUTHS OF THE FIABESQUE: VERNON LEE'S VENICE

***Keywords**: Venice, Italy; Commedia dell'Arte; aesthetic paradox; alternative truths; the grotesque and the classical in art; the writings of Vernon Lee; aesthetic philosophy and the gothic.*
***Abstract**: While living in Venice, Italy in the 1880s, the Victorian writer and aesthetic philosopher Vernon Lee began formulating what would become her definition of the genius loci, or "spirit of places": a divinity sacred to "the substance of our heart and mind" (5), who constitutes a geographical area's conscience, character, sensory and extra-sensory effects. Like Yeats's Byzantium, Venice was for Vernon Lee at once the subject-matter and ultimate destination for the artist's imagination: not an eternal, naturalistic paradise on the order of the Paduan hills or Roman forests about which she wrote with uncomplicated devotion, but instead a constantly shifting representation of conflicting aesthetic ideals: frivolity and sustenance of the soul; demonic possession by the holy rapture of the beautiful. With its undulating waters, in which cheerfully-illuminated music boats do little to dispel the evanescent mysteries of shadow and reflected sound, Venice physically embodied for Lee the imagination's forced submission to the voluptuous lure of epiphany. As she discovered early in life, the fiabesque Venetian Fairy Comedy expressed most eloquently the sensory and imaginative chaos-banquet that was Venice, using the homeliness of ancient fairy tales for plot and character. Throughout a career that spanned seven decades, Lee repeatedly witnessed the power of Venice to inspire "the weaving of subtle and fanciful shapes; the realizing in dream or nightmare the distant and the impossible." In her communion with the genius loci of Venice as with her more straightforward interpretations of the city, Lee articulated the beautiful as at once the highest good and the most profound danger, dispensing with the artificial separation of history, philosophy, and creative fiction.*

Even today, the Palazzo Barbaro seems strangely aloof from the bustling tourist world of Venice. It faces the Grand Canal on the north bank, at one of the three bridges that cross Venice's main waterway, and is seen by thousands of people every day. In crossing the Accademia Bridge from the south side of the canal, one may not even notice the fifteenth-century Venetian Gothic palazzo; its Persian arches and lacework recede into those of the neighboring palazzi and the constantly-shifting *chiaroscuro* that surrounds it. At the apex of the curved wooden bridge, the eye is drawn toward the southeast and the domes of the Chiesa della Salute near the end of the canal; in daylight, the sun hits the golden sphere of the customs-house steeple at its eastern entrance. The gardens of the Palazzo Franchetti Cavalli also separate Palazzo Barbaro from the bridge, and while the average visitor may, like

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Alice, view at a distance those who mingle in the garden "among the bright flower-beds and the cool fountains,"[1] the eye is rarely diverted to the palazzo beyond.

But its camouflaged position amid the eminently visible is fitting for Palazzo Barbaro. It is here that the artistic center of the nineteenth-century Anglophone expatriate community in Venice created and established its place. Daniel Sargent Curtis, a Bostonian lawyer, had moved his family to Venice following a small-scale court case for assault on a Boston judge, who during a train journey had implied that Curtis was not a gentleman.[2] After he spent two months in a Boston jail, Curtis purchased the larger and older part of the palazzo, which was being sold by the last of the Barbaro family. After extensive restorations of the palazzo's interior, Curtis, his English wife Ariana and their artist son Ralph Curtis moved in in 1881 and spent the next decade hosting expatriate Americans with Harvard or Boston connections such as Isabella Stewart Gardner and John Singer Sargent, a cousin of the Curtises whose painting *An Interior in Venice* features the family in their opulent Ballroom.[3]

They also became acquainted with Henry James, who had first visited Venice in 1881 at the age of thirty-seven. James initially found the city dreary but came to love its "thousand occasional graces and …happy accidents" as he writes in *Italian Hours*.[4] Palazzo Barbaro became the model for Milly Theale's Venetian palace in James' *The Wings of the Dove*:

> the high, florid rooms, palatial chambers where hard, cool pavements took reflections in their lifelong polish, and where the sun on the stirred sea-water, flickering up through open windows, played over the painted subjects in the splendid ceilings—embossed and beribboned, all toned with time and all flourished

[1] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* Ill. Arthur Rackham. London, 1907. Rpt. ed. New York: Viking, 1975.

