

Writing Cosmopolis: The Cosmopolitan Aesthetics of Emilia Dilke and Vernon Lee

Hilary Fraser

In his 1920 review of Vernon Lee's avant-garde pacifist allegory *Satan, the Waster: A Philosophical Trilogy*, George Bernard Shaw salutes the author as a representative of 'the old guard of Victorian cosmopolitan intellectualism'.¹ Shaw's formulation reflects the fact that he is writing after the watershed (and bloodshed) of World War I had rendered cosmopolitanism a contested concept.² He looks back nostalgically to a cultural moment when the idea of transnational European cooperation seemed both right-thinking and realizable, a moment that he identifies with the figure of Vernon Lee (1856–1935). A century on, as we face another watershed in Anglo-European relations, it seems timely to revisit that cosmopolitan ideal, at once old guard and avant-garde, and how it inflected Victorian cultural history.³ This article will take a particular aspect of Lee's protean oeuvre — her contribution to the historiography of art — as a starting point for reflecting on the cosmopolitan mobility of nineteenth-century female art historians, and how their unsettling subversion of national cultural boundaries was a shaping factor in the evolving identity of British art and art history as produced in Great Britain. It will consider in particular the transnational contribution of the late-Victorian historian of French art, Emilia Dilke (1840–1904), alongside Lee's own books on Renaissance Italy.

The past decade or so has seen a re-evaluation of Victorian Britain and its global presence in the period from the 1830s to 1914, which has transformed the somewhat narrow — not to say Podsnappish — view of Victorian culture as defined by nationalism and imperialism that hitherto prevailed. Nineteenth-century scholarship in all disciplines is now more alert to the dynamic interaction of the domestic and the global in the century between the fall of Napoleon in 1815 and World War I, in the context both of Empire and the expanding opportunities for international trav-

¹ Bernard Shaw, 'A Political Contrast', *Nation*, 18 September 1920, pp. 758–60 (p. 760).

² An even more contested concept, that is, than it was in the nineteenth century. On its Victorian history, see the special issue on 'Victorian Cosmopolitanisms' of *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38 (2010), especially the introduction by Tanya Agathocleous and Jason R. Rudy (pp. 389–97).

³ See Patricia Pulham, 'A Timely Warning on the Dangers of Patriotism from the First World War', *Independent*, 19 May 2017 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/a-lesson-on-the-dangers-of-patriotism-from-a-pacifist-of-the-first-world-war-a7741166.html>> [accessed 6 March 2019].

el and exchange within and beyond Europe. These complex hybridities and influences are profoundly important to our understanding of the Victorian art world, not least for an appreciation of the interactions and tensions between national and cosmopolitan world views inherent in such intercultural negotiations. The ‘*aspiration to a distanced view*’, as Amanda Anderson argues, defined nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism, and influenced the ethos and practice of some of its most prominent literary figures, such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens.⁴ It also, I suggest, shaped the cosmopolitan practice of art historians such as Dilke and Lee, and is an important and neglected aspect of their contribution to the ecology of late nineteenth-century art writing.

Cosmopolitanism can be thought of as nationalism’s dialectical other, and women participated in this dynamic by bringing their cosmopolitan sensibilities as well as their networks to the service of nationalist art projects.⁵ They conveyed to British readers their personal experiences of contact with the art of foreign nations in ways that not only threw new light on the European old masters but also influenced and helped define the distinctive characteristics of British art. As Oscar Wilde’s character Gilbert declares in ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1891), ‘it is only by contact with the art of foreign nations that the art of a country gains that individual and separate life that we call nationality.’⁶ For Shaw, Lee was not only an exemplary cosmopolite but also ‘an Englishwoman [...] English of the English [...] the noblest Briton of them all’ (p. 760). Both Irishmen understood the paradox that writing from cosmopolis was fundamental to national identity formation. As British art became a topic of growing popular interest, and as international exhibition culture burgeoned and national collections (often of international art) were being formed and hotly discussed, contemporaries recognized that women like Dilke and Lee brought a refreshing perspective to these debates that was deeply informed by modern European theory and methods.

European perspectives

Many of the women discussed in this issue of *19* were not just international in intellectual outlook, they were also widely travelled and linguistically proficient, known for their cosmopolitan sociability and empathy as well as for their expertise in Euro-

⁴ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 6, emphasis in original.

⁵ See, for example, Susanna Avery-Quash on Anna Jameson’s contribution to the development of the National Gallery of Ireland’s collection and Zahira Véliz Bomford on Mary Merrifield’s contribution to the government-led project to reinvigorate British art in the 1840s, both in this issue of *19*.

⁶ ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Ian Small and others, Oxford English Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–), IV: *Criticism*, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (2007), pp. 163–206 (p. 164).

pean art and scholarship. Early Victorian women who worked on Renaissance art in the 1840s and 1850s, such as Anna Jameson and Mary Merrifield, demonstrated at every turn their transnational sensibilities, and their ability to translate the language of the old masters both literally and more broadly in cultural terms to a British readership.⁷ My focus is on two women who wrote about art later in the century, and whose cosmopolitan identities were more consciously self-fashioned: Francis Pattison, aka Emilia Dilke, and Shaw's exemplar, Vernon Lee. As the wife of Oxford don Mark Pattison and later of Sir Charles Dilke, Francis Pattison/Emilia Dilke travelled regularly to France and adopted the persona of cosmopolitan *salonnière* at home, bringing her cultivated 'Frenchness' to her rigorous and prolific publications on French art. Violet Paget, who assumed the nom de plume Vernon Lee for a series of articles she wrote for the Italian journal *La rivista europea* in 1875 and was thereafter known by that name, was the daughter of an English mother and French father. Her peripatetic childhood was spent in France and Switzerland under the tutelage of German governesses before she settled in Italy, where she became a force in the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century international cultural community in Florence. Lee applied her formidable multilingual intelligence and learning to her own highly distinctive experiments in art writing and introduced Anglophone readers to the German concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy), a significant influence on developments in contemporary European psychological aesthetics. Both women engaged vigorously with European scholars and worked with primary archives, importing Continental methods and discoveries into British art writing; in turn — and this was where their work differed crucially from the earlier women art writers noted above — they translated the fruits of English art historical scholarship for French, German, and Italian audiences.

