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Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations: A Modern Morality, an Intermedial Mosaic*

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Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915) documents the rise of nationalist discourses that led to World War I, as well as Lee's zealous commitment to the promotion of pacifist values in contradiction to the rhetoric that had been fuelling the hostilities. The letter that she addressed to the secretary of the Women Suffrage Alliance, Rosika Schwimmer, which appeared in the *Evening Post* on 3 October 1914, is a blatant vindication of her activism. Besides stating the need for women across the world to take sides against the barbarity that was plaguing Europe, Lee offers a passionate summary of her engagement with contemporary politics. This began with her response to French novelist Paul Bourget's anti-German campaign:

so far back as 1907 I answered in the *Westminster Gazette* an article by French academician Paul Bourget calling upon England [...] to help France to keep Germany in the place befitting her as a civilization without Latin (or he was civil enough to add) even Anglo-Saxon *order*, a civilization still unwashed of its muddy dross ('encore mal lavé de ses scories'), a civilization expressed by the *Bourgeoisisme* (I am quoting) of Goethe, the *vulgarité* of Heine, and altogether little better than a *semi-barbarism* destined to a *rôle subalterne* in Europe.¹

Lee was afraid that the *Entente Cordiale*, which had been signed in 1904 to improve Franco-British relationships, might have taken on dangerous implications for the increasing nationalist drives across Europe. Accordingly, in the years leading up to the war she had signed numerous contributions to the *Saturday Westminster Gazette*, the *Nation*, the *New Statesman*, and the French *Correspondances*.² As Peter Gunn remarks, Lee's anti-war activism even changed her entourage at Il Palmerino, which became a pacifist hub hosting visitors such as Philip Edward Morrell, one of the few Members of Parliament who voted against Britain's declaration of war on Germany in 1914.³

When the conflict broke out, Lee was unable to return to Italy from her usual holiday in England, and this event shaped *The Ballet of the Nations*. This allegorical work, which intentionally conflates different genres and codes, was published with elegant illustrations by painter Maxwell Armfield that framed the text with a 'pictorial commentary' as the frontispiece states. However,

contemporary reviewers strongly criticized the inconsistency between word and image, as the latter seemed deliberately to avoid the brutality of the war. As Rachel Baldacchino summarizes, *The Ballet of the Nations*

was largely ignored by readers and critics and the few reviews that covered it were either lukewarm or completely dismissive. The *Athenæum* called it ‘a clever piece of imaginative description of WWI’ which served to expose Lee ‘as a stylist’ and the *Saturday Review* said it was ‘not the sort of literature which endures in another age since it expresses the fury of the moment’. Armfield’s pictorial commentary was not well received either. The *Manchester Guardian* criticised his ‘exaggerated avoidance of the brutal’ whilst *The Evening Standard* argued that the illustrations were ‘unforgivable’ and completely irrelevant to Lee’s *Ballet*, so much so that they turned it into a ‘book of nonsense’.⁴

These reviews criticize Lee and Armfield as they seem to fall in with the aesthetic fallacy that was to concern Theodor Adorno after World War II – that is, the need to represent the horrors of the conflict in such an aesthetic form as to avoid morbid or voyeuristic effects.⁵ Adorno specifically referred to the Shoah, but his preoccupation, particularly with the risk of endorsing the values that legitimize war and death, raises issues that are crucial to any representation of violence and warfare. With the necessary distinctions, the reviews of *The Ballet of the Nations* suggest the relevance of an aesthetic paradigm suitable for representing the horrors of the conflict without complying with the culture that fostered them.

That Lee had similar issues in mind is manifest in her decision to republish her contemporary morality play as part of *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes & Introduction* in 1920. In a revised form, *The Ballet of the Nations* appears here as a two-act interlude framed by a Prologue in which Satan dialogues with Clio, the Muse of History, and an Epilogue. *Satan the Waster* foregrounds a more explicit search for theatricality than *The Ballet of the Nations*, although the Note to the Reader clarifies that the ‘drama is intended to be read, and especially read out loud, as *prose*’.⁶ Moreover, in the introduction to the trilogy, Lee admits that she had intended to come up with ‘symbolical figures, grotesquely embodying what seems too multifold and fluctuating’. This search led to an ‘improvisation’ with which she was ultimately dissatisfied.⁷

