

Vernon Lee's Composition of 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers': Historic Emotion and the Aesthetic Life

Sarah Barnette

In the wake of her travels to Tangier and southern Spain in the winter of 1888–89, Vernon Lee (1856–1935) composed 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers: A Moorish Ghost Story of the Seventeenth Century', a supernatural tale that distilled her recent impressions of Morocco and Spain into an invented Andalusian folk tale.¹ In the short story, she experimented with two aesthetic theories that she had developed out of a careful study of her interactive experiences with art, landscape, and architecture in recent years. These theories, one concerning the 'faculty of association' and the other 'historic emotion', each conceptualize aspects of the relationship between the mind and art. In examining 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' we come closer to understanding Lee's early views regarding the limits, advantages, and disadvantages of our aesthetic faculties. This article, in its contextualization of Vernon Lee's travels before her composition of this tale, navigates a constellation of Lee's essays, letters, and impressions of Morocco and Spain as recorded in her *Commonplace Book iv*. Later on, Lee would experiment with her 'empathy' theory of response to beauty, set more firmly in the context of her interest in psychological aesthetics in the 1890s, but 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' marks a return to Lee's early theories of aesthetics in the 1880s. This supernatural tale is situated in a specific biographical context, composed after Lee's synergetic relationship with A. Mary F. Robinson (1857–1944). The first part of this article introduces Lee's aesthetic theories, assesses the challenges they pose, and narrates the context of her travel; while the second moves to consider the tale itself. It uncovers affinities with Lee's experiences abroad as evidenced by her *Commonplace Book iv*, and argues for ties to Lee's essay in *Juvenilia* on the

¹The story first appeared in print in 1896 when it was published in French under the title 'La Madone aux sept glaives' in *Feuilleton du journal des débats du Samedi*. It was first published in English in two parts in 1909. See Vernon Lee, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers: A Moorish Ghost Story of the Seventeenth Century', in *English Review*, January 1909, pp. 223–33; and February 1909, pp. 453–65. The tale was reissued and collected in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: Bodley Head, 1927). Parenthetical citations given in the text are from the 1909 publication and prefixed with *VSD*.

‘faculty of association’.² In essence, the article contends that Lee uses the tale to seek some mode of resolution between her two aesthetic theories.

The tale and its context

Vernon Lee has come to be recognized as a zealous and ambitious figure in late nineteenth-century British aestheticism.³ A close friend of Walter Pater, Lee assiduously inserted herself into the London and Oxford circles of the aesthetes in the early 1880s. Born in France and raised in Germany and Italy, Lee lived primarily in Italy in later life and immersed herself initially in the study of eighteenth-century Italian music and Italian classical and Renaissance art. As critical attention to her oeuvre has increased, she has largely become known for her supernatural tales collected into *Hauntings* (1890) as well as for her theory of ‘aesthetic empathy’ and her work alongside the artist Clementina (‘Kit’) Anstruther-Thomson (1857–1921) in psychological aesthetics at the turn of the century.⁴ However, Lee’s earlier aesthetic theories and her supernatural tale, ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (which does not appear in the *Hauntings* collection), have received relatively little notice in comparison.⁵

² Waterville, ME: USA, Colby College, Miller Library, Special Collections, Commonplace Books, iv, pp. 1–38. Many thanks to the Special Collections team at Colby College for generously sharing digital copies of this Commonplace Book. Further references to this volume are given after quotations in the text and prefixed by CB. Vernon Lee’s Commonplace Books are marked sequentially from III to XIV and cover a period from May 1887 to May 1900. Transcriptions are my own.

³ See Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 55–92; Laurel Brake, ‘Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle’, in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 40–57. Angela Leighton places Lee’s ghost stories within the framework of Victorian aestheticism in ‘Ghosts, Aestheticism, and “Vernon Lee”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28 (2000), 1–14. For a narration of Lee’s entrance into London literary society and her foray into aesthetics in the early 1880s, see Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 78–83.

⁴ For an overview of Lee’s involvement in psychological aesthetics, see Carolyn Burdett, “‘The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside’”: Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics’, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (2011) <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.610>>.

⁵ The tale is only mentioned in a single line in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856–1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 226, and does not appear in the monograph by Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003). Vineta Colby turns briefly towards this story and its context in *Vernon Lee*, pp. 241–42. An annotated edition of the tale is featured in Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), pp. 249–78. The most extensive textual analysis appears in Patricia Pulham, *Art and*

The tale opens in the present day, with lurid descriptions of Granada's Basilica of Our Lady of Sorrows. The narrator paints a vibrant portrait of the church's sixteenth-century baroque interior — a style Lee detested as one that signalled 'the last traditions of chivalry of the Pulgars and Garcilastros disappearing in the buccaneering swagger, the pirates' heroics of Cortes and Pizarro' — and fixates upon the enthroned Madonna beneath the cupola, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers.⁶ Then the scene is reimagined in the glow of the past as the narrative turns to a winter afternoon in the seventeenth century just in time to see Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor, enter the church to pray to the Virgin. In preparation for his most daring feat, he swears his devotion to her and requests her protection; in return she promises salvation. Encouraged, Don Juan confidently proceeds with his plans to enter the enchanted subterranean depths of the neighbouring Alhambra by necromantic means, and claim the forbidden fourteenth-century Islamic princess hidden there as his bride; he hires a Jew, Baruch, to perform the rites and then kills him afterwards. Even after a lifetime of profanity, sexual escapades, and outrageous murders, Don Juan's previous exploits seem 'trumpety and mawkish' in the face of this new roguery (*VSD*, p. 227). In wedding himself to the Islamic Infanta he will bring his lineage, 'in direct line from the Cid, and from that Fernan del Pulgar who had nailed the Ave Maria to the Mosque', into irreverent contact with that of the daughter of 'King Yahya, of Cordova' (pp. 228, 229), the penultimate caliph of the Umayyad dynasty before Spain was overtaken by the Catholicism of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

Alas, when Don Juan finds the Infanta she asks him to swear that she is more beautiful than any other woman, including the Virgin of the Seven Daggers. He cannot bring himself to swear against the Virgin, and reeling from a confused vision wherein he sees the image of the Infanta fused with that of the Virgin, Don Juan is decapitated. He awakes the next day in the open air near the Alhambra and, deciding his experience was all a dream, he strides back into the city. He encounters a group of people crowded round a grotesque scene, which he discovers to be his own bloodied corpse. Upon realizing that he is dead, he flees into the Church of Our Lady of the Seven Daggers in fear and anguish, believing she has forsaken him. Once inside, however, she cleanses him of his sins and he is lifted up to Heaven with a vision of the Virgin before him. The tale ends with a coda

the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 93–97, but it does not rely upon the specific context of Lee's experiences in Tangier and southern Spain.

⁶ CB, p. 28. See Colby, p. 241, and Pulham, p. 92 for more on Lee's dislike of Spanish baroque art and Spanish Madonnas. See 'Preface to "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" (1927)', in *Hauntings*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, p. 246, in which Lee addresses her dislike of the art of the Catholic Revival and Spanish Madonnas directly.

from the present-day narrator: a letter from Don Pedro Calderon — the famous sixteenth-century Spanish playwright in whose plays ‘you hit upon death wherever you go’ (CB, p. 29) — reveals that the story we have just read came to his friend, ‘the Archpriest Morales, at Grenada’ in a vision (*VSD*, p. 465). Calderon indicates that he agrees with the archpriest’s suggestion that this story, ‘were it presented in the shape of a play, adorned with graces of style and with flowers of rhetoric, [. . .] would be indeed [. . .] well calculated to spread the glory of our holy church’, but then dismisses the project as he is much too old to write. And so instead ‘unworthy modern hands have sought to frame the veracious and moral history of Don Juan and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (*VSD*, p. 465).

To understand the tale more fully, one must take a step back and turn towards Lee’s development of her aesthetic theories, a process that can be traced throughout her work of the 1880s, during the period marked by her collaborative friendship with A. Mary F. Robinson. Poet, mentee of John Addington Symonds, and constant companion (and some argue lover) of Lee from 1881 to 1887, Robinson helped to precipitate a prolific period of writing for Lee.⁷ On 24 August 1887, however, Lee received a letter from Robinson which announced her engagement to a noted Persian scholar and orientalist from France, James Darmesteter. While Robinson’s relations reeled at her choice — there were reservations about the couple’s short acquaintance and objections to Darmesteter’s Jewish heritage — Lee’s distress was particularly acute. By March 1888 she suffered a nervous breakdown and, devastated, turned for support to Kit Anstruther-Thomson, whom she had met that same summer. After experiencing a relapse in poor health in August 1888 — the month of Robinson’s marriage — Lee spent the autumn with Anstruther-Thomson in Scotland and was ultimately persuaded by her new friend to travel south for the climate, and to escape the familiar sights of England and Italy that held so many memories of Robinson. From November 1888 to January 1889, Lee stayed in Tangier and travelled in southern Spain before returning to Italy; the notes from this period now comprise the first thirty-eight pages of her *Commonplace Book* iv. In the coming years, Lee would lift whole sections from these entries and transfer them into her essays and fiction, but her initial step was to concentrate her recorded impressions of landscapes, architecture, and

⁷There is no critical consensus as to the exact nature of Lee and Robinson’s relationship. See Colby, p. 58 for her view that it was physically non-sexual. See also Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination, Victorian Style: A Psychological and Critical Study of ‘Vernon Lee’* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987); and Martha Vicinus, “‘A Legion of Ghosts’: Vernon Lee (1856–1935) and the Art of Nostalgia”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10 (2004), 599–616. Emily Harrington notes there is evidence of Lee and Robinson’s physical intimacy in their letters in ‘The Strain of Sympathy: A. Mary F. Robinson, *The New Arcadia*, and Vernon Lee’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 61 (2006), 66–98 (p. 74, n. 19).

cultures into ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’.⁸ In doing so, Lee was carrying forward work she had originally pursued alongside Robinson. Her tale can thus be read as an early experiment in grappling with her aesthetic theories and her meticulously recorded travel experiences in the context of the emotional aftermath of a failed love (and work) relationship.

The early aesthetic theories

Lee’s early aesthetic theories start taking shape in the dialogue essays she began writing while working alongside Robinson. They feature the character Baldwin, Lee’s fictional alter ego, and reflect how Lee considered the mind to be rooted in sympathetic impulses that sought out the familiar and layered images from memory over those of the present moment. The essays themselves — as points to which Lee drew her interests, her friendships, familiar landscapes, and her experiences — enact this view: the dialogues are set in places Lee knew, the interlocutors are based upon her friends, and the topics no doubt reflect subjects discussed with them. Lee’s first dialogue, for example, features Baldwin and Cyril and mirrors her partnership with Robinson. Set in Italy, the dialogue is an artistic reproduction of their discussions surrounding the uses and morality of literary art.⁹

In 1885 Lee utilized the dialogue essay specifically to devise and expound upon a theory of an ‘aesthetic life [. . .] within us’.¹⁰ A theory of unconscious aesthetic response to external form, through it Lee identifies how, within each individual, an ‘aesthetic life’ is created over time from the gradual, unwitting accumulation in our souls of past ‘broken impressions’. Lee presents it as pleasure driven, ‘a kaleidoscopic shifting and rearranging of all pleasant impressions of colour, sound, form, or emotion’ (‘Value of the Ideal’, p. 276). As a direct result of what has pleasurably influenced us in the past, each ‘aesthetic life’ has its own set of ‘sympathies and desires’ that hunger for ‘food’ in sympathy with earlier satisfying impressions (p. 275). In this way the ‘aesthetic life’ predetermines exterior forms and objects with which one identifies; the mind is naturally drawn to the familiar: ‘we

⁸ Additional pieces Lee wrote using sections from her *Commonplace Book iv* include: ‘Orpheus in Rome’, *Contemporary Review*, June 1889, pp. 828–49; ‘Sketches in Tangier’, *New Review*, March 1890, pp. 221–28; and ‘In Praise of Old Houses’, *Longman’s Magazine*, July 1892, pp. 287–96.

⁹ ‘A Dialogue on Poetic Morality’, *Contemporary Review*, May 1881, pp. 682–707. See Harrington for a more in-depth review of Lee and Robinson’s shared interests and collaborative work.

¹⁰ The dialogue essay in which Vernon Lee theorizes about the ‘aesthetic life’ first appeared as ‘The Value of the Ideal’, *National Review*, September 1885, pp. 26–42. It was later collected in *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1886), pp. 249–307. References given after quotations in the text are from this 1886 edition.

stretch out, as it were, our mental feelers [. . .], as the needle may be said to recognize the loadstone, the special object of its desires — it sucks them in' (p. 298). These 'sympathetic' impulses, however, limit one's receptivity. Lives are lived much more 'in the past of our aesthetic impressions than in their present', and external forms and objects in and of themselves (particularly when they are disliked) are much less important than an individual's internal 'aggregate, constantly shifting, [. . .] living dust of broken impressions' (pp. 276, 275).

Concerned with whether or not it was morally correct to give sway to the internal and subjective, Lee continued to question and investigate, publishing in 1887 an essay titled 'The Lake of Charlemagne: An Apology of Association'. In it she elaborates upon the basis for her theory of 'aesthetic life' by describing an innate 'faculty of association'.¹¹ This faculty is fundamentally the engine that keeps the cumulative 'aesthetic life [. . .] within us' running. Like the unconscious nature of the 'aesthetic life', the 'faculty of association' functions within us involuntarily. Both afford pleasure, but Lee makes the qualifying remark in 'The Lake of Charlemagne' that 'pleasant things are not necessarily good or proper' (*Juvenilia*, 1, 43). In this essay, Lee writes informally in the first person rather than using Baldwin; she adopts a conversational tone of one weighing the advantages and disadvantages of this associative faculty, the process 'by which the real presence of one object evokes the imaginary presence of other objects' (1, 30). 'Association', she writes, 'means the investing of one object, having characteristics of its own, with the characteristics of some other object: the pushing aside, in short, of reality to make room for the fictions of the imagination or memory' (1, 45). Although concerned with this faculty's moral implications, by the essay's conclusion, Lee does not (or cannot) decide whether or not ultimately to name this a 'pestilent faculty, leading to insincerity, injustice, and stupid wastefulness' or an 'excellent, useful, and most honourable' thing (1, 30, 31).

Lee's *Commonplace Book* iv entries demonstrate her continued preoccupation with association. In her notes, Lee frequently superimposes her memories of the familiar over her recordings of what was foreign and new, often connecting what she sees while abroad with recognizable landscapes or styles of art, and exhibiting a cognitive pattern of turning inwards towards memories and the stores of her imagination. In Tangier she writes, 'these Moors, ploughing on the hillside, look like white Benedictines in some old fresco — or like some allegorical orchard in a mediaeval poem' (CB, p. 6). In the crepuscular moments she loved so well, when the hills 'turned faintly purple', Lee catches glimpses of the Italian landscape: 'they seem to tell of something in common with other countries, [. . .] of

¹¹ This essay is collected in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), 1, 23–76.

the solemn and tender country of St. Francis' (p. 6). A Moroccan beggar has 'withered features' as 'keen [and] singularly straight' as 'those of certain early Greek coins or certain marble Renaissance medallions' (p. 1). Standing on a roof in Tangier overlooking sea, city, and hillsides, she receives 'an impression making one think of Salambô', Flaubert's historical novel set in third century BC Carthage, while a youth she catches sight of in the city streets looks like 'a young prince in disguise, [. . .] one of the *Arabian Nights*, thinking of his princess Badura' (pp. 4, 9). This careful inclusion of memories and associations drawn from an internal 'aesthetic life' demonstrates Lee's self-experimentation in the winter of 1888–89. These entries indicate a specialized attention to the 'faculty of association', to how things from her past — memories of reading Flaubert and the *Arabian Nights*, knowledge of Greek coins and Renaissance medallions — are conjured by the external world: 'it came home to me that in our perceptions of nature and of art there usually exists a kind of phantom of the past' (*Juvenilia*, 1, 68).

She knows that the 'faculty of association' poses a problem of attention: personal associations with the past, subjective impressions, and memories fill our minds easily and unbidden, distracting us from specific (art) objects, places, and time. The faculty awakens Lee's 'fear of injustice' because it has the mischievous effect of causing unwarranted 'maltreatment of others, vandalism, and wastefulness' through its (mis-directed) concentration upon subjective realities (*Juvenilia*, 1, 31, 45). For instance, it commits an injustice towards the artist, whose symphony, sculpture, or painting we only engage with so far as it reminds us of ourselves. Yet, even as Lee struggles with these cons she cannot help but defend the faculty as the 'indispensible' basis of all art: 'Without association, I say, no art' (1, 53, 56) — a statement that parallels Baldwin's view that 'Art [. . .] exists, not because the things outside us clamour to have their portraits taken; but because the things, the desires, within us clamour for a particular kind of satisfaction' ('Value of the Ideal', p. 301). Without this faculty, our creative impulses would never draw associations together to a degree sufficient enough for the transmutation of memories and impressions into symphonies, sculptures, paintings, or — in Lee's case — dialogue essays.

Lee does, however, gesture towards her hope that there is a chance we may prevent 'maltreatment' and 'wastefulness' — not in spite of the 'faculty of association', but because of it. Lee indicates a possible solution in 'The Lake of Charlemagne' by suggesting that association can be construed as moral because by fastening the unfamiliar present to the familiar past, we transform the present into a permanent feature of our mental landscape: 'the present is in itself, however vivid, too transient and thin; [. . .] it requires, in order to remain, a layer or two of the past, unseen, perhaps, but which gives it body, and tone, and stability' (*Juvenilia*, 1, 68–69). But

Lee also provides a caveat: the past does not necessarily indicate the subjective past. One might need rather to consider the past of a place, of another person, of an artwork:

There are persons, and many, who, going through a picture gallery which is new to them, or walking through a new country, will frequently complain of a sort of painful sense that their minds cannot take in new things sufficiently quickly. Now, if you question such people, you will almost invariably find that they have *only confused and very general impressions* about the galleries and countries which they have previously visited. They compare their brain to a thoroughly soaked sponge, which can absorb no more water. But their simile is false; they suffer not because there is too much past to admit the present, but because *they have not enough of that many tinted though faded tapestry of the past, into which to weave, to secure them, the brilliant threads of the present.* These are the benefits which we obtain in our aesthetic life from association; nay, this constant adding of old to new is our aesthetic life itself. (*Juvenilia*, I, 69–70, emphasis added)

Lee implies that in order for the ‘faculty of association’ to function ethically, a working knowledge of what lies behind the scenes of any new and unfamiliar place, person, or object — a place’s history, an artist’s story, or a culture’s folklore, for instance — is required. Only by feeding on history — ‘that many tinted though faded tapestry of the past’ — can the ‘faculty of association’ bring an individual’s subjective past and external realities of the present together in a way that ensures the present will have sufficient ‘body, and tone, and stability’ (*Juvenilia*, I, 69).

As Lee experimented with the faculty of association in her notebook, she also introduces a second aesthetic theory, one that results from a knowledge of history combined with affective responses to external realities: ‘historic emotion’. It overwhelms an individual’s past with the past of history. It is distinct from association and the ‘aesthetic life’ because, rather than a ‘delicate’ or ‘permanent process’, it is a ‘powerful thing’, an ‘intellectual [emotion], [. . .] made up of many and various elements’ that ‘approach[es] and com[es] upon [one]’ without warning (CB, p. 25). Lee identified it with ‘that curious emotion which I have felt in such different places’, from ‘the little gothic church at Lamballe’ to ‘the porch at Ely’ to ‘the churches of Bruges and Innsbruck’ (pp. 25, 26). It is not perceptually pleasurable, but ‘fill[s] us with the confused throb of passions welling from our most vital parts. It is [. . .] akin to the emotions of religion. There is [. . .] a sense of the presence [. . .] of the Past’ (p. 26).

Based upon Lee’s description, ‘historic emotion’ has less to do with an individual’s unconscious ‘aesthetic life’ and more to do with an acquired knowledge of ‘that many tinted though faded tapestry of the past’. Lee’s

fullest description of her experience of ‘historic emotion’ comes from an experience at Granada when attending a ceremony celebrating the Conquest at the Chapel of the Catholic Kings.¹² Sitting beside the burial place of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, Lee found the ceremony ‘very paltry [. . .] compared with what one sees in Italy’, adding, ‘nor did I care for it at all’ (CB, p. 24). And yet during the ceremony, Lee describes how ‘for a moment [. . .] the life of today seemed to stagger and vanish and my mind to be swept along in the dark of gleaming whirlpools of the Past’ (p. 26). In struggling to explain what ‘historic emotion’ is — ‘a kind of rapture [. . .] not easy to describe’¹³ — Lee details exactly how her senses were being overwhelmed in the moments leading up to the experience:

My eyes wandered round the wide chapel, up the sheaves of the pilasters to the gilded spandrils of the vault, round the altars covered with [. . .] sculpture, [. . .] and down again among the kneeling crowd on the matted floor, women in veils, men in cloaks [. . .]. In the middle were the marble tombs of Ferdinand and Isabella, lying with folded hands and rigid feet, four crimson banners of the Moors hanging above them [. . .]. The organ played in vague mazes above the chanting. (pp. 24–25)

In this account, ‘historic emotion’ is produced from fusing historic knowledge with affective response. Lee had been intensely focused upon the arrangement and movement of the architectural lines in the cathedral’s interior — she seems to have been attentive to internalizing these forms, indicating that her ‘aesthetic life’ within was not uppermost. It is possible that Lee’s unexpected experience of ‘historic emotion’ amid architecture she disliked and during a ceremony she was inwardly criticizing led her to consider using it as a further corrective to the ‘faculty of association’, one through which personal subjectivities would not only be checked, but completely submerged and made to give way to alternate perspectives. Because the ‘aesthetic life’ unavoidably distracts from reality, ‘historic emotion’ usefully springs from a knowledge of history that accentuates surrounding forms and objects, drawing forth and emphasizing their historic reality in a vibrant, if mysterious, way; it (intellectually) redirects attention to the ‘reality’ of a place and thereby restricts any unjust emphasis the ‘faculty of association’ may place upon ‘the fictions of the imagination or memory’ (*Juvenilia*, I, 45). The ‘faculty of association’, nevertheless, still plays its part in preventing ‘historic emotion’ from becoming *too* oppressive, and sweeping the mind *away* ‘in the dark of gleaming whirlpools of the Past’.

¹²The anniversary marks the end of Moorish rule in Spain.

¹³‘In Praise of Old Houses’, p. 293. Lee transferred descriptions of ‘historic emotion’ from her *Commonplace Book IV* to this publication.

Lee's impressions meet 'that many-tinted though faded tapestry of the past'

Lee's Spanish tale experiments with balancing these two theories. She transplants her recorded subjective memories and impressions to 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' to give 'body, and tone, and stability' to the places and people she encountered during her travels and thus celebrate the 'constant adding of old to new [. . .] our aesthetic life itself'. Simultaneously, she infuses her tale with planned historic and cultural research in an effort to reach out towards that 'intellectual' emotion 'made up of many and various elements' and apprehend 'a sense of the presence [. . .] of the Past'. Indeed, Lee added her previous knowledge of the folk tales of Andalusia, Calderon's plays, and the history of baroque architecture to the research she conducted while travelling.¹⁴ On 8 January 1889 she composed a detailed letter to her mother about her research into Granada's local history, in particular citing facts about 'the Moorish revolt under Aben-Ameya or Humeya' of the sixteenth century:

In 1568–69 Don Fernando de Valory Cordova [Fernandez de las Infantas, 1534–1610], a young noble of Granada, descended from the Umeyyad Khalifs of Cordova and thence from the Prophet, took to the mountains, raised a rebellion among the Moriscos or (forcibly converted Moors) and had himself crowned king of Granada under the name of Aben o Humeya [. . .]. Aben Humeya was murdered by another Moor called Dago Lopez [Diego Alguacil] or Aben-Aboo who succeeded him and was crushed by the Marquis of Mondejar and S. John of Austria [. . .]. Murtas, a village in the Alpujarra or country lying in the Sierra Nevada is described as a Xan [Christian] village of Castillean appearance near to the Moorish village of Albuñol. During the Rebellion the Monfies or fanatical Moorish brigands, murdered many Xans.¹⁵

Lee took an evident interest in the religious disputes and violence that occurred in the century following the fall of Moorish Spain. In this letter she also shares her efforts to translate 'the story of Catalina de Arrazo'. From Tangier on 12 December 1888 she wrote to her mother that she was learning Spanish and 'reading the Coran'.¹⁶ In a postcard to her mother,

¹⁴ Lee dedicated the 1909 publication of her Spanish tale to her friend Jose Fernando Gimenez, 'in remembrance of the Spanish legends he was wont to tell me'. Lee had already published 'Don Juan (con Stenterello)' in *Juvenilia* as a result of Gimenez's stories.

¹⁵ Vernon Lee, letter to her mother Matilda Paget, Miller Library, Special Collections, letter no. 439 (8 January 1889). My transcription.

¹⁶ *Vernon Lee's Letters*, ed. by Irene Cooper Willis (London: privately printed, 1937), pp. 300–01.

also dated 8 January, she passes this woman's history on to her half-brother Eugene, a poet, as a suitable 'ballad subject':

I have another ballad subject for him; in the tremendous Morisco revolt of 1569, a Moorish woman, Catalina de Arrazo, who had a son by a Xian, but who had remained strictly Moorish, saw her son, a priest, killed by the Moors; whereon she declared herself a Xian & made them kill her in the church yard, singing Xian hymns.¹⁷

Her research into Spain's violent religious history surfaces in her opening description of the church's 'jagged lines everywhere as of spikes for exhibiting the heads of traitors; dizzy ledges as of mountain precipices for dashing to bits Morisco rebels' and in her meticulous references to the lineages of Don Juan and the Infanta — Don Juan 'as descendant of Fernan Perez del Pulgar, would be expected to carry the banner of the city at High Mass in the cathedral' during the Liberation, the holiday celebrating the overthrow of the Moorish caliphs (*VSD*, pp. 223, 462). This setting of the tale on the eve of the anniversary of the Conquest is also telling. The holiday is 'a very solemn feast for the city, being the anniversary of its liberation from the rule of the Infidels' during which time the city excitedly looks forward to 'the grand bullfights of the morrow, and the grand burning of heretics and relapses in the square of Bibrambla' (*VSD*, p. 226). The interest in religious tensions also emerges in her allusion to how Calderon would have penned the tale as 'well calculated to spread the glory of our holy church', and in the form of Baruch, 'the converted Jew of the Albaycin', whom Don Juan employs to perform the necromantic rites needed to find the enchanted Infanta (p. 226). The Albaycin was the quarter of the city inhabited since medieval times by (converted) Jews and Arabs. There are several hints of religious tension and controversy surrounding Baruch who, although his name means 'blessed', is anything but; Don Juan 'really could not stomach that Jew Baruch, whose trade among others consisted in procuring for the Archbishop a batch of renegade Moors, who were solemnly dressed in white and baptized afresh every year' (p. 228). The subject of forced conversions also arises in Baruch's comical slip of the tongue when he voices his fears of damnation for performing rites of necromancy: 'I have imperilled my eternal soul [. . .] in the purchase of the necessary ingredients, all of which are abomination in the eyes of a true Jew — I mean of a good Christian' (p. 230).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304. Vernon Lee's half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton was an invalid confined to the family's home in Italy. For an analysis of their overlapping interests, see Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 114–65. Lee habitually sent Eugene descriptions of places and artefacts that she thought could be used in his poetry.

Lee was prepared to weave the new impressions that she gathered in Tangier and southern Spain into ‘that many tinted though faded tapestry of the past’, which forms the backdrop of her supernatural tale. The opening of the tale with a present-day description of Granada’s Basilica of Our Lady of Sorrows reads like the entry in Lee’s *Commonplace Book* iv from 2 January when she examined the sixteenth-century Malaga cathedral: ‘pillars hoisted upon pillars, arches on arches and architraves on architraves, those enormous shafts, that confusion of colossal bases and capitals, line warring with line, and curve with curve’ (CB, p. 27). The present-day narrator echoes, ‘On colonnade is hoisted colonnade, pilasters climb upon pilasters, bases and capitals jut out, [. . .] line warring with line and curve with curve’ (*VSD*, p. 223). Where the present-day narrator calls the Church of Our Lady of the Seven Daggers ‘a place in which the mind staggers bruised and half-stunned’ (*VSD*, p. 223), Lee’s visit to Malaga incited her contempt for the ‘desire, as it were to be bruised and stunned, or to bruise and stun others, in the imagination of this people whose holidays have been *auto da fès* and are bullfights’ (CB, p. 27). In Malaga she deplors the ‘waste of workmanship in all forms, columns and architraves writhing and twisted, stone carved like wood, wood twisted like stucco, stucco whipped up like whipped cream or pastry cook’s work’ (CB, p. 28), while in the tale

everything on which labour can be wasted is laboured, everything on which gold can be lavished is gilded; [. . .] stone and wood are woven like lace; stucco is whipped and clotted like pastry-cooks’ cream and crust; everything is crammed with flourishes like a tirade by Calderon. (*VSD*, pp. 223–24)