[2] See Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurry, *John Singer Sargent: The Early Portraits,* complete paintings Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 62.

[3] Natasha Wallace, 'Venice: Palazzi Barbaro' *The John Singer Sargent Virtual Gallery*, dir. and maintained by Natasha Wallace, 1/31/03. 27 May 2003 <http://www.jssgallery.org/index.htm>

[4] Henry James, *Italian Hours*, published 1909 (The Project Gutenberg EBook of Italian Hours, by Henry James, etext prepared by Richard Farris), chapter 2. 27 May 2003 <http://www.gutenberg.config.com/etext04/8ihou10.txt>

and scalloped and gilded about, set in their great molded and figured concavity. (James 145)

As both a relative and friend of the family, John Singer Sargent visited frequently, producing hundreds of views of Venice, from St. Mark's Square to views of the front water-doors of palazzi that lined the Grand Canal, and portraits of native Venetians as well as expatriates.

The Curtises also played host to his childhood friend, a young writer and aesthetic philosopher named Violet Paget, who since her first major publication in her early twenties had gone by the pen-name Vernon Lee.

Lee had first visited Venice with her family as a child sometime between 1866 and 1870, shortly after the nomadic British Pagets began wintering in Italy (Colby 6-8). Carefully fostered by her intellectual mother, Lee's precocity and natural passion for Italian antiquity would lead to her discovery, before age fifteen, of the Arcadian Academy's deserted meeting place in Rome (Ady). They would also inspire her groundbreaking *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, published when she was twenty-three. A reviewer of the work in *The Atlantic Monthly* commented that "Vernon Lee has made such good use of uncommon powers and opportunities that she has been able, at an age when most have barely realized their emancipation from the school-room, to shed light on the annals of a comparatively neglected period, and to make a fresh and important contribution to the History of Italian Art."[5]

As one of the four major cultural centers of eighteenth-century Italy, Lee positions Venice as a city in decline by the end of the 1700s. But if it does not retain the full possession of its former political and military powers, its cultural influence remains secure. In 1740, Lee writes, "Venice was still something of what she had been in 1540, although she died of the first storm-blast of revolution, she retained her general aspect of manner of other days" (252). She goes on to identify the role occupied by the Venetian Comedy of Masks in preserving the spirit of the great sea republic in the form's revivification by the composers Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi. Goldoni, Lee observes, was uniquely and solely fashioned to be the creator of

[5] Joseph Lee, 'Vernon Lee,' *The Atlantic Monthly,* Vol. 55, Is. 328, Feb. 1885, 220-8 (Making of America Online Database, The Cornell University Library, 1999) 31 May 2003 <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK2934-0055-38>

the Venetian realistic comedy, both through his life experiences as a middle-class lawyer and his appreciation of his audience of everyday workers. When he presented the traditional Venetian comic mask figure of Pantalone, with his red stockings and long black hooded cloak, Goldoni created of the character a meticulous Venetian merchant, whose comic persona was accompanied onstage by real-life Venetian fishermen and gondoliers. Lee encourages the reader to consider what she calls the "profane farce" of Venice only in terms of its nineteenth-century caricature; it is Goldoni who can show us the city's true persona:

> Let us follow Goldoni across the square of St. Mark's, heedless of the crowd in mask and cloak…and let us thread the network of narrow little streets of the *Merceria* [the Rialto marketplace]. There, in those tall, dark houses, with their dingy look-out to narrow canals floating wisps of straw…is the real wealth, the real honour, the real good of Venice…all that remains of the frugal, industrious Venice of the Middle Ages. (265-266)