For these reasons, scholars have mostly explored *The Ballet of the Nations* as a text reflecting Lee’s pacifist commitment and her concerns over the role of art and beauty in the light of historical

contingency. Grace Brockington, for instance, rightly argues that the work foregrounds ‘an aesthetic controversy about the function of art in a belligerent society’.⁸ While I agree with Brockington, I also believe that her claim that *The Ballet of the Nations* consists of ‘two books, two conflicting interpretations of art’s role’ needs further contextualization.⁹ More to the point, I suggest that such perceived inconsistency is to a considerable extent the result of the complex web of allusions that lies beneath *The Ballet of the Nations*. Lee’s work bridges aesthetic issues and ethical concerns by appropriating a hybridization of the poetics of art that attempts an osmotic fusion of diverse genres and art forms. Possibly prompted by Richard Wagner’s experimentation in the mid-nineteenth century, this aesthetic process, as Elisa Bizzotto illustrates, had been pursued by artists and writers at the fin de siècle. It is my contention that Lee follows a similar pattern to voice her pacifism at the outbreak of the Great War.¹⁰

Accordingly, in this article I argue that *The Ballet of the Nations* stands out as an intermedial mosaic, an imbrication that is formed of a complex, multifarious web of hints and suggestions. Besides paying homage to the tradition of morality plays, Lee’s allegory incorporates into her prose the visual representations of the ‘Danse Macabre’ and ‘The Triumph of Death’. Moreover, I suggest that *The Ballet of the Nations* should be placed within the context of nineteenth-century experimentation in the fields of music and ballet, with Franz Liszt’s *Totentanz* (1849), Camille Saint-Saëns’s tone poem *Danse Macabre* (1874), and the Italian extravaganza *Ballo Excelsior* (1881), providing representational models for Satan’s dominion as well as the implicit faith in a future brotherhood of the nations.

***The Ballet of the Nations* as a trans-genre work**

Several textual and non-textual elements suggest that *The Ballet of the Nations* is an attempt to align different genres and art forms. The frontispiece states that *The Ballet of the Nations* is a ‘Present-Day Morality’, thus grounding it in a specific dramatic tradition. Armfield’s illustrations, on the other hand, are defined as ‘a pictorial commentary’. This indication foregrounds a precise relationship

between text and images in spite of the inconsistencies, which amount, as Brockington has documented, to about half of the pictures.¹¹

The Ballet of the Nations is patently modelled on the example of medieval morality plays, a vernacular genre that staged allegorical characters embodying abstract or moral qualities such as Vice, Justice, and Virtue, and had a didactic aim. Lee follows the same pattern: Satan, who is known as ‘the World’s great Stage-Lessee’, assisted by the Ballet-Master, Death, groups an orchestra and a *corps de ballet* for his gruesome show. The former consists of allegorical personifications of passions and habits, such as Self-Interest, Fear, and ‘her shabby, restless twins, Suspicion and Panic’. The instrumentalists are complemented by a couple, Lady Idealism and Prince Adventure, and several other passions: Sin (who is also known as Disease), Rapine, Lust, Murder, Famine, Hatred, Self-Righteousness, and the ‘Prince of Tenors’, Heroism. During the rehearsal, Satan summons some of the nations to dance, while others – presumably the countries that had chosen neutrality during World War I – remain seated with Sleepy Virtues and Centuries-to-Come, a character that stretches the temporal dimension of *The Ballet of the Nations* forward.¹²

Before Satan and Death arrange their performance, the narrating voice locates the dramatic action in a well-defined historical context, which coincides ‘with the end of the proverbially bourgeois Victorian age’ and other unspecified events that have occurred in ‘South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently’.¹³ The allusion is arguably to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the Agadir Crisis (1911), the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), about all of which Lee had openly voiced her dissent.¹⁴ Still, the silent presence of Centuries-to-Come, coupled with the vagueness inherent in the allegorical construction of this character, hints at a typical element of medieval moralities, that is, the timelessness resulting from conflating the contemporary with the eternal.¹⁵ This strategy is also confirmed by the presence of Science and Progress, two characters that clearly point towards a future dimension. Moreover, the timelessness of the ballet that is about to be staged on the ‘Theatre of the West’ is fully embodied

in its impresario, Satan, whom the dancing nations acknowledge as ‘a power transcending their ephemeral existence’.¹⁶