To give a sense of their cosmopolitan aesthetics, let me begin with Francis Pattison's substantial, cutting-edge monograph, *Claude Lorrain: sa vie et ses oeuvres*, published in 1884 by the Bibliothèque internationale de l'art. The chief art critic for the *New York Times*, John Russell, would describe this book a century later as 'the pioneer study of him in English' (although it was in fact only published in French, so perhaps he meant 'by an English person'). In his view, 'no one has bettered her account of the way in which Claude's feeling for landscape "is connected above all to his instinct for the invisible, for the imperceptible air and colorless atmosphere, which is nowhere and everywhere".'⁸ His translated quotation is from the

⁷ See Judith Johnston, *Victorian Women and the Economies of Travel, Translation and Culture, 1830–1870* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); and Lesa Scholl, *Translation, Authorship and the Victorian Professional Woman: Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Martineau and George Eliot* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

⁸ John Russell, 'Art View; Giving Full Due to an Influential Master's Art', *New York Times*, 24 October 1982 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/24/arts/art-view-giving-full-due-to-an-influential-master-s-art.html>> [accessed 6 March 2019]. This is a review of the retrospective exhibition commemorating the 300th anniversary of Claude's death, jointly organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington and the Louvre in 1982–83.

closing pages of Pattison's book, where the reader's attention is directed to a contemporary studio copy of the artist's *Landscape with the Death of Procris* (Fig. 1) in the National Gallery, London, the original of which, the author explains, is recorded in Claude's *Liber Veritatis*, preserved in the British Museum:

The landscape has become like a reflection of human passion; the leaves of the forest seem to shiver with pain. In a similar way, the expectation of pleasure mingles with the glow of the setting sun in *Le Débarquement de Cléopâtre*, and the dying day, set alight by its devouring fire, appears to us, through the diaphanous veils of the atmosphere, to be illuminated and shimmering with pleasure.⁹

This picture, even in its doubly mediated form, seems to capture that 'feeling for landscape' that, for Pattison, marks Claude out as the greatest landscape painter of all time: 'His passion for light and air would have been sufficient to give his work an accent of poetry, even without the tendency which has always drawn him to look for the vibrations of the human soul in the image of nature.'¹⁰

Pattison's lyrical response to Claude's signature landscape aesthetic distinguishes her approach. But her fine poetic readings are founded upon thorough archival research and shrewd scholarly judgement. The title page proclaims the book to be 'd'après des documents inédits', from unpublished documents. In her opening chapter, she reviews previous studies of Claude's life and work by French and other European scholars, takes issue with earlier accounts that are not based on original research, and describes what she herself found in the Capitoline Archives on a visit to Rome in 1881 (pp. 6–12). She includes as appendices previously unpublished material she has traced, including the artist's will. The book is generously illustrated with forty images from British and Continental European collections and concludes with an impressive work of original scholarship in its own right: a detailed 100-page catalogue of Claude's work. It is organized in four sections: a descriptive catalogue of the *Livre de Vérité*, a collection of 195 drawings recording his finished paintings; his paintings in international public and private collections; his drawings in international public and private collections; and a chronological list of his etchings. Her preface to the catalogue of paintings states that she only includes work that she has seen herself, or which a trustworthy expert has verified. She regrets that she is una-

⁹ Mme Mark [E. F. S.] Pattison, *Claude Lorrain: sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Rouam, 1884), p. 184. 'Le paysage y est devenu comme le reflet de la passion humaine; le frisson de la douleur semble courir sur les feuilles de la forêt. C'est ainsi que l'attente de la volupté se mélange aux ardeurs du soleil couchant dans le Débarquement de Cléopâtre, et que le jour mourant, embrasé par ses feux dévorants, nous paraît, à travers les voiles diaphanes de l'atmosphère, comme illuminé et frémissant de plaisir.' All translations in this article are my own.

¹⁰ 'Sa passion pour la lumière et pour l'air aurait suffi pour donner à son oeuvre un accent de poésie, même sans la tendance qui l'a toujours porté à chercher dans l'image de la nature les vibrations de l'âme humaine' (p. 183).

ble to draw on Waagen's account of Claude's work in English collections because, she declares, 'this author is so often wrong that I have had to give up on him.'¹¹ She also points out that she has had to correct errors made more recently by Professor L. Dussieux in the third edition of his *Les artistes français à l'étranger* (1876). All in all, it is an ambitious work of scholarship by any standards that established her reputation for original research in the field.

So who was this woman who questioned the authority of such eminent scholars as Waagen and Dussieux, and why has she fallen out of view? A passage from her book is translated in an appendix to H. Diane Russell's excellent catalogue for the 1982 exhibition 'Claude Lorrain, 1600–1682' at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, but, with the honourable exception of Colin Eisler and Elizabeth Mansfield, she has otherwise been overlooked by modern art historians.¹² Despite her books and articles on French Renaissance and seventeenth-century art, her name is mysteriously absent from Anthony Blunt's *Art and Architecture in France, 1500–1700* (1953). More surprisingly still, her magisterial four-volume publication on the arts of eighteenth-century France is not mentioned in Thomas E. Crow's study of the institutional contexts of eighteenth-century French painting, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (1985).