Lee invites the reader to continue further from St. Mark's to the more remote canals and campielli of the city, following Goldoni to the islands on the archipelago of Venice, "and he will show us," she writes, "all that remains of the force of the city, of the savage simplicity and austerity of the boatmen, and fishers, and working classes" (266). The democratic Goldoni, she concludes, "naturally refused to show us the corrupt Venice of adventurers like Casanova, heaping up all the ordure of their town and times, [who] have made some of us believe to have been the sole, real Venice of the eighteenth century,"

> It is this something of former days, mixed with the modern, which gives Venice in the eighteenth century so peculiar an aspect, something analogous to the portraits of Doges in the robes of the Middle Ages over knee-breeches, and the cap of Byzantine days stuck upon a powdered bagwig….The old patches of half-medieval, half-oriental gold and colour, the old dabs of sea-stain and filth, still remained in the spirit of Venice as on its walls. (252-3)

But the composer who voiced the authentic spirit of the city most accurately was Count Carlo Gozzi, a contemporary and sometime rival of Goldoni. According to Lee, Gozzi was possessed spiritually and artistically by the city; in his crumbling ancestral home in the *Cannereggio* district he was constantly being haunted by "the hobgoblins and phantasms of Venice," revenants of the ancient folktales and *masques* who impelled him to create the most characteristically Venetian art form: the fairy comedy. If Lee acknowledges Goldoni's contribution of realism to Italian musical comedy, she reserves her praise of the most genuinely Venetian composer for Gozzi, who dispensed with Goldoni's meticulously realistic shopkeepers and gondoliers to form his art from the supernatural folktales "told by every nursemaid from Venice to Naples" in the form of works that redefined and revivified the figures of the old Venetian *Commedia dell'Arte* while capturing the attention of an audience jaded by Goldoni's realism. Most famously in *The Love for Three Oranges, Turandot,* and *The Little Green Bird,* Gozzi revealed himself as an artist "who believed in the superior wisdom of childishness, in the philosophy of old

nurses' tales; in the venerableness of clowns" (274) and thus created the *fiabe teatrale,* most Venetian of art-forms:

> When we return to Venice after an interval of years, melancholy with the first impression of the lurid-green canals, the dilapidated, discoloured palaces,…our first sight of the squares of St. Mark's in the summer evening is like the transition from the world of *Childe Harold* to that of the *Love for Three Oranges.* The two squares, smooth like huge ball-rooms, enclosed by the lace-like stonework of the *Procuratie* and the Ducal Palace, the arcades brilliant with the yellow light of the jewelers. . .; the middle of the square, where the yellow light from the porticos dies away into the white twilight; the indistinct shapes and colours of St. Mark's, with its confused stories of pillarets and piles of cupolas and gleaming mosaics and gold, facing the hazy sea, the great belfry rising, shooting up in the dim, distant sky. All this is fairy-like, *fiabesque* in Carlo Gozzi's sense of the word. (*SECI* 279-80)

Lee considered Gozzi's *fiabesque* to evoke not only the aesthetic and spiritual appeal of Venice but its squalor and base humor, as he provides in his mask characters and scenery an illustration of the last days of the great sea power:

> If we repeople [Piazza San Marco] with the crowd in domino and mask, with the fiddlers and singers, with the story-teller and nostrum-seller…we get the background of one of Gozzi's comedies, and we can imagine…the last gay days of Venice…when the dying republic gathered its tarnished grandeur about it and awaited its death in merriment. (280)

Gozzi's *fiabesque* was born of the composer's threadbare aristocratic upbringing in Venice; "he was as fragmentary, as incomplete, as those very elements of humor and fancy which he had saved out of the wreck of the *Commedia dell'Arte*...he clung with tenderness and veneration to the Republic; he loved its traditions, its glamour, its unrealities" (282). Gozzi's work lifted Venice out of its stagnant reality into the glittering unrealities of the fairy world to portray the city at its most beautiful, letting the Masks show its homelier charms.