Lee adopts the allegorical and didactic pattern of morality plays, but further evidence indicates that the models she had in mind were possibly much broader. My claim is that *The Ballet of the Nations* is a trans-genre work, a text that employs the main characteristics of the macro-genre to which Lee assigns it – that is, the morality play, as the subtitle suggests – but which also encompasses features typical of other genres and forms. This conflation results in a work that is far more complex than the mere assemblage of different tropes and conventions, many of which are explicitly alluded to in the text. Satan, for instance, admits preferring the Ballet of the Nations to any of the other mystery-plays that Death occasionally stages, such as Earthquake and Pestilence. Only a few lines later, the reference to another medieval vernacular genre, and to the role of pageants in illustrating biblical stories is followed by Satan’s claim that the ballet ‘answers perfectly to what the Spaniards call an *Auto Sacramental*, a sacred drama having all the attractions of a bull-fight’.¹⁷

A popular dramatic genre in medieval and Renaissance Spain, *autos sacramentales* developed along the lines of morality plays and were performed on religious feast days and at other celebrations. Lee was familiar with Calderón de la Barca’s *autos sacramentales*, as her allusion to *El purgatorio de San Patricio* (1628) in the story ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1909) suggests. Moreover, Patricia Pulham has illustrated that *The Ballet of the Nations* also subsumes elements of the *auto da fé* [act of faith], the ritual of punishment and public penitence for heretics that was introduced by Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in the late fifteenth century.¹⁸

The *auto da fé* was not impromptu, but a carefully concocted event that showcased human suffering and, as Satan says, it even included bull fights. Pulham’s argument on the influence of the *auto da fé* on *The Ballet of the Nations* is convincing, and I would add that the ideological implications of this Spanish ritual branch out further than the religious sphere. The *auto da fé* was meant to celebrate the politics of the Spanish Monarchy, whose judicial system compared – and cooperated

– with that of the Pope.¹⁹ From this perspective, this Catholic ritual was also a spectacle of national power and supremacy, which is precisely what Lee points to. After rapping three times on his desk, Master-Death thus announces the title of the performance to the company: ‘THIS Ballet of ours [...] is called the Ballet of the Nations. Nothing very new in the title, but one that always draws.’²⁰ But as far as the spectacularizing of nationalistic ideology is concerned, Death’s assertion also grounds Satan’s performance in another long-established dramatic genre. This is the French tradition of the *ballet des nations*, a fact that scholars have curiously overlooked despite its being explicitly recalled in the title of Lee’s work.

Like the *auto da fé*, the *ballet des nations* testifies to growing chauvinistic ideologies. Both contributed, in fact, to the celebration of national superiority in front of other nations, either by showcasing the power of a country to preside over people’s lives, or by mocking foreign customs. The latter aspect is typical of the early sixteenth-century *ballet des nations*, which stages French grandeur by parodying other nations through the allegorical representation of what were perceived as their stereotypical flaws.²¹ The Germans, for instance, were the object of parody as gullible drunkards, a portrait that insists on the barbarism that was also to fuel early twentieth-century nationalist drives, leading to the gory spectacle of *The Ballet of the Nations*. In addition, Lee’s desire to show horror and suffering, and the spectacle of the nations as a corps de ballet dancing aimlessly except for Satan and Death’s directions, also point, as in a game of Chinese boxes, to another dramatic genre.

Embedded in Lee’s tragic morality tale is the admixture of violence and comedy that was a staple of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. Looking back on the conflict in the preface to *Satan the Waster*, Lee defines the Great War as

gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly ‘Grand Guignol’ performance. It could, as it seemed to me, have been planned and staged only by the legendary Power of Evil; and the remembrance of mediaeval masques naturally added the familiar figure, fiddling and leering as in Holbein’s woodcuts, of a Ballet Master Death.²²

The passage confirms that Lee conceived of her pacifist morality as a response to a number of different dramatic and visual conventions. Founded in Paris in 1897, the Grand-Guignol was

considered to be the antonomasia of the theatre of horror, largely because of its melodramatic combination of realistic and naturalistic elements. Lee explicitly compares the war to the performances of the Grand-Guignol in the introduction to *Satan the Waster*, but allusions to its dramatic conventions can also be traced in *The Ballet of the Nations*. Due to their desire to draw the audience's attention to the physicality of pain, the plays staged at the Grand-Guignol laid specific emphasis on body language. In 1908 playwright André de Lorde authored *Pour jouer la Comédie de salon*, a guide for actors that provided a catalogue of expressions for the head, the face, and the body:

THE FACE

The *eyes*.—Half-closed: malice, disdain. Lowered: great respect, shame. Wide open: amazement, anger, terror. [...]