‘That gloomy sanctuary’ (CB, p. 27) becomes ‘all this gloomy yet festive magnificence’ (*VSD*, p. 224), and the sentiment behind her commentary on ‘the senseless pomp, the monstrous spears, the miserable meanness, of the 16th century’ (CB, p. 28) becomes a barrage of pessimism in the opening description: ‘monstrous heads [. . .] burst forth from all the arches’, ‘the building’s monstrous front’, ‘shines barbarically’, ‘contorted’, ‘melancholy hue’, ‘gloomy [. . .] magnificence’, ‘warring’, ‘staggers’, ‘bruised’, etc. (*VSD*, pp. 223, 224). Overall, ‘the church presents a superb example of the pompous, pedantic and contorted Spanish architecture of the reign of Philip IV’ (*VSD*, p. 223).

Lee knew before she travelled south how strongly she disliked the ‘pompous’ baroque art of the Counter-Reformation, a style that, for her, emulated the wastefulness and intolerant fanaticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As her biographer comments:

Vernon Lee had little appreciation for Spanish culture, especially its art of the baroque age [. . .]. Her years in Italy had made her sympathetic to Latin culture, but it was the joyous,

wholesome, open spirit of Italian life to which she responded [. . .]. She scorned the Calvinism of the Counter-Reformation [. . .]. She was also repelled by the grim, morbid spirit of Spanish art. (Colby, p. 241)

Furthermore, she was uneasy before the waxen life-size effigies of wounded Christs and agonized Madonnas common in the Spanish churches:

In proportion to that natural devotion of mine to the Beloved Lady and Mother, Italian or High Dutch, who opens her scanty drapery to suckle a baby divinity, just in proportion did that aversion concentrate on those doll-madonnas in Spanish churches, all pomp and whalebone and sorrow and tears wept into Mechlin lace.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Lee encases her impressions within a baroque style and her tale exhibits an excessive and ironic tone which mimics the excesses of the high baroque. She brandishes heavily ornate and florid descriptions, and her sardonic quips throughout (the tale is, in fact, very funny) are capricious and cavalier, as if to mimic the volatile nature of the architecture and ‘buccaneering swagger’ of Don Juan.

What is more, although Lee’s ‘aesthetic life’ rejected ‘the senseless pomp, the monstrous spears, the miserable meanness’ of the sixteenth century (CB, p. 28), the tale remains devoted to this ‘Past’ and to the very Madonna figure Lee detested. The Virgin of the Seven Daggers is a rendering of the Virgin Mary as a mater dolorosa, or Mother of Sorrow, and is portrayed with seven daggers piercing her heart to represent her seven sorrows. Her pain and suffering are always uppermost, and sometimes she is shown with the lifeless body of Christ flung across her lap. Lee, however, strongly preferred the art of the Renaissance touched by the effects of humanism as opposed to the Spanish Counter-Reformation’s ‘cultus of death, damnation, tears and wounds’ (‘Preface (1927)’, p. 245). During the Renaissance, portrayals of the Virgin Mary as the Mater Gratiae, or Mother of Grace, made her more accessible and maternal; she was often positioned with open arms or in moments of tenderness with Jesus, either breastfeeding or playing with him as an infant or young child. The harsher rendering of the Virgin Mary was not unknown to Lee, but in Spain the image was startling in its relentless repetition and in the prevailing use of life-size waxen effigies rather than sculptures or paintings.

In fact, this model of the Madonna seems to have haunted Lee throughout her time abroad. In Tangier, at first she is subtly reminded of the Madonna when she spots a beggar with ‘rows and rows of beads and silver and coral amulets’ that hang around his neck ‘like ex votos on a Madonna’ (CB, p. 1), but on two later occasions mental associations with

¹⁸ ‘Preface (1927)’, in *Hauntings*, ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, p. 246.

the sorrowful Virgin are more forceful. In the first instance, Lee visits the home of Selám, a man who has had multiple wives, and she is uncomfortable with the evident social inequality between the sexes. Mme Selám is an obedient wife and mother who never asks for permission to leave home (a fact at which Lee inwardly exclaims, 'But this is a convent!' (CB, p. 12)) and Lee expresses her uneasiness and irritation through objections to the 'meretricious' quality of Mme Selám's clothing. Soon she finds herself comparing this Moorish woman with Italian images of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers.¹⁹ The impractical, over-elaborate, and imprisoning dress reminds Lee of the wasteful extravagance on waxen effigies:

I sit and look at [. . .] Mme Selám, with her white face, huge and painted eyes, her stiff attitude in her wide, stiff embroideries of a shimmer of various colours, [and she] strikes me at first as one of those lifesize wax Madonnas in Italian churches, when they have on their best silk and lace frock and veil in drought or cholera time; if you stuck daggers in her heart she would not wince. (CB, pp. 11–12)

The dutiful mother is joined by the virginal bride when a few days afterwards Lee is taken to see a young bride 'of twelve or thirteen':

She sat, with her embroidered vests and muslins spread out, her hands folded, her face, elaborately painted under the eyes, about the eyebrows and with a large black patch in the middle of a delicately rouged cheek, absolutely motionless, scarcely raising her heavy black eyelashes [. . .]. With her halo of gauze, her shimmer of gold embroidery, beads and borrowed jewels, she looked even more like a miraculous Madonna than Mme Selám. (p. 17)

When Lee arrives in Spain and visits the churches the haunting continues: 'Always dolls, and always dolls in agony — For every Madonna with her child, for every peaceful mother you may count two dolorosas, weeping, wringing hands, the seven daggers stuck in or near them' (CB, p. 28). In the tale, the Virgin of the Seven Daggers is 'an enthroned Madonna in agony' with 'hoop, brocade skirts and stays, lace veil and tinsel diadem' (*VSD*, p. 224). Reminiscent of the Tangier descriptions, 'the reddish shimmer of the gold wire, the bluish shimmer of the silver floss, [blend] into a strange melancholy hue without a definite name' and 'a little clearing is made among the brocade and seed pearl, and into this are stuck seven gold-hilted knives' (*VSD*, p. 224). The Infanta also wears 'shimmering gauze', a 'diaphanous veil of shimmering colours' (*VSD*, p. 457). Like the Tangier bride she sits motionless with 'the rigidity of a statue' and cast-down eyes,

¹⁹ When Lee published sections of her impressions of Tangier, she replaced 'Italian churches' with 'Spanish churches'. See 'Sketches in Tangier', p. 223.

‘her heavy eyelids, stained violet with henna’ (pp. 457, 459). While ‘upon [the Tangier bride’s] cheeks were painted two elaborate triangular patterns’ (CB, p. 20), upon the Infanta’s cheeks ‘an exquisite art had painted a small pattern of pyramid shape’ (*VSD*, p. 457).

Lee’s conflated memories of Mme Selám with the young Tangier bride no doubt influenced her fusion of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers with the Islamic Infanta. When Don Juan is forced to choose between the Infanta and the Virgin, ‘the place seemed to swim about [him]’:

Before his eyes rose [. . .] the Moorish Infanta with the triangular patterns painted on her tuberoso cheeks, and the long look in her henna’d eyes; and the image of her was blurred, and imperceptibly it seemed to turn into the effigy, black and white in her stiff puce frock and seed-pearl stomacher, of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers staring blankly into space. (*VSD*, p. 460)

His punishment by decapitation and his eventual realization that he is dead after following a trail of blood to his corpse are both in line with Lee’s *Commonplace Book* iv. Her entries testify to how she wrestled with Spain’s cultural glorification of violence and especially the profusion of blood in both literature and religious art: ‘the Christ is always on the cross, or just off it, or weeping and bleeding with stripes and crowned thorns’ (CB, p. 28). During her trip Spain became like ‘Andalusian [*sic*] folktales [. . .], you hit upon death wherever you go, you meet your own funeral, you sit with dead women, or you are brought face to face, like Ludovic Enio in Calderon’s play, with your dead self’ (p. 29). ‘This Spain [. . .] kills everything it touches (and it clutches everything)’ (p. 28).

Even the natural world, usually Lee’s ultimate source of pleasure, is altered by a repetitive exposure to death and violence. Looking out over the landscape at the Sierra Nevada mountains on the horizon, ‘the [reddish] slopes of the Sierra’ appeared as ‘stone [. . .] corroded by blood’ (CB, p. 30). She cannot help but see blood everywhere, and this too finds its way into her tale. ‘[A] bleeding Christ with a velvet spangled petticoat round his loins’ (CB, p. 28) becomes ‘a train of waxen Christs with bloody wounds and spangled loin-cloths’ (*VSD*, p. 224). Don Juan’s ‘great bed, [is] covered and curtained with dull, blood-coloured damask’ (*VSD*, p. 227). ‘The slopes of the Sierra’ looking like they have ‘reddish brown spots of oxide where stone has been corroded by blood’ (CB, p. 30) become the blood-red sunset Don Juan sees just before meeting Baruch:

The sun had long since set, making a trail of blood along the distant river reach, [. . .] turning the snows of Mulhacen a livid, bluish blood-red, and leaving all along the lower slopes of the Sierra wicked russet stains, as of the rust of blood upon marble. (*VSD*, p. 229)

Association and the creation of art

The conception of Lee's tale sprung, not from visits to Spanish churches, but from two visits to the Alhambra, the neighbouring Moorish palace, on 4 and 7 January 1889. On 8 January Lee wrote to her mother announcing, 'I have an idea for a longish ghost story about this place. It is called the Virgin of the 7 Daggers, and is about her and a Moorish Enchanted Princess.'²⁰ Five pages are filled with Lee's impressions from her first visit. She 'carefully' examined the arabesques, 'compared and counted the patterns' along the walls and capitals, and determined that the palace fortress — 'despite the charm of proportions' and its 'architecture of cobweb and soapbubble' — was more 'monotonous and wearisome [. . .] than any other mediaeval building' (CB, p. 31). She contrasts its 'lavishness' and 'luxury of handicraft' with medieval and Renaissance structures across Europe. There are 'great gaps of nothingness in every cathedral front, from Lucca to Rouen, there are gaps in the mosaic patterns at Ravenna; and the front even of St Marks is less thickly covered with ornament' (p. 31). The Moorish architecture is too 'homogeneous'; 'there is nothing missing here [. . .]. All that was to be given, is given' (p. 32). Even where the foliated scroll work suggests 'real vegetable [. . .] forms', Lee complains it is all 'the result of careless and unintelligent observation' — the pine cone has been 'confounded with a pomegranate' and the 'leaves and flowers and fruit [. . .] are so like those of a badly embroidered handkerchief' (p. 33). Having described the 'faculty of association' as that which 'fill[s] up all gaps' and lifts art out of 'the [mind's] crepuscular places' (*Juvenilia*, 1, 68, 64), she bemoans the lack of gaps or spaces through which to insert associations that will inspire creativity.

On 7 January, however, Lee revises these uncompromising impressions and fills two additional pages with descriptions of the transformative effects of 'the faint winter sunshine'. Now she calls the structure 'living':

The sunshine turns it all [. . .] to a living thing. The sunshine [. . .] adds to these colonnades and archways their missing half [. . .]. How much is added by the perception that beyond those inlaid suns and stars in the vaults are real suns and stars, a vault which these starry ceilings are but a fallen part! (CB, p. 35)

No longer does Lee think of 'badly embroidered handkerchiefs'. In sunlight, gaps and spaces emerge through which the 'faculty of association' may operate, and the palace is transformed as it suggests to Lee a series of natural elements. The sun 'adds real stars of white light to the constellations of ivory and mother of pearl [. . .] incrusting in dark cedar vaults'; it gives 'to

²⁰ Miller Library, Special Collections, letter no. 439.

the stalactites of plaster [. . .] the uncertain shimmer [and] droop of icicles or long hanging cave weeds'; 'the honeycombing of the ceilings' is given a 'mellow transparency [like] the sheen of wax'; the patterned walls are metamorphosed with 'all pattern and colour [subdued] into vague shimmer, [. . .] as of countless shells, [. . .] the sunshine restores their sea cave mystery' (p. 35). The creative effects of this are most evident in Lee's description of the Alhambra's reflection in the Tank of the Court of the Myrtles:

There, sunk in the still, green water [. . .] lay the myrtle hedges and orange trees, the sunlit colonnade and dusky antechamber of the [H]all of the Ambassadors, the red battlemented tower, [. . .] more real in this green water than in the faint winter air, clearer of outline [. . .]. And when a drop fell from the overhanging roof, making the ripples once made by the fountains, there ran through the water a slow shudder, the marble columns twisted and entwined slowly, [. . .] and, as the circles in the green water widened as they died away, the whole palace waved to and fro with the ripple. (CB, p. 36)

Lee later identified *this* moment as the instant when she conceived the idea for her Moorish ghost story:

With the vision in those jade green waters, there wavered into my mind the suspicion that there might well have been an almost successful rival of Don Juan's gloomy Madonna, a temptation worthy of his final damnation along with a supreme renunciation worthy of his being, at last, saved. ('Preface (1927)', p. 248)

And the details from these entries feature in the tale as Don Juan enters the enchanted palace:

He found that he was standing in a lofty colonnade, with a deep tank at his feet, surrounded by high hedges of flowering myrtles, whose jade-coloured water held the reflection of Moorish porticos, [. . .] and of a great red tower, raising its battlements into the cloudless blue. [. . .] As he stood there, [. . .] the fountain began to bubble; and the reflection of the porticos and hedges and tower to vacillate in the jade-green water, furling and unfurling like the pieces of a fan. (VSD, p. 453)

Don Juan sees 'roofs [. . .] hung as with icicles' and 'incrusted with mother of pearl constellations', and 'walls [shining] with patterns that seemed carved of ivory and pearl and beryl and amethyst where the sunbeam grazed them, [. . .] imitat[ing] some strange sea caves' (p. 454). He sees too 'constellations in the dark cedar vault' and 'an archway whose stalactites shone like beaten gold' (pp. 461, 455).

'Ex-Voto dans le Goût Espagnol'

Recurring meetings with the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, first via mental associations in Tangier and later via physical confrontations in Spain, may have awakened deep stirrings of depression in Lee. Due to the nervous disorder she endured following Mary Robinson's engagement, Lee suffered in a blurred region between psychical and physical pain, her own heart having in effect been pierced. It is likely that the sorrowful Virgins continually brought Lee's mind back to her painful separation from Robinson; Mary haunted Lee, and Lee, likely aware of this, noted on 2 January 1889: 'Perhaps it is the fault of my illness that I should have received so gloomy an impression of this place, and so far, of Spain' (CB, p. 26). But then she immediately continues, questioning herself, 'Be it as it may the impression is very homogeneous; and everything, almost, seems to conduce towards it' (pp. 26–27).

Which theory of aesthetic effect is uppermost in this tale? Is Spain 'gloomy' because of Lee's illness and emotional vulnerability, or because, in fact, 'everything, [. . .] conduce[s] towards it'? Do the 'faculty of association' and Lee's mental state during her travels have more sway over her tale's composition, or has careful study of history and observation — producing 'historic emotion' — been more central to its inspiration?

We find by the tale's end that the author is doubling as Calderon: 'unworthy modern hands have sought to frame the veracious and moral history of Don Juan and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers' (*VSD*, p. 465). But although the tale endeavours to capture so many elements of Granada's history and of seventeenth-century Spain, it is perhaps more about Lee's devotion to the Virgin than it is about the devotion of the legendary Spanish libertine Don Juan. According to Lee, the story doubles as her 'Ex-Voto dans le Goût Espagnol' — her 'votive offering in the Spanish style'. When Lee collected the tale in a later publication, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927), she insists in the preface that it 'is really the outcome of my devotion to the other Madonna, Mater Gratiaë' and she confesses:

If I have anywhere in my soul a secret shrine, it is to Our Lady. Even I don't like living in places where her benignant effigy does not consecrate to sweet and noble thoughts. For is she not the divine Mother of Gods as well as God, Demeter or Mary, in whom the sad and ugly things of our bodily origin and nourishment are transfigured into the grace of the immortal spirit? ('Preface (1927)', p. 245)

In calling the tale her 'Ex-Voto dans le Goût Espagnol', Lee makes its content deeply personal but also alien. She complicates distinctions between her 'aesthetic life' and history, experimenting with how far the creative

potential of the 'faculty of association' can be stretched to add 'new' disliked and painful elements to 'old' familiar memories. She tests how faithfully she could render moments of Spanish and Moorish history when blended so fully with her subjective impressions.

When Don Juan realizes he is dead he knows his fate is in the hands of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers and, like 'the divine Mother [. . .] in whom the sad and ugly things of our bodily origin and nourishment are transfigured into the grace of the immortal spirit', she saves him, appearing before him in a vision, 'her big black eyes fixed mildly upon him', and raising him 'upwards through the cupola of the church, his heart suddenly filled with a consciousness of extraordinary virtue' (*VSD*, p. 465). By the tale's end Lee had transformed Spain's devotion to the *mater dolorosa* into 'my devotion to the other Madonna, *Mater Gratiae*', perhaps as a signal of her movement away from mourning and grief, towards gratitude.