Yet at the beginning of the twentieth century Pattison/Dilke's reputation as the acknowledged British expert on all aspects of French art had been such that she was invited to write the introduction to the first catalogue of the Wallace Collection, which was published in both English and French in 1903. Thus her authoritative and confidently articulated views on French art introduced the general public to the recently opened gallery, which houses five centuries of fine and decorative arts, including one of the most significant collections of French eighteenth-century decorative art anywhere in the world. Her introduction presents visitors with her thesis, developed consistently over the course of her professional career, that the arts are inalienably political:

If I have allowed myself to be drawn into these political considerations, it is because they are essentially relevant; it is because the character of the artistic works of that time, — represented in an unparal-

¹¹ 'Cet auteur est si souvent en défaut que j'ai dû renoncer à le mettre à contribution' (p. 225).

¹² See Colin Eisler, 'Lady Dilke (1840–1904): The Six Lives of an Art Historian', in *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820–1979*, ed. by Claire Richter Sherman with Adele M. Holcomb (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 147–80; Elizabeth Mansfield, 'Victorian Identity and the Historical Imaginary: Emilia Dilke's *The Renaissance of Art in France*', *Clio*, 26 (1997), 167–88; Elizabeth Mansfield, 'Articulating Authority: Emilia Dilke's Early Essays and Reviews', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 31 (1998), 75–86; Elizabeth Mansfield, 'The Victorian *Grand Siècle*: Ideology as Art History', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28 (2000), 133–47. Kali Israel's excellent monograph, *Names and Stories: Emilia Dilke and Victorian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), does not have a primarily art historical focus.

leled way at Hertford House, — was influenced by the administration and organization under which they were produced.¹³

When she died the following year, this highly regarded and productive art historian, who was also in her later years an energetic campaigner for women's trades unions, was widely mourned, inspiring as Mansfield notes, 'a public lamentation extraordinary for its scope as well as its subject. Full-page obituaries appeared in newspapers, popular magazines, literary journals, and political newsletters throughout Europe and North America' ('Articulating Authority', p. 75).

Emilia Dilke's French Renaissance

It is interesting to track Lady Dilke's entry into what was to become a career-long profession as an art historian. Emily Francis Strong was brought up near Oxford, and her early art education was shaped and encouraged by John Ruskin, who was a family friend. She studied art in London, before her marriage in 1861 to the much older scholar Mark Pattison, rector of Lincoln College. E. F. S. Pattison began to make her name as a historian of French art in the early 1870s in a series of signed articles on the French Renaissance for the newly launched art journal *Portfolio*. These qualified her to write what is today her best-known publication: her prominent review of her friend Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which is still often quoted in Pater scholarship.¹⁴ Numerous further articles on French art followed, in leading, opinion-forming journals such as the *Academy*, the *Contemporary Review*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *Fortnightly Review*, before she published her first book, the two-volume *Renaissance of Art in France* (1879), unusually substantial for a debut publication.¹⁵

Her innovative approach was evident from the outset. Compared with the Italian, the French Renaissance had previously received scant critical attention in

¹³ *La Collection Wallace (Objets d'Art) à Hertford House*, text and description by Émile Molinier, intro. by Lady Dilke (Paris: Goupil; Manzi, Joyant, 1903), pp. i–xi (p. v). 'Si je me suis laissé entraîner à ces considérations politiques, c'est parce qu'elles sont essentiellement de circonstance; c'est parce que le caractère des oeuvres artistiques de cette époque, — représentées de façon sans égale à Hertford House, — a été influencé par l'administration et l'organisation sous lesquelles elles ont été produites.'

¹⁴ See, under the name E. F. S. Pattison, 'Carstens', *Portfolio*, 1 (1870), 76–80; 'Palissy', *Portfolio*, 1 (1870), 189–91; 'Jehan Cousin', *Portfolio*, 2 (1871), 7–9; 'Jehan Goujon', *Portfolio*, 2 (1871), 22–24; 'Germain Pilon', *Portfolio*, 2 (1871), 72–75; [E. F. S. Pattison], review of Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, in 'Art', *Westminster Review*, April 1873, pp. 638–45 (pp. 639–41).

¹⁵ Mrs Mark [E. F. S.] Pattison, *The Renaissance of Art in France*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1879).

Britain.¹⁶ Pattison had already distanced herself from Pater's rather airy, unlocated version of the cosmopolitan Renaissance, which she lambasted in her review in the *Westminster* as anything but historical. Interesting though they are, Pater's *Studies* 'are not history', she pronounced in 1873, 'nor are they even to be relied upon for accurate statement of simple matters of fact' (p. 640). The tension between scholarly historicization and a renewed emphasis on the centrality and psychology of the personal response was a key motif in intellectual debates across Europe as the century drew to a close. Similar tensions are observable in the development of the study of English literature in the early decades of the twentieth century, where interestingly the impressionistic appreciation of texts was increasingly feminized as against a 'manly' emphasis on philology. It is the queer male critic who espouses impressionism in the disagreement between Pattison and Pater, and the woman with the masculine forename who defends objectivist history, but the controversy over Pater's book in effect stages two distinct modes of late nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism — the appreciative and the historicist — which are vivid in the art writing of the period. They are not unconnected to complex discussions over the relationship between the national and the cosmopolitan. However, as is clear from Pattison's own stance, there was no clear alignment between nationalism and historicism, or between cosmopolitanism and impressionism. These were concepts and methodological practices that were entangled and interfiliated in complex and changing ways.

The stance Pattison takes in her review of Pater's book anticipates the approach taken in her own book on the Renaissance, the art of which she finds, by contrast with Pater, to be defined by the historical circumstances in which it was produced. She begins with an introductory chapter on the social, political, and economic organization of sixteenth-century France, arguing that French Renaissance art 'requires perhaps more than the art of any other time a knowledge of the conditions under which it was produced in order to arrive at an appreciation of its excellence' (*Renaissance of Art in France*, I, 1). Her focus on the significance of the environment in which art is made, her insistence, indeed, that Renaissance art should be viewed as a material response to that environment, reflects her reading in a European tradition that supplemented the interests of her Oxford neighbour Pater and her early mentor John Ruskin. Although her marriage to Pattison was notoriously unhappy, her husband had fruitfully encouraged her adventurous intellectual development, advising her to focus on making herself a specialist in a single defined field — French art — and introducing her to the work of Continental intellectuals such as the Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), the positivist philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), and the literary historian and sociological positivist Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893).

¹⁶ On the ubiquity of the Italian Renaissance in nineteenth-century British culture, see J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); and Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

Burckhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) was translated into English in 1878, the year before Pattison's own Renaissance monograph appeared. But she was an accomplished linguist and her German was excellent, as her reviews of German books on art in the early 1870s demonstrate, so she is likely to have read the original much earlier. As Mansfield notes, the prefatory comments to her book have a 'Burckhardtian ring' ('Victorian Identity', p. 173). Certainly, Pattison shares with Burckhardt a commitment to writing a new form of cultural history that, in line with her belief in the historical determination of art, recognizes the connectedness between the fine and the decorative arts produced at any particular moment. It was an emphasis that in her case inevitably invited gendered critical responses, such as the *Westminster Review*'s complaint that her history of the Renaissance in France was 'little better than a history of furniture'. The reviewer concluded that 'a Renaissance whose chief results lie in the department of decorative upholstery cannot, of course, hope to vie with the splendid names and varied qualities of the Italian new birth'.¹⁷

A reviewer of her book in the *North American Review*, however, was more appreciative of its breadth and historiographical thesis, praising both 'the measure of technical knowledge evinced in the exposition of the new impulse imparted to the several arts and industries' and 'the comprehensive grasp upon the intellectual and moral forces, which, in the space of a generation, transformed the spirit of society and refashioned the aims of life'.¹⁸ The writer admires that fact that 'Mrs. Pattison is no less happy in a synthetic interpretation of the whole movement than in an analysis of its multiform phases', and commends her thesis 'that great changes of style are always harbingered by some preceding change in the conditions of human society' (p. 299). The reviewer likens her comprehensive and erudite study of the French Renaissance to John Addington Symonds's multivolume history of Renaissance Italy, finding them comparably significant. But his description of her method also recalls that of Taine, whose work she knew, and whose conviction of the reciprocity of artistic and sociopolitical forces she evidently shared. It is not without interest to note that Taine, visiting Oxford in 1871 to deliver a series of lectures on Corneille, Racine, and their times, pronounced her 'the leading mind' among women working on art and literature in Oxford.¹⁹

The question of the sociopolitical embeddedness of the arts is a theme developed in her subsequent art historical work. The fullest exposition is in her book on the *Grand Siècle* that followed the monograph on Claude. By this time she had remarried and was writing as Emilia Dilke. *Art in the Modern State* (1888) is, like her earlier books, informed by intense work in French archives and extensive engagement with Continental scholarship. She lists the archives she has consulted, cites

¹⁷ 'Miscellanea', *Westminster Review*, April 1879, pp. 594–600 (p. 596).

¹⁸ Mayo W. Hazeltine, 'Three Important Publications', *North American Review*, September 1879, pp. 294–302 (pp. 297, 297–98).

¹⁹ Quoted in 'The Art-Work of Lady Dilke', *Quarterly Review*, October 1906, pp. 439–67 (p. 447).

dozens of European secondary sources, and includes unpublished documents pertinent to her thesis as an appendix. ‘The true greatness of this great century consists’, she argues, ‘not in its vain wars, and formal stage, and stilted eloquence, and pompous palaces, and grandiose art, but in the formation and working out of the political and social system of which these things were the first fruits.’²⁰ Dilke’s choice of a generic title for this book, which does not specify countries or timescale but only the relationship of art to the State and modernity, enables her to theorize on a large scale as well as to delve deep into French seventeenth-century culture and society, and to draw parallels with contemporary issues in Britain. Her book describes and analyses the institutional structures and key figures that shaped the cultural production of seventeenth-century despotism and laid the foundations for our own modernity; for, she declares,

if we would know anything accurately about modern political and social organisation, we have to look to the system which lies at the root of our own growth [...]. We have inherited it, it has penetrated our lives in every direction, we act, we think under its invisible pressure, and its study is pregnant with teaching, not only for the student, but also for the practical man. (pp. 1–2)

Mansfield argues that Dilke’s identification of the ‘invisible pressure’ of ideology at work in all cultural production in *Art in the Modern State* ‘points to a new direction in Victorian aesthetic theory’. Indeed, she asserts that the book offers ‘the first direct application of Marxist philosophy in an art historical text’. As a ‘fusion of Tainean cultural enquiry with a Marxian concern for class struggle and socio-economic conditions’, it is, she proposes, a groundbreaking ‘example of materialist art history’.²¹

Dilke’s other early mentor, John Ruskin, also, of course, wrote powerfully and influentially about the social and political conditions under which art was produced and which determined its aesthetic value, but her work had quickly taken an independent course and was by this point much more closely aligned with Continental methods. She reframes Ruskin’s moralistic approach to the art and architecture of the past as a history of dialectical struggle; she sees the history of France and its artistic production as an ongoing contest between democracy and individualism, ‘which tends to the building up of absolutism’. She traces this history from the medieval guilds, based on the principle of collectivism, through Renaissance individualism, to the absolutism of the *Grand Siècle*, and then the inevitable reaction, Revolution:

²⁰ Lady Dilke, *Art in the Modern State* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), p. 1.

²¹ Mansfield, ‘The Victorian *Grand Siècle*’, pp. 133, 138. Mansfield concludes, on the basis of internal evidence, that ‘Dilke’s familiarity with Marx’s writings is certain, but remains unattested. None of her papers or correspondence include direct references to his work’ (p. 139).

For the irresistible development of democracy, which is the keystone of the modern situation, begun in the moral world by the Renaissance, received so severe a check politically and socially in France during the seventeenth century, that 1789 was needed in order to redress the balance. (*Art in the Modern State*, p. 221)

The institutional manifestation of this struggle that had most impact on the arts was, she argues, the replacement of the ancient guilds by the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, and the ensuing conflict between the Academy and the guild members, known collectively as the *Maîtrise*. It is a theme that consciously resonates with debates around the role of the British Royal Academy in the nineteenth century.

Like Ruskin, she draws out the implications of her social critique of historical art for contemporary arts institutions and art practice, and views British culture from the perspective of Continental Europe. But her methods are differently inflected in ways that reflect the cosmopolitan stance of a later generation.²² She pauses to consider, for example, French nationalism: “‘Tout pour la patrie’”, she writes, ‘all for France — the watchword which is ever on the lips of her sons, is ever in their hearts. In this absolute devotion to France lies the national point of stability.’ What, then, she asks, does a study of seventeenth-century France have to say to contemporary England? ‘At the present moment’, she observes,

when the bonds of national life seem somewhat slack amongst us, the means by which this spirit was called forth are full of interest, and the more so since the perplexing conditions, social and political, with which we have to deal may be referred, in great measure, to that disciplined reaction against liberty of thought and life which was in part the work of the seventeenth century. (*Art in the Modern State*, p. 219)

Mansfield regards *Art in the Modern State* as, in sum, ‘a vehicle for Dilke’s theory on the relationship between art and democracy in modern Britain’ (‘Victorian *Grand Siècle*’, p. 136).

Being foreign

The implications for modern Britain to be drawn from Dilke’s four-volume study of the fine and decorative arts of eighteenth-century France (1899–1902) are less emphatically drawn but nevertheless clear. This project takes to its logical conclusion her conviction that all the arts taken together, because of their shared historical context, manifest a period style. She devotes a volume each to painting, architecture and

²² Both Dilke and Lee were considerably more immersed in the cultures of which they wrote compared with Ruskin, who had little Italian and little time for modern Italians.

sculpture, furniture and decoration, and engraving, noting their interlocking features. As in her previous studies of earlier periods, she seeks to evoke the world that produced the art of eighteenth-century France, ‘to trace the action of those social laws under the pressure of which the arts take shape’, as well as to analyse the artefacts themselves.²³ Her interest in the economics of the art market is evident throughout.²⁴ Equally, Dilke, who had been involved with the Women’s Trade Union League since 1886, investigates the economics of production from the perspective of the artists and craftsmen engaged in making luxury items. Thus she writes of the suffering and distress of the tapestry workers at the Gobelins and the Savonnerie and those engaged in the historical industries of Aubusson and Felletin, who, on low piece-work rates of pay, were forced at mid-century to make their work look as exactly as possible like painting (*French Furniture*, pp. 110, 115). Her discussion resonates with contemporary debates about the socio-economics of art and craft production in late nineteenth-century Britain, allowing her to comment, with barely concealed contempt, on the modern market for eighteenth-century art among the nouveau riche (pp. vi, 203).

The Academy makes an appearance again in the first chapter of *French Painters of the XVIIIth Century*, but here the account is of its demise following its fatal association with the aristocracy, ‘their very existence [...] bound up with that system of privilege and caste which the nation was rousing itself to overthrow’.²⁵ She describes how, as the century proceeded, the Academy became increasingly elitist and exclusive, securing a monopoly of exhibitions and ‘narrowing down the common freedom of the profession which it represented, whilst enlarging the privileges which gave to itself social dignity and influence’ (*French Painters*, p. 12). The inevitable consequence was the fall of the ‘Bastille de la Peinture’ (p. 21).

Dilke leaves her readers to draw their own conclusions about the relevance of the eighteenth-century French Academy to the British Royal Academy at the turn of the twentieth century. Herself a vigorous campaigner for the rights of women, who had studied art at South Kensington, she is sarcastic about the hypocritical obstacles put in the way of female talent in the French Academy. On the issue of access to life drawing classes, she notes wryly ‘the fulfilment by the administration of its often deferred promise to enable the Academy to open their Life School without charge, and the vigorous decision, taken in the same year [1706], not to receive women, in future, as “académiciennes”’ (*French Painters*, p. 3). She explains that a few women did manage to gain admittance, ‘in spite of this fixed determination’. But, as she acerbically observes,

²³ Lady Dilke, *French Engravers and Draughtsmen of the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1902), p. v.

²⁴ See, for example, Lady Dilke, *French Furniture and Decoration in the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1901), p. 163.

²⁵ Lady Dilke, *French Painters of the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1899), p. 7.

[these] incursions of women, rapidly following on one another, were evidently regarded as dangerous, and the Academy took occasion to record, that though they liked to encourage women by admitting a few, yet such admissions, being in some sort foreign to their constitution, ought not to be multiplied, and thenceforth it was resolved never to admit more than four. (p. 4)

This notion that the admission of women was somehow ‘foreign’ to the Academy’s constitution persisted, and was reiterated much later, in 1790, when, in the final stages before the Academy’s demise, a group of officials and academicians protested that it was not fitting for ‘women to interfere in a work that is foreign to them’.²⁶ She does not need explicitly to compare the practices of the Royal Academy on the other side of La Manche, which counted two women (Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser) among its founding members in 1768, but had excluded them from full election ever since. Women were evidently no less ‘foreign’ to the British Royal Academy than they were to the French.

Vernon Lee’s Italian Renaissance

The cosmopolitan Lady Dilke exposes the dangerous expedient of excluding the ‘foreign’, here elided with ‘des femmes’, as damaging to the interests of a nation’s art. Vernon Lee was likewise an advocate of the benefits of foreign perspectives, for ‘we all of us are the better, of whatever nationality (and mostly, perhaps, we rather too-too solid Anglo-Saxons) for some fusion of a foreign element’.²⁷ Lee has been at the centre of recent critical interest in *fin-de-siècle* cosmopolitanism, and important work has been done, not least in *19*, on her engagement with Continental psychologists in the development of her own theory and practice of physiological aesthetics.²⁸ Less attention has been paid to the cosmopolitan framing of her books on Renaissance art — *Euphorion* (1884) and its sequel, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) — hence this will be my focus.²⁹

²⁶ ‘Des femmes viennent s’immiscer dans un travail qui leur est étranger’ (*French Painters*, p. 17).

²⁷ Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856–1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 28.

²⁸ See, for example, Francesca Billiani and Stefano Evangelista, ‘Carlo Placci and Vernon Lee: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Cosmopolitanism in *Fin-de-Siècle* Florence’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10 (2013), 141–61; 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>>.

²⁹ However, see Alison Brown’s excellent essay, ‘Vernon Lee and the Renaissance: From Burckhardt to Berenson’, in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 185–210.

Perhaps mindful of Pattison's strictures on Pater's cavalier approach to history in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Vernon Lee is careful to distinguish her own enterprise in writing *Euphorion* from that of more conventional historians in ways that throw interesting light on the distinctiveness of her methodology:

The Renaissance has been to me [...] not so much a series of studies as a series of impressions. I have not mastered the history and literature of the Renaissance (first-hand or second-hand, perfectly or imperfectly), abstract and exact, and then sought out the places and things which could make that abstraction somewhat more concrete in my mind; I have seen the concrete things, and what I might call the concrete realities of thought and feeling left behind by the Renaissance, and then tried to obtain from books some notion of the original shape and manner of wearing these relics, rags and tatters of a past civilization.³⁰

She writes, in other words, as only someone can who lives in Italy and is immersed in the material traces of the Renaissance. It is a history she wears rather than researches, which might be thought a median position between the poles of historicist and appreciative cosmopolitanism.

For hers is a cosmopolitan rather than purely Italian encounter with the past. Her Renaissance is viewed through the lens of Impressionism, for example, emanating from France; her method of writing history is elaborated in an extended metaphor that compares it to contemporary Impressionist landscape painting (I, 9–12). Despite her disclaimers, *Euphorion* is underpinned by a deep knowledge of history and thoughtful reflection on historiography. Nevertheless, she identifies its 'principal merit' as deriving from 'the spontaneity and wholeness of personal impression', which her cosmopolitan artist friends helped her to see (II, 238). She especially acknowledges the Paris-trained British sculptor Thomas Nelson MacLean, 'who has made it possible for a mere creature of pens and ink to follow the differences of *technique* of the sculptors and medallists of the fifteenth century', and her childhood friend 'Mr. John S. Sargent, of Paris' for 'various such suggestions as can come only from a painter' (II, 239, emphasis in original). The links too are with Pater, in addition to her copious scholarly reading in the history and literature of the Renaissance.

Euphorion was dedicated to Pater, in homage to his own *Studies*, and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* closes with a valedictory essay following his death in 1894. In the introduction to *Euphorion*, she explains that her title is taken from Goethe, who gave the name Euphorion 'to the marvellous child born of the mystic marriage of Faust and Helena' (I, 3), and its appendix lists a large number of French, Italian, and German medievalists and British scholars of the Elizabethan stage whose work influenced her own. With regard to art historical sources, she negotiates

³⁰ Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1884), I, 16.

between the scholarly and vivid, personal appreciation. She notes that her essays on art ‘have naturally profited by the now inevitable Crowe and Cavalcaselle’ but have on the whole ‘relied very little on books’ (II, 239). Nonetheless, the writers who seem to have influenced her most significantly were the nineteenth-century historians who had recently revolutionized the historiography of the Renaissance. She records her particular debt to ‘the genius of Michelet’, who in 1855 was the first to name and attempt to formulate the modern idea of the Renaissance in the introduction to Volume VII of his monumental *Histoire de France*: ‘how much I am, however unimportant, the thing made by him,’ she writes, ‘every one will see and judge’ (II, 237). Lee’s first study of the history, literature, and visual arts of the Renaissance focuses on its emergence from the Middle Ages, and takes most notably from Michelet an emphasis on the role of the common people in its achievements (I, 138–42, 152–55). She points out, for example, that the peasantry of the great Italian commonwealths, who did not labour under feudalism, but were ‘an independent and well-to-do class’ (I, 139), produced ‘quaint and graceful’ love poems that were adapted to a ‘more artistic shape’ by Lorenzo (II, 90).

Lee also acknowledges the Italian historian of the Renaissance Pasquale Villari, author of influential books on the life and times of Savonarola and Machiavelli; John Addington Symonds, whose seven-volume *Renaissance in Italy* (1875–86) was still in train; and Jacob Burckhardt, whose *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* she would doubtless have read, like Pattison/Dilke, in its original German. As her library of liberally annotated books in English, Italian, French, and German — now archived at the British Institute in Florence — demonstrates, Lee was a truly cosmopolitan scholar, who voraciously read, wrote, thought, and discoursed in four languages. Her unshowy acknowledgement of these German, Italian, French, British, and Swiss writers comes as no surprise.

Her reading of the Swiss historian who had inaugurated the methods of *Kulturgeschichte* seems to have been especially formative, as it was for Pattison/Dilke, though with a different national focus.³¹ Lee shares Burckhardt’s view that the Italian independent city states modelled the transformation from feudalism to the rise of modern nation states, and that this provided the crucial political context for the re-birth of art in quattrocento and cinquecento Italy. In her own history of the civilization of the Renaissance she, like Burckhardt and Pattison/Dilke, surveys a broad social and cultural spectrum, paying attention to the relationship between works of art and the larger political and cultural structures within which they are produced. She too thinks about the material conditions of life as it was lived and art as it was made, asking ‘How [...] do matters stand between art and civilisation?’, and what

³¹ On the parallels and differences between Lee and Burckhardt on the Renaissance, see Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 16–17, 26, 35–36.

combination of forces makes art ‘bestir itself’ at a particular ‘historic moment’ such as the Renaissance?³²

Although she acknowledged that the evolution of artistic form is to a degree internally driven and organic, Lee found the explanation for significant shifts in the history of art in the constellation of new intellectual and spiritual, but also material, conditions that occurred at such moments. She attributed the inventiveness and accomplishment of Renaissance art to the liberation from the religious stranglehold of the Middle Ages brought about by the reforms of the Franciscans, for example, and to a new regard for the individual. But it was also a product of the discovery of new materials and techniques, ‘the opening up of quarries, the discovery of metallic alloys, the necessity of roofing larger spaces, the demand for a sedentary amusement, for music to dance to in new social gatherings’ (*Renaissance Fancies*, p. 37). Lee draws attention to the transformative effects on conventional Christian themes of the new techniques that emerged in a reformist environment, noting that ‘the problems of form and of sentiment, the questions of perspective, anatomy, dramatic expression, lyric suggestion, architectural decoration, were established, in however rudimentary a manner’, as soon as painters were allowed to vary the repertoire of static hackneyed subjects that were the staple of devotional art, ‘and told to set about showing the episodes of Scripture, the things Christ and the Apostles did, and the places where they did them, and the feelings they felt about it all’ (p. 39).

Technical innovation and spiritual renovation go hand in hand, according to Lee. She takes as an example Signorelli, whose treatment of *Resurrection of the Flesh* in the chapel of San Brizio at Orvieto (*Fig. 2*) is ‘one of the earliest and greatest innovations’ (*Renaissance Fancies*, p. 80). His naked figures, she argues, ‘could not possibly have been executed or even conceived until his marvellous mastery of the nude and of the anatomy of movement had been obtained’. ‘Indeed,’ she proposes,

wherever, in the art of the fifteenth century, we find a beginning of innovation in the conception and arrangement of a Scripture history, we shall find also the beginning of the new technical method which has suggested such a partial innovation. (p. 81)

This distinctively new painterly interest in ‘tangible bodies’, in the human figure as a ‘living organism’, an ‘animate reality’, was generated, she argues, by the intervention of another art form: sculpture. It came out of ‘the workshops of the stonemason, of the goldsmith, of the worker in bronze, of the sculptor’ (*Euphorion*, I, 176, 178). It was the result of a dynamic dialogue between the arts that was further energized by the dialogue with the classical past that was such a signature feature of the Renaissance and that centred on the recovery of ancient figurative statuary (I, 182–98).

³² Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to ‘Euphorion’* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), p. 37. On the influence of Burckhardt, see Brown, pp. 190–93.

In the case of lesser painters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Lee maintains, the endlessly reworked themes of the Christian story made them lazy: ‘if the old themes were not only worn threadbare, but actually maltreated, what wonder? The themes were there, thank Heaven! no one need bother about them; and no one did’ (*Renaissance Fancies*, p. 84). She takes the unvaried rendition of the Annunciation as an example, dismissing impatiently the ‘crowd of unimpressive, nay brainless, representations of one of the grandest and sweetest of all stories’ (p. 87). The composition of the scene, she notes, is monotonously replicated: ‘It never seems to have occurred to any one that the Virgin and the Archangel might be displayed otherwise than each in one corner of the picture’ (p. 85). She compares the composition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s modern Pre-Raphaelite rendition of the Annunciation in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849–50) (*Fig. 3*), where ‘the Virgin cowers on her bed as the angel floats in with flames round his feet’, observing that ‘such a suggestion as that of the unfinished lily on the embroidery frame, was reserved for our sceptical and irreverent, but imaginative times’ (pp. 85, 85–86). As with Dilke, the linking of the contemporary to the historical is pointed.

However, in his representation of the Annunciation, Signorelli once again stands out from the crowd as ‘the greatest early master of form and movement, or rather the master whose form and movement had a peculiar quality of the colossal’ (p. 87). She describes his small predella in the Uffizi, *Episodi dell’ infanzia di Cristo* (c. 1494), as, ‘besides the Orvieto *Resurrection*, his most superb and poetical work’. The tiny figures of the shepherds and the Magi ‘have his highest quality of powerful grandeur’ (p. 87); the landscape, despite its small scale,

is one of the amplest and most austere that ever has been painted: a valley, bounded by blue hills and dark green ilex groves, wide, silent, inhabited by a race larger and stronger than the human, with more than human passions, but without human speech. (p. 88)

In the Annunciation scene, the Virgin calmly receives the Archangel, who ‘comes bounding, with waving draperies and loosened hair [...] like a rushing wind, the wind which the strong woman is quietly inhaling’. She finds the painting to be without religious or human sentiment: Signorelli’s Madonna ‘bows gravely as one who is never astonished; and, indeed, this race of giants, living in this green valley, look as if nothing could ever astonish them — walking miracles themselves, and in constant relation with the superhuman’ (p. 88).

In the same room in the Uffizi is another painting that she singles out as also offering more than a merely conventional treatment of the theme. This time it is a large Annunciation in tempera by Botticelli (*Fig. 4*), who she describes, echoing Swinburne and Pater, as ‘the man, of all Renaissance painters, whose soul seems to have known most of human, or rather feminine wistfulness, and sorrow, and passion’ (p. 87). In his rendition of the scene,

the angel has knelt down vehemently, but drawn himself back, frightened at his own message; moved overmuch and awed by what he has to say, and her to whom he must say it; lifting a hand which seems to beg patience, till the speech which is throbbing in his heart can pass his lips; eagerness defeating itself, passionate excitement turned into awe in this young, delicate, passionate, and imaginative creature. He has not said the word; but she has understood. She has seen him before; she knows what he means, this vehement, tongue-tied messenger; and at his sight she reels, her two hands up, the beating of her own blood too loud in her ears, a sudden mist of tears clouding her eyes. (pp. 88–89)

Lee distinguishes Botticelli's Madonna from the 'terrified and awe-stricken girl' in Rossetti's Annunciation (p. 89). Rather,

this is the nun who has been waiting for years to become Christ's own bride, and receives at length the summons to him, in a tragic overpowering ecstasy [...]. Nay, this is, in fact, the mere long-loving woman, suddenly overcome by the approach of bliss ever hungered for, but never expected, hearing that it is she who is the beloved; and the angel is the knight's squire, excited at the message he has to carry, but terrified at the sight of the woman to whom he must carry it, panting with the weight of another man's love, and learning, as he draws his breath to say those words, what love is himself. (p. 89)

It is a scene marvellously imagined by the painter, and imaginatively read by the aesthetic critic, who herself gives new life to the old scene of the Annunciation by rendering it as a modern medieval, Pre-Raphaelite romance.

What we see in Lee's forcefully idiosyncratic and deliberately anachronistic readings of Renaissance art is a cosmopolitan sensibility at work. Her relationship with Renaissance art is that of a woman who has lived most of her life in Italy and is steeped in its history and culture. The paintings she describes are old familiars. But the devout Catholicism of the culture from which they emerge and to which they speak is alien to her. In this regard she relates more closely to the 'sceptical and irreverent, but imaginative times' that she finds reflected in the work of a foreign interpreter of early Italian art, the British Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti (*Renaissance Fancies*, p. 86). Her declared impressionist method, shaped by her reading of Pater and her painter friends, supervenes upon the sociopolitical historicism of her other models, Michelet and Burckhardt. And meanwhile, in the early 1890s, she read widely in the work of contemporary French, German, and American psychologists, beginning the work on psychological and physiological aesthetics that preoccupied her over the next decade and more, and took her work on art in fresh directions. The figure who, for Shaw, stands for 'the old guard of Victorian cosmopolitan intellectualism' ventures towards the end of the century into fertile new territory that is, once again, defined by its border-crossing internationalism.

Cosmopolitan conclusions

Both Emilia Dilke and Vernon Lee transcended national identities. Pattison/Dilke's 'Frenchness' was only in part ascribed to her intellectual and professional interests in the history of French art. Although, as Kali Israel observes, she 'was not explicitly associated with some of the most disreputably exciting possibilities of French womanhood', her racily unconventional personal style, her Parisian taste, and her radical ideas were all traits that identified her with contemporary France. She fenced, she went to French plays, and she organized amateur theatricals with a French flavour at Lincoln College; she was seen smoking and reading *Le Figaro* in a café.³³ Lee was similarly 'un-English' in her appearance and behaviour, and both women challenged the insularity of British intellectual life. According to Maurice Baring, Lee 'opened and stimulated the mind more than any English person or than any person, however cultivated, who has always lived in England could have done'. Not only did she speak Italian, German, and French fluently, but 'she has always understood the finer shades of Italian feeling, and German and French feelings as well'.³⁴

Did their cosmopolitanism divide and distance these women from their British readership and market? Was it responsible for their falling out of view for later generations? Neither Lee nor Dilke, despite declaring their love of England and the English, felt entirely 'at home' there. According to her biographer Peter Gunn, Lee felt that her 'sympathies were too international to be acceptable even to the least insular among her English friends'.³⁵ In the case of both women, I suggest, the 'foreignness' that enabled them to open and stimulate the mind more than their conventionally British colleagues who wrote about art, was also the reason for them falling out of view in the fraught nationalist landscape of early twentieth-century Europe.

Captions

Fig. 1. Studio of Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with the Death of Procris*, c. 1647, oil on canvas, 38 × 48.6 cm, National Gallery, London. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Fig. 2. Luca Signorelli, *Resurrection of the Flesh*, 1499–1502, Chapel of San Brizio, Duomo, Orvieto. Wikimedia Commons.

³³ Kali Israel, 'The Resources of Style: Francis Pattison in Oxford', *Radical History Review*, 72 (1998), 122–62 (pp. 144–47).

³⁴ Maurice Baring, *Lost Lectures; or, The Fruits of Experience* (London: Heinemann, 1932), pp. 87, 89.

³⁵ See Israel, *Names and Stories*, p. 181; and Gunn, pp. 167–68.

Fig. 3: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, 1849–50, oil on canvas, 72.4 × 42.9 cm, Tate Gallery, London. Sailko [CC BY 3.0](#), Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 4: Sandro Botticelli, *Annunciation*, c. 1489, tempera on wood, 150 × 156 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Wikimedia Commons.