But as Lee attests, Gozzi can only show an outline of his subject, not the full form; the rest must be imagined, must haunt the reader's thoughts if it is to create the full effect of the city. Like Gozzi's fairy comedies, Venice is an absurdity and a miracle, childhood amazement mixed with adult gratification, and happiness in Lee's sense of the word: the creation of and response to aesthetic beauty. It challenges artists to articulate its graces, or at least communicate its equal necessity and danger. Gozzi's fanciful, grotesque comedies grew directly from this "strange, weird, beautiful, half oriental, half medieval thing, [this] city of gorgeous color and mysterious shadow" (*SECI* 279).

Here in her earliest published work, Lee was already formulating what would become her definition of the *genius loci*—the spirit of places, "a divinity deserving of silent worship" (*Genius Loci* 4-5). Yet it will also serve to distinguish her writing from that of other *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes or "decadent" artists of her day, who centered desire and reverence in the physical body. Lee disdained physical representation of the *genius loci*; she writes in the introduction to her first volume on the spirit of places, "to think of a place or a country in human shape is, for all the

practice of rhetoricians, not to think of it at all. The Genius Loci, like all worthy divinities, is the substance of our heart and mind" (*GL* 5).

Lee's 1881 story "A Culture Ghost," revised as "A Wicked Voice" for the collection Hauntings published nine years later, has as its narrator an opera composer seduced by the voice of an eighteenth-century Italian castrato, Zaffirino, and unable to free his creative mind from its insidious stimulation. In the original story Lee's setting was Florence; for this more sinister version she chose Venice, perhaps in part because of the historical connection to Richard Wagner, who composed part of Tristan und Isolde there and died in the Palazzo Vendramin in 1883.[6] For Lee's narrator Magnus, an acolyte of Wagner who is writing a heroic opera in his style, Venice is at once repulsive and intoxicating, floating in its stagnant "lagoon of the past," but transforming all surfaces within it to scintillating, moonlight-dappled waters.

Similarly, Zaffirino's "downy" voice, in its ambiguous gender and thinly veiled erotic power, is infamous: according to Venetian lore, no woman could survive hearing it. Magnus first encounters the legend of Zaffirino after finding a miniature portrait of the singer in his boarding-house, and soon after begins to hear the soft insinuations of his music, both when alone and among the Venetian crowds. At one point Zaffirino's voice is heard publicly, apparently coming from a gondola on the Grand Canal, but Magnus is the only listener who recognizes it as more than a beautiful mystery. In his compulsive search for the origin of the voice, Magnus travels to the mainland, where he lodges in the eighteenth-century villa in which Zaffirino's voice killed the Procuratessa Vendramin, an aristocratic young lady who had disparaged the singer's vocal prowess.

One night while wandering the deserted halls and ballrooms of the villa, now employed as storage facilities for hay and farming implements, Magnus suddenly hears the voice at its most exquisite. He approaches the grand hall of the villa, filled with rotting tapestries and Venetian glass chandeliers which rotate slowly, "like gigantic spiders hanging from the ceiling," and is drawn toward the sound of the voice to a small observation gallery. From there, he watches a phantasmic re-creation of the scene in which Zaffirino's performance kills the Procuratessa:

> I recognised at once that delicate, voluptuous quality, strange, exquisite, sweet beyond words, but lacking all youth and clearness. That passion veiled in tears which had troubled my brain that night on the lagoon and again on the Grand Canal. (234)

Magnus knows that the voice has possessed him and is driving him to madness; after his encounter in the villa his mind is full of music he has never heard before—not his own creations, but the songs and melodies of the eighteenth century, which being a Wagnerian he disdains. As the castrato voice becomes a strangely

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[6] For a detailed study of Lee's response to the music of Richard Wagner, see Carlo Caballero, ''A Wicked Voice': On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music' in *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts, and Sciences* 35.4 (Summer 1992): 385-408.

erotic weapon overpowering both women and men, so the story's fluid and shifting atmosphere provides the environment for that conquest.

Of Lee's second book of aesthetic essays *Belcaro* (1881), Harriet Waters Preston writes in an 1885 *Atlantic Monthly* article that with its "intense subjectivity and glorious lawlessness" Lee is able to "shake herself free of artistic affectations and conventionalism, enter the heart and fathom for herself the sublime secret of those great antiques which she so truly loves" (Preston 224). The most oft-quoted essay in the collection, "Ruskinism," focuses more generally on aesthetics than Venice in particular, yet it exposes what Lee sees as an inherent flaw in the aesthetic philosophy of John Ruskin, whom she would otherwise extol as her chief inspiration, through his ideas promulgated in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice.*

Ruskin, Lee writes, "has taught us more of the subtle reasons of art, he has reproduced with his pen more of the beauty of physical nature, and he has made us feel more profoundly the beauty of moral nature, than has, perhaps, been done separately by any critic, or artist, or moralist of his day." (*Belcaro* 200) His only error is that he insists on the duty of art to serve a moral purpose beyond the simple goodness of its beauty. As she remarks, "He felt himself endowed to struggle for righteousness and bound to do so, and he also felt himself attracted by mere beauty. To the moral nature of the man this mere beauty, which threatened to absorb his existence, became positively sinful." (203) Ruskin's carefully codified moral philosophy of art amounts to a warning to other thinkers, to recognize the distinction between aesthetic beauty and moral character:

> We must beware lest we use as a map of the earth into which we have been created the map of the heaven which we seek to create; for we shall find that the ways are different…and we shall uselessly weep or rage until all the time for our journeyings and workings is over, and death has come to ask how much we have done. (206)

Ruth Robbins has observed of Lee being identified as a "decadent" writer that she simply refused a binary reading of the world by which her age defined its values. The rules of the Protestant God so important to Ruskin were not the immutable Good of the world; morally irreproachable medieval saints "must have been appalling prigs, indifferent to family affections, higher literature, hygiene, and rational cookery" ("Economic Dependence of Women" 72), and much that epitomized the morally worthy was suspect at best. In "Ruskinism" she bends her exasperation at Ruskin's idea of the fall of Venice to her respect for the nobility of his endeavor, but she cannot let him get away with his false teachings. That Venice's "bad architecture" of the fifteenth-century Gothic Revival acted with the Republic's moral degradation to bring about its political ruin is "a complete historical misconception…not only in the history of art, but also in the history of civilization" (*Belcaro* 218). The geographical chance of being a sea power when the Mediterranean was the only known sea raised the palaces of Venice; the fact that the oceans superseded the Mediterranean is the explanation of the fall of Venice, of the city's political torpor and the social lassitude which produced its consequent vices, not the other way around. "The lace work of fifteenth-century gothic is not a *lie,*"

she insists, "it is an effete form." Ruskin's catastrophic error is his insistence on a complete and systematic theory that imposes a moral message on the beautiful, when it is in fact "the irrelevant, the contradictory [that] is precious, because it is true to our better part. Though art has no moral meaning, it has a moral value; art is happiness, and to bestow happiness is to create good." (*Belcaro* 225,229)

But if she appreciated the artistic opportunities it offered, Lee was perpetually exasperated by the city's "lazy over-loveliness," as she writes in *Genius Loci* (1899), her first book on the spirit of places. She initially pronounces the divinity of place in Venice extinguished and replaced by bric-a-brac shops; then as she contemplates the Lion of Saint Mark atop his pillar she realizes that he is the key to the city's spirit, although she is unsure in exactly what manner. The answer comes to her as she is "wandering about among the furniture and old clothes of the municipal museum" (*Genius Loci* 108) in the unlikely object of a white leather military coat of the seventeenth century. Worn by Francesco Morosini, the Venetian naval officer who defended Greece against the Ottomans in the 1680s, the coat puts Lee in mind of the figure of Morosini and the places he fought: "Melos, with the Venus buried in its walls, and Samos, where Polycrates had been king in the days of Darius" (109). She meditates on the Greek sites associated with the Mongol-whiskered Morosini and the armies he defeated, capturing the Turks' "damascened muskets and cannon, the whole deadly equipment of the legendary East." (108-9) By the time she disembarks the penny steamer from the museum to Piazza San Marco, Lee is able to ascertain the "*genius loci* of the dying city," personified by Morosini. "He had made me understand that Venice is different from any of her medieval rivals only inasmuch as, like her Lion on the column, she looks East. The last word of the antique civilizations of the Mediterranean was said in the building of St. Mark's." (112) She understands the Lion now, with his "stiffened tail and white, dreadful eyes," crouching perpetually to spring into the east.

Lee's final comments on Venice are found in *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (1925), published ten years before her death. The penultimate essay begins "Out of Venice at last, and back once more in these most friendly Paduan hills." (*GK* 73) Amid the "yellow and russet on poplars and hedgerows," and the "kindly farm noises," she writes, the "mists and langours and regrets and dreams of Venice are swept, are cleansed away." (73) Once she returns to the mainland, her thoughts regain structure:

> After those days of moody isolation, fluctuating and shifting in stagnation like the shallow and stagnant Venetian waters. . .wherein the stormy sunsets put shifting iridescences and sanguine splendours and scales of unclutchable gold; all the dead greatness and happiness which has never really been, and the crumble of endless neglect and the creepy life of obscure baseness, seem all to be in their ooze. (74)

Venice's dissipation is made manifest in the human reactions it inspires; here Lee forsakes architecture, music, and other human compositions to focus on the inhuman influence of the city. "It seems to me that I have rarely been healthily happy in Venice, never quite free from regrets and from longings, or the delusive happiness which is streaked with them" (74). She returns to the subject of "A

Wicked Voice" as she explains. "The things which Venice offers to the eye and the fancy conspire to melt and mar our soul like some music of ungraspable *timbres* and unstable rhythms and modulations, with the enervation also of 'too much': more sequences of colours on the water, more palaces, more canals, more romances, and more magnificence and squalor" (74). In this final essay, the *fiabesque* uniqueness which captured the young philosopher's imagination becomes abundance carried too far. Dispensing with the beauties of its Byzantine and Gothic past, Lee conceives the city's spirit of place as malevolent virtuosity proliferating incomprehensible sensation. "It brings a knot into my throat, and into my mind the ignominious sadness of lovers' quarrels, like Musset's and George Sand's, of the going to bits of Byron, and of its own long, shameful crumble, ending in sale of shrines and heirlooms, and dead women's fans and dead babies' shoes at the curiosity dealers" (*GK* 76). In the Euganean Hills Lee can look back on Venice, "that marvelous, more than Wagnerian symphony of sights and fancies, with its lapsing rhythms and insidious *timbres* and modulations. But I am out of it," she concludes, "and safe."

Vernon Lee was safe in the Euganean Hills because they were far enough away from Venice that she could convince herself she was as safe spiritually as she was distant physically from its sinister associations. But when she saw the god Dionysus being worshipped in the small Paduan village of Rovolo, as she records in a memorial essay for Walter Pater in 1921, she knew there was no escape from the effects of Venice. If Dionysus was here with his "mystery, in human or divine shape, of the unaccountable dreams and transformations. . .the supreme elemental mystery of fermentation and its effects" ("Dionysus" 350), she realized that nowhere was safe from the exiled god. Gods in exile are "*revenants,* tragic beings likely as not malevolent towards living men," and Lee knew that the ancient deity was not some jolly, rotund winebibber, but as the earliest Greek art portrayed him: a young man of physical perfection with a pointed beard and a cynical expression, the "symbol of moods which seek deliverance from reality in horror as well as excessive rapture. . .a kind of haunting" (348).

Dionysus is also effeminate or androgynous, attractive as a "young, bearded deacon," and, like Zaffirino, seductive and ghostly, dangerously unbounded. Zaffirino may be identified as Lee's personification of Venice in that he is a figure of transformation that both allows and sublimates "the hopes and fancies, the ecstasies and barbarities which humdrum existence has said No to" (351). Thus Dionysus, the powerful death-god in exile, is a direct correlate in Lee's aesthetic philosophy to the *genius loci* of Venice.

Like her protagonist Magnus, Lee might have felt safer but could not be content outside Venice. In the Euganean Hills she sought freedom from the conflicting effects of pleasure and revulsion, pity and admiration, fear and surrendering ecstatically to the loss of control, particularly creative control, that Venice produced. But like Magnus, she was constantly drawn back, as Magnus is cursed with equal desire for and hatred of the deadly voice after he scorns Zaffirino's influence. As her friend John Singer Sargent gave supernatural beauty to ordinary scenes, Lee created of the scenes she encountered in Venice strange and threatening agents of beauty. But for her Venice was not merely a subject of art; it was an aesthetic philosophy unto itself: the most beautiful of all that is natural and

artificial, the most hideous and sordid. It could be feared and loved, but not forgotten.

Throughout a writing career that spanned seven decades, Vernon Lee denied truths assumed to be inviolable and identities held sacred by her time and place. She neither excused Ruskin's philosophical lapses nor appeared to be troubled by the traditional social and intellectual mores by which she was surrounded. Instead, she pursued her intrepid vision, constant throughout her life, of the beautiful in art as the good of the world, dispensing in this pursuit with the separation of history, philosophy, and creative fiction. Her writings on the supernatural continue the expression of her reverence for the final splendor of imperial Byzantium found in Venice, itself proceeding toward ruin even as it married the arts of east and west, and conjured from barbarian origins a stylistic vitality of its own. Venice was never Vernon Lee's home, but it was a place whose unique situation of happenstance greatness and inevitable failure beckoned her, via the final decades of its glory during the eighteenth century, from the time she wrote of it in her early twenties to her leave-taking at age seventy.

Like Yeats's Byzantium, Vernon Lee's Venice was the final destination for the artist's memory and imagination; in her place within the city and its place within her diverse writings, she returns to her intellectual and spiritual origins. Venice was not a paradise on the order of the Paduan hills or Roman forests about which Lee wrote with uncomplicated devotion, but instead a shifting representation of ideals and realities that epitomized decadence and classicism, physical and spiritual attraction, frivolity and enhancement of the soul, and "demonic" possession by the holy rapture of the beautiful. Venice's *genius loci* was monstrous, but so enticing to artists that they must decipher its mystery whatever the cost. If one encounters the vegetation god Pan upon getting lost in the woods, in Venice one faces Dionysus, the exiled, vengeful god of voluptuous sensation. Its gilded and mildewed, enchanted and corrupt dream is a challenge for the artist to create of it something holy, i.e. beautiful. When in Venice the artist's mind becomes like Zaffirino's voice: filled with suppressed tears and ecstasy, fluid in identity and time, breaking out pure and piercing so that artistic creation is at once apotheosis and brutal purgation.

Venice is limitless possibility because it is both grotesquely real and glitteringly evanescent, like Dionysus born of violence and sacrifice, excess and abandonment, meticulous design and confusion. In this way, Vernon Lee's Venice embodies the supernatural, dim world from which all artistic masterpieces come. Realists like Goldoni could use it, but poets like Gozzi, in bringing it only halfway to visible form through the *fiabesque*, provide a better understanding of the wondrous to their audiences. Venice's *genius loci* seduce those with artistic sense. It is the inevitable agony, the sacrifice to a destroyer god, the creative process writ large in *calli* and *campielli*, towers and canals.

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