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ending 500 million years in the future. Pure pf may not strictly belong to the category of “fantastic in the arts,” but this book is nevertheless likely to be of great interest to any reader of this journal.

EDWARD JAMES

Pulham, Patricia. *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. 166 pp. Cloth. ISBN-13: 978-0-7546-5096-6. \$99.95.

During her lifetime Violet Paget, better known by her *nom de plume*, Vernon Lee, was internationally recognized for her works of supernatural fiction, as well as her historical studies, travel accounts, and works on aesthetics and philosophy. Her first book was published in 1880 and her last in 1932; she was thus witness to both the *fin de siècle* and the birth of the new century. Nevertheless, despite her fame during her lifetime and her prolific output, critical discussion of Lee has been lacking. The eclipse of Lee's literary and intellectual status is undoubtedly the result of the consolidation of Modernism in the early twentieth century and the concomitant disdain with which the Victorians were regarded by the Great War generation. With all that shouting and banging associated with the Modernists, it is perhaps not surprising that the less strident voice of Lee would have been stifled by the clamor.

This is not to say that Lee was hesitant in the voicing of her opinions and thoughts; quite the contrary. She was a forthright combatant in the intellectual struggles of her day, with the result that she was often the subject of surprisingly vituperative reactions. Bertrand Russell described her in this manner: "She was a woman of almost unbelievable ugliness and probably never aroused the desire in any man. She has a whole series of young girls to whom she was a vampire, and when one of them was used up, she would throw her away and get another" (Pulham 26). As Patricia Pulham demonstrates in the introduction to her new book on Lee, this reaction (and others like it) are the result of a complex of associations that emerged in the late nineteenth century ensuring that intellectually aggressive women encountered a Victorian firewall, and in breaching this gender barrier, they ran the risk of being caricatured as a vampire, a *femme fatale*.

Lee was also a problematic figure for her generation in that she had assumed a gender-neutral penname and, as Russell was so quick to point out, spent much of her time in the company of women. Pulham rejects outright any simple categorizing of Lee as "lesbian" or "failed lesbian" (as one biographer of Lee strangely described her). This rejection of simplistic analyses and a favoring of undecidability in categorization reflects the operating thesis behind *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales*. Pulham proposes that Lee's ambiguous sexuality has a formal relationship with her stories of the fantastic—that her literary and psychic spaces overlap.

Pulham's conception of this intertwining of Lee's psyche and storying is informed by her understanding of a particular psychoanalytical theory, that of the "transitional object" as originally proposed by Donald Winnicott in 1971 in his *Playing and Reality*. The "transitional object" is a child's toy, or any other

item to which a child forms an attachment while he or she is in a particular stage of psychic development that Winnicott defines as the “potential space” out of which a sense of self will emerge. This is a liminal space, suspended between the child’s earliest apprehension that the world is coextensive with itself and the later, critical division between a world “out there” and a self within. Within this borderland psychic space, the child still experiences proximity to the mother, yet does not directly interact with her. Rather it plays and interacts with a toy that it initially conceives of as being a part of itself. It is through the process of play that the child acquires a sense of the bounded self that is differentiated from the plenitude of the “polymorphously perverse.”

It is Pulham’s contention that Lee’s supernatural tales of “ghostly singers, metamorphic sculptures, strange uncanny dolls, [and] portraits that come to life” (xvi) are representative of the haunting presence of Winnicott’s liminal stage of psychic development. For Winnicott, our engagement with both art and culture is the result of a sort of “return of the repressed” of the “transitional object.” In other words, our aesthetic sense is a return of play. According to Pulham:

It appears that “play” is at the heart of Lee’s engagement with aesthetics, and the striking parallel between the thoughts of Winnicott and Lee on this subject, together with the centrality of the art object in Lee’s supernatural fiction, inspire a reconsideration of these works in the light of Winnicott’s theories. In this context, Lee’s supernatural fiction becomes a form of “potential space” in which she plays with cultural objects in order to explore alternative subjectivities. (xvii)

The opening chapter, “Castrato Cries and Wicked Voices,” is a good example of the range of ideas pursued by Pulham while examining individual tales. In looking at two tales by Lee, “A Culture Ghost: Winthrop’s Adventure” (1881) and “A Wicked Voice” (1889), Pulham notes that Lee recognized the moment of her artistic and intellectual development when she rejected the fancies of childhood, yet that “these fantasies return forcefully in her fiction, often ‘haunted’ both literally and figuratively by the maternal voice” (3). Pulham then pursues a study of this “voice” (both maternal and otherwise) and its implications for Lee’s tales. What was the nature of Lee’s literary voice? Operating in a patriarchal environment, and adopting a male pseudonym, “Lee was certainly aware of the need to masquerade as male in order to be taken seriously in the male literary world” (4). Yet Pulham finds even greater psychoanalytical quarry here, for “to speak was to be unsexed, and the language in which one spoke remained indubitably male” (4). As standard Lacanian psychoanalysis formulates it, to speak, to accede to language, is to enter the Symbolic through the overcoming of castration anxiety and final acceptance

of the *nom du pere*, the “name of the Father.” Pulham writes, “Yet, as Lacan suggests, the mother’s voice itself must also function as a transitional object (an object like the breast, the faeces, a loved blanket or doll) from which the child must separate itself in order to become an independent subject” (5).

Moreover, the maternal voice surrounds the child like an “umbilical net,” simultaneously both comforting and an image of entrapment, and thus indicative of a profound ambivalence. The maternal voice is contrasted with the paternal world, and thus the mother is identified with sound and the father with meaning (or the Symbolic, as Lacan and his followers would have it). Pulham links the disturbing nature of the operatic voice in Lee’s stories with the pre-linguistic “cry,” a sound that paralyzes like a sonic glare of the Medusa. Recognition of this “cry” heralds the continuing presence of the “preverbal relationship with the Mother and its attendant sensations of bliss and paranoia, of release and entrapment” (7). Pulham quickly plunges into an *excursus* on the singing of the sirens, the song of Circe, the Medusa and the Gorgon, all linked to the “disruptive power” of the feminine voice.

Unlike Lee’s theoretical writings on music, which for Pulham constitute an attempt to neutralize the disruptive power of music by “disciplining” it, Lee’s ghost stories “play out these powerful effects [of music] or put them on display” (11). The figure that most clearly represents the mysterious, disruptive force of the “cry” is the figure of the *castrato*. Despite the fact that Lee never describes the singer Zaffirino (in “A Wicked Voice”) as such, Pulham mounts a powerful case that the ghostly opera singers in various of Lee’s supernatural tales are indeed castrato figures, the sexual ambiguity of their voices presenting a threat to the stable “reality principle” of their audience and Lee herself. In Pulham’s reading, the castrato represents “an alternative subjectivity that is played out in the ‘potential space’ of Lee’s fictions” (27).

This initial chapter is representative of the form of all the succeeding chapters. The writer rarely deviates from first stating her theme (the voice, for example), then presenting an extended *excursus* or development (the siren song, Circe, Medusa, Gorgon, the flute), and finally returning to the tonic chord (the castrato figure, representative of the Medusan voice/cry). I do not personally see anything particularly wrong with this repetition of form; however, it must be noted that if one is adverse to a certain way of adducing non-causally connected evidence, then the text may at times become a little tiresome. At their worst, certain sections of individual chapters may appear as little more than a concatenation of analogies that in no way constitute a reasoned argument. Here is an example of what I mean: Venice—the setting of “A Wicked Voice”—is known as *La Serenissima*, which means serene, which is etymologically linked to the word *siren*, a hybrid being (half bird, half woman), and one who enchants through the voice. A siren is also an obsolete musical instrument as well as an imaginary species of serpent, which we can associate

with the Medusa, a “violin of flesh and blood” and thus the “maternal fluidity” and the “serpentine waters” of Venice (17). Depending on how highly one values the psychoanalytical project, this arrangement of associations within a paratactical scholarly space will either serve to edify or make one feel trapped in a sort of post-structuralist nightmare, doomed to jump from one signifier to the next in a vertiginous spiral of referential allusions.

The ensuing chapter delves into Lee’s fascination with the statue and sculptural beauty. Here again Pulham examines the writer’s ambiguous relationship with the idea of aesthetic form: Lee’s theoretical works extol the Apollonian, formal virtues of classical sculpture, while her stories, such as “Marsyas in Flanders,” examined in depth here, seem to reveal a disquieting awareness of the Dionysian connections between the flayed satyr Marsyas, Dionysus, Orpheus, and their indeterminate gender and sexuality. In writing about the chthonian, maternal origins of the figure of Marsyas in Lee’s tale, Pulham achieves some remarkable rhetorical effects: “Skinned alive, Marsyas body becomes a kind of disturbing double for the body in its embryonic state, in which the blood and veins of the foetus are visible through the translucence of the skin” (49). The figure of Marsyas, like that of Dionysus, Orpheus, and even Christ (“[t]hroughout the ages, the mystical tradition has considered Christ as an androgyne”) embodies the “fluid sexuality” of the “amorphous existence” of the child before its adoption of a “‘fixed’ subjectivity” (51). Pressing her case further, Pulham examines “St. Eudaemon and His Orange Tree” in which the uncovering of an ancient statue of Venus disrupts the quietude of a small Italian township. The androgyny of the classical Venus is discussed at length, allowing Pulham to conclude that “The search for plenitude that is figured through Venus’s androgyny can therefore be seen as expressive of lesbian desire” (58).

By the time one gets to the final chapter of the book, there is a decided ring of familiarity to the pattern of Pulham’s arguments and her conclusions. In discussing the figure of the vampire, for example, she suggests that “vampirism might also serve as a model for the embryonic fusion with the mother that informs Lee’s negotiation of sexual identity: in the womb, the baby feeds vampirically on the mother’s blood-enriched placenta” (136). Somewhat frustratingly, it appears that no matter from which direction we begin our journey, we always end up in the same place: the limbo of “mummy and me.” Pulham certainly accrues an impressive amount of evidence, yet image upon image, story upon story, and *still* there is no escape from the maelstrom of phantoms that lead us back to the beginning.

It is no doubt churlish to accuse the author of a book entitled *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* of a Freudian reductionism in her study of Lee’s supernatural fiction. It is perhaps inevitable that once one adopts the psychoanalytical mindset, the myriad forked paths of the

writer's imagination resolve into a single ordinary track, and one becomes committed to an iterative loop in which one traces and retraces these origins.

Having said this, for the reader interested in Lee's oeuvre—both her theoretical works and her supernatural tales—there is much in Pulham's text to recommend. She strengthens her arguments through extended comparative analyses of fantastical stories by Lee's contemporaries and antecedents: Hoffman, Henry James, Balzac, Poe, etc. She draws upon an impressive array of secondary texts that illuminate aspects of art history, aesthetics, and various and varying psychoanalytical ideas that support her thesis. There is enough fascinating detail in each chapter to spark the scholarly imagination into pursuing, perhaps in very different ways, some of Pulham's often ingenious ideas.

LEON MARVELL