The *mouth*.—Half-open: surprise, joy. Wide open: astonishment [...]. Lower lip extended: disdain, sulkiness, ignorance. Lower jawbone extended: ferociousness. Chattering of teeth: mad terror.

THE HEAD

Forward: curiosity, ferociousness. Back: audacity, insolence, fear. To the side: pity, indolence. [...] Lowered: shame, fear. [...]

THE BODY

With shame, and often with terror, the body is held in, the back is curved, the arms held tightly by the sides ... with fear and with repulsion, the torso is held back.²³

De Lorde instructed actors on particular gestures and expressions that were meant to show and elicit specific feelings and reactions, namely dismay, abhorrence, and loathing. In *The Ballet of the Nations*, Lee draws a similar distinction between the heads and the bodies of the dancing nations, and the contrast that she highlights fulfils an artistic as well as a political purpose. After announcing the title of the performance, Death points out that the nations 'have all got excellent heads', and thus allows them to dance according to their inspiration:

The more they [...] [cut] capers according to circumstances and inventing terrifically new figures, the more they will find, odd as it may appear, that their vis-à-vis as well as their partners will respond; and the more indissolubly interlocked will become the novel and majestic pattern of destruction which their gory but indefatigable limbs are weaving for the satisfaction of our enlightened Stage-Lessee, my Lord Satan, and the admiration of History.²⁴

Lee's insistence on body language and the gruesome aspects it can convey suggests that she already had in mind the combination of horror and comedy that was a staple of the plays performed at the Grand-Guignol. However, her attention to the heads of the nations as entities separated from the body also transfers the doctrine of the body politic onto the stage. According to this metaphor, which originated in classical times, the structure of a polity is represented analogically as a human body, and its chief, be it a sovereign or a government, is the head presiding over the body and limbs. The doctrine was further elaborated during the Renaissance, with James I allegedly claiming that 'the proper office of a King towards his Subjects, agrees very well with the office of the head towards the body' and that 'the head hath the power of directing all the members of the body to that use which the judgement in the head thinkes most convenient'.²⁵ Though slightly modified after Charles I's execution, the allegory of the body politic remained in use and was further popularized by Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), as its frontispiece clearly indicates in foregrounding an image of the sovereign consisting of the bodies of the citizenry.

In Lee's case, the distinction between the heads and the bodies of the nations is central to her criticism of early twentieth-century governments, which she holds responsible for dragging their countries to gratuitous conflicts that are ultimately left to the people to fight:

every Nation can dance Death's Dance however much bled and maimed, dance upon stumps, or trail itself along, a living jelly of blood and trampled flesh, providing only it has its Head fairly unhurt. And that Head, which each Nation calls its Government, but the other Nations call 'France', or 'Russia', or 'Britain', or 'Germany', or 'Austria' for short, that Head of each Dancing Nation [...] is very properly helmetted, and rarely gets so much as a scratch, so that it can continue to catch the Ballet-Master's eye, and order the Nation's body to put forth fresh limbs, and [...] keep its stump dancing ever new figures in obedience or disobedience to what are called the Rules of War.²⁶

This interrelationship of multiple dramatic conventions and *topoi* pervade a text that bears witness to Lee's profound research into an aesthetic paradigm fit to represent the horrors of the war. In this sense, *The Ballet of the Nations* already suggests, as Nicoletta Pireddu rightly claims in relation to *Satan the Waster*, that 'the aesthetic sphere' that Lee had hitherto 'protected from moral, rational, and more widely utilitarian contaminations seems to be invited directly to participate in real life events'.²⁷ Such complexity probably explains why Lee conceived *The Ballet of the Nations* as a closet

drama, a dramatic text primarily suited for reading rather than stage production. Moreover, as Lee points out in *Satan the Waster*, her contemporary morality responded to visual, in addition to dramatic, conventions, and this combination should be borne in mind in order to fully understand her aesthetic experimentation at the outbreak of World War I.

The interart motif of the *danse macabre*

Lee's reference to Hans Holbein in *Satan the Waster* is especially relevant to an examination of the aesthetic pattern underlying *The Ballet of the Nations*. Holbein's grotesque drawings were published in 1538 as the series of woodcuts *Danse Macabre*, and exemplify the circulation of this genre, illustrating the theme of the *memento mori* – that is, the universality of death – during the Middle and Early Modern Ages. My contention is that the allusion to Holbein's woodcuts indicates Lee's attempt to transfer onto the page – and its fictional stage – the visual tradition of the *danse macabre*, the allegorical representation of death summoning the representatives of medieval society regardless of their rank, from peasants and labourers to popes and emperors.

Overall, direct references to the *danse macabre* are scant in Lee's writings, yet there is evidence that she had long been interested in the aesthetic significance of this visual trope. On 6 September 1879, Lee wrote to Linda Villari that she was eager to read the essay on 'The Dance of Death in Italian Art' that the Irish poet and journalist Ellen Mary Clerke had recently published in *Cornhill Magazine*.²⁸ The reference indicates that Lee had long been considering the *danse macabre* as a particularly fit dramatic subject, but it took the horrors of World War I to provide her with a suitable subject matter. Moreover, in investigating the history and the cultural significance of the visual trope of the *danse macabre*, Clerke arguably shares the same interart perspective that shapes *The Ballet of the Nations*.

Besides providing a survey of frescoes and murals illustrating the *danse macabre* in Switzerland, France, and Italy, Clerke foregrounds its relevance across art forms, from fine to applied and performing arts. The motif of the *danse macabre*, she argues, 'is found not alone on the

walls of cemeteries and churches, but on glass, tapestry, and household furniture’, and it provides ‘a favourite subject equally for painting and sculpture, as for poems, masquerades, and dramatic representations’.²⁹ Implicit in Clerke’s argument is the idea of the *danse macabre* as an interart motif, which is further confirmed by her reference to numerous morality plays staged in Belgium and France in order to counteract the development of profane performances. Although this claim would probably require better grounding, Clerke fascinatingly suggests that

[t]he form in which Death is portrayed in the earlier picture tends to confirm the idea that they were derived from a dramatic performance; for he appears not in skeleton shape, impossible to assume by a living actor, but still clothed in fleshly integuments, the corroded state of which could be conveyed by a judicious use of paint.³⁰

Clerke suggests that the *danse macabre* is an interart motif *per se*, and hints at a genealogy that is reminiscent of the classical claim *ut pictura poësis* to the extent that it connects painting to poetry and drama. This potential imbrication is emphasized by the reference to Pietro Vigo’s study *Le danze macabre in Italia*.³¹ Published in 1878, the volume examines a wide range of pictorial and poetic examples of this theme in Italy, and it is complemented by a series of plates from at least three frescoes that are worth discussing here.

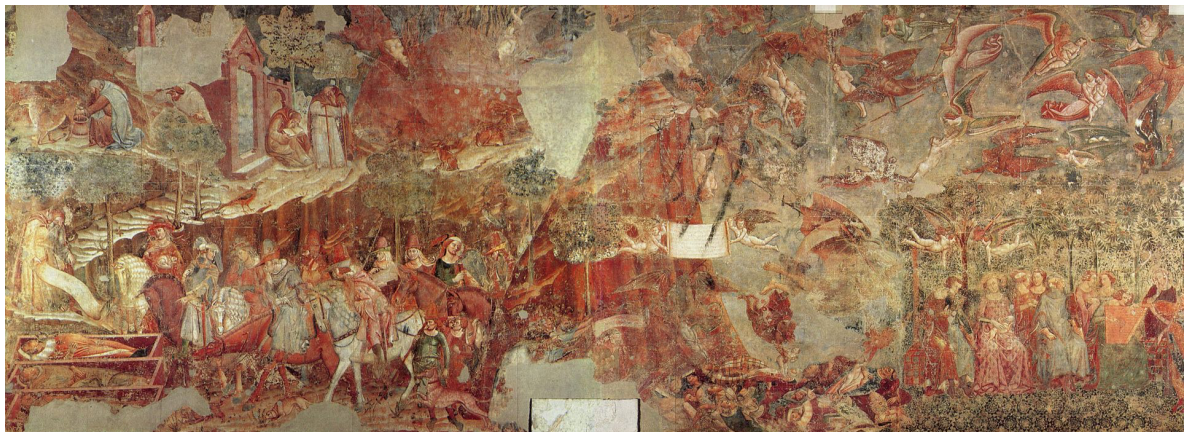


Fig. 1: Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Trionfo della Morte*, fresco, c. 1336-1341, Campo Santo, Pisa.

The first, and certainly the best-known, is the *Trionfo della Morte* at the Camposanto in Pisa [see fig. 1]. Originally believed to have been painted by Andrea Orcagna, and now attributed to the Florentine painter Buonamico Buffalmacco, the *Trionfo* plays a significant role in Lee’s reflection, and especially her belief in an aesthetic continuity bridging the Middle Ages to modernity. In the

collection of essays *Euphorion* (1884), Lee describes the *Trionfo della Morte* as the first testimony of the revival of antiquity in Pisa, as well as an early example of the conflation of classical and medieval elements that she recognizes as an aesthetic tenet of the Renaissance. In the Pisan cloister, Lee claims,

the art of the Middle Ages came for the first time face to face with the art of Antiquity. There, among pagan sarcophagi turned into Christian tombs, with heraldic devices chiselled on their arabesques and vizored [sic] helmets surmounting their garlands, the great unsigned artist of the fourteenth century, Orcagna of Florence, or Lorenzetti of Siena, painted the typical masterpiece of mediaeval art, the great fresco of the Triumph of Death. [...] The antique and the modern had met for the first time and as irreconcilable enemies in the cloisters of Pisa; and the modern had triumphed in the great mediaeval fresco of the Triumph of Death.³²

The Pisan *Trionfo della Morte* provided Lee with a visually powerful example of the aesthetic transition towards modernity, which is consistent with her intention to adapt a medieval genre such as the morality play in light of historical contingency. But Vigo and Clerke also dedicate ample room to the unattributed *Trionfo della Morte* that is now housed at Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo [see fig. 2]. In this fresco, Death violently enters the scene on the back of a horse. Men and women belonging to different social strata are grouped around Death, and several corpses lie scattered at the bottom.³³ It must be remembered here that Lee toured Sicily a few years before the beginning of the war. In 1912 she visited the Cappella Palatina, the Royal Chapel of the Normal Palace, but no record confirms a visit to Palazzo Abatellis. However, she most likely knew about this *Trionfo* through Clerke's essay.³⁴



Fig. 2: *Trionfo della Morte*, fresco, 1440-1445, Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo.



Fig. 3: Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Danza macabra*, fresco, 1484-1485, Clusone, Oratorio dei Disciplini.

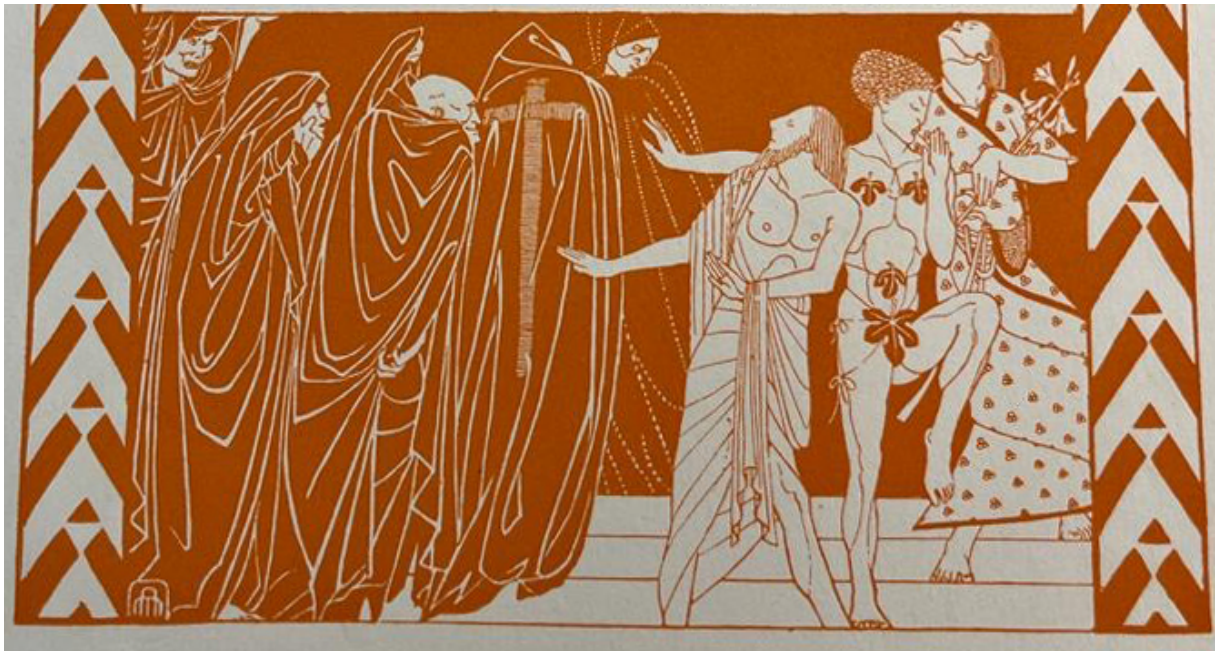


Fig. 4: Detail from Maxwell Armfield's illustration in Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), p. 5.

Finally, both Clerke and Vigo dwell at length on Giacomo Borlone de Buschis' *Danza della Morte* in Clusone, near Bergamo [see fig. 3]. Dating to the mid-fourteenth century, the fresco is part of a cycle at the Oratorio dei Disciplini and represents a series of male figures who are waiting for death, a presence which is symbolically embodied in the skeletons standing next to them. Particularly striking is the horizontal arrangement of the composition and its complete lack of perspective, which is far more marked than in the Pisan *Trionfo*. Arguably this is the same viewpoint that shapes Armfield's illustrations for *The Ballet of the Nations*, which develops from left to right at the bottom end of each page, and equally lacks perspective [see fig. 4]. Thus, these three medieval frescoes give new meaning to Armfield's work, their bi-dimensionality, and the synchronous narration that they provide to Lee's text.

As far as illustrations are concerned, Lee's remarks in *Euphorion* also anticipate her claims about Hans Holbein's dramatic representation of death as the character of a masque in *Satan the Waster*. In the essay 'Symmetria Prisca', Lee considers Holbein as one of the masters of sixteenth-century German art, whose 'wonderful minute yet grand engravings' she views as a form of the Renaissance spirit deprived of the revival of antiquity.³⁵ In the essay devoted to 'The Outdoor Poetry', she draws an interart comparison in discussing the majesty of Lorenzo de Medici's *Nencia da Barberino* (c. 1469-1473) and the simplicity and the poverty of the mother in Holbein's woodcut 'Dance of Death' [see fig. 5]. Holbein, Lee argues, characterizes her dramatically:

seated on the mud flood of the broken-roofed, dismantled hovel, stewing something on a fire of twigs, and stretching out vain arms to her poor tattered baby-boy, whom, with the good-humoured tripping step of an old nurse, the kindly skeleton is leading away out of this cruel world.³⁶

It becomes clear that Holbein's woodcuts provided Lee with an aesthetic paradigm suitable for voicing her pacifist commitment in *The Ballet of the Nations* if one considers that in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) she further praised them as a most poetic subject, one that was able to express the whole of human experience. 'Holbein's Dance of Death', Lee writes in 'The Imaginative Art of the Renaissance', is 'terrible, jocular, tender, vulgar and poetic', it 'contains it all'.³⁷ I suggest that

it is this admixture of features that made Holbein's drawings a suitable aesthetic precedent for Lee's representation of the Great War as a *danse macabre*.



Fig. 5. Hans Holbein, *Dance of Death: The Child*, c. 1526, woodcut.

It must be added that in discussing Leo Tolstoy's writings in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), Lee outlined a historical and anthropological conception of art that disentangled it from the deliberate search for beauty in favour of a materialistic approach that included 'building, weaving, pottery, dress, war, and ritual'.³⁸ This claim already hints at the layered interart aesthetics of *The Ballet of the Nations*, which we might regard as a palimpsest that responds to the general nineteenth-century interest in the *dance macabre*, making it an interart trope *per se*. One may think, for example, about Goethe's ballad 'Die Totentanz' (1813) or Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842). Around the same years, the *Trionfo della Morte* in Pisa and Holbein's woodcuts

inspired Franz Liszt's symphonic piece for solo piano and orchestra, *Totentanz*. While living in Pisa in 1839, Liszt was enraptured by the frescoes at the Camposanto, which, as he wrote to Hector Berlioz, he perceived as a visual translation of Mozart's *Requiem*. Moved by the *Trionfo della Morte*, Liszt first composed two sketches, 'Comedy of Death' and 'Triumph of Death', which were followed by a first version of *Totentanz* in 1839 and a second in 1853. According to Anna Celenza, the harmonic structure of the second theme of *Totentanz* clearly reveals Liszt's attempt to create 'aural depictions' of the Pisan frescoes, with specific focus on the hunting scene illustrating the encounter by the three living and three dead men.³⁹

Interestingly, in a letter written in October 1884, Lee expressed her desire to 'learn all the Liszt & Wagner things' that she could 'lay hand on'.⁴⁰ And as far as *The Ballet of the Nations* and its orchestra are concerned, it is also significant that in *Music and its Lovers* (1932) she would claim that Liszt's compositions stand out for their 'harrowing harmonies and compelling rhythm', which result in 'more than orchestral sonorities'.⁴¹ The connections between literature, music, and visual arts are further revealed if one thinks about Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre*. Saint-Saëns did not originally conceive his tone poem as a work for orchestra but as a song for voice and piano, a decision akin to Lee's conception of *The Ballet of the Nations* as a closet drama. As Death plays the violin, the music awakens the dead who dance to the rhythm of the orchestra. This suggests several fascinating parallels with Lee's work in which Satan conducts the Orchestra of Human Passions and engages the nations in a dance that turns them into 'unspeakable hybrids between man and beast'.⁴²

One further element should be considered in discussing the aesthetic context within which Lee developed her grotesque *Ballet of the Nations*, that is, the transformations of ballet as an art form between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Lee explicitly mentions the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in Paris as antonomasia for the staging of gruesome performances, but the innovations introduced by the Milanese *Ballo Excelsior* also suggest several echoes within *The Ballet of the Nations*.



Fig. 6. Cover of Romualdo Marengo's score for *Ballo Excelsior*, Milano, Sonzogno, 1881.

The *Ballo Excelsior* debuted at La Scala in 1881 with choreography by Luigi Manzotti and music by Romualdo Marengo [fig. 6]. The first act is set in Spain at the time of the Inquisition, which coincides with the period when most *autos da fé* were organized. Obscurantism is introduced as dominating over Light, but when the latter breaks the fetters that keep her captive the stage welcomes a series of allegorical characters and objects that celebrate the progress of humankind thanks to reason. The leading characters are Science, Industry, Civilization, Union, Value, Glory, and Fine Arts. In addition, several technological innovations, such as the steamboat, the electric battery, and the Suez Canal are welcomed as representative of the victory of Light over Obscurantism, therefore marking the triumph of Civilization.⁴³ Significantly, Obscurantism is defeated when Italian and French miners complete the excavations for the Mont Cenis Tunnel, which was inaugurated in 1871. The *Ballo Excelsior* is undoubtedly a celebration of contemporary technological progress, but it also foregrounds the role of reason as the one human faculty that can

guarantee a peaceful brotherhood of nations. This is suggested by the conjoined efforts of the Italians and the French, and the fact that the Mont Cenis Tunnel virtually obliterates the barriers between the two countries.

Lee most likely knew about the *Ballo Excelsior* from the Florentine *Nuova Antologia*, which dedicated ample room to the Milanese ballet because of its international popularity. In the 'Rassegna musicale' (published in January 1883), the *Excelsior* is praised as an innovative form of 'ballo a tesi', that is, a ballet in which the choreographic action is conceived not only as entertainment, but also as fulfilling a social mission. Central to Manzotti's experimentation, as the reviewer of *Nuova Antologia* argues, is the desire to promote the harmonious cooperation of nations through science and progress.⁴⁴ As Alessandra Campana remarks, Manzotti's extensive use of allegory, and his insistence on the 'iconic visualization of abstractions', are instrumental in staging the battle between good and evil, but they also provide an inventory of imagery that was easily accessible to the spectators.⁴⁵ This is precisely what Lee aspires to in *The Ballet of the Nations*, where Life and Progress are seen as enemies sending spies to watch Satan's performance.

Imbricating genres, reconciling arts

The apparent simplicity of Lee's verbal and Armfield's visual texts, and their seeming inconsistency, are layered instead onto a complex imbrication of dramatic genres and art forms. According to Brockington, *The Ballet of the Nations* is a satire in the etymological sense of the word 'medley' as it sets various emotions and historical moments side by side.⁴⁶ In addition to its political implications, *The Ballet of the Nations* stands out as an intermedial mosaic, an interart fresco whose key theme is certainly the Great War, but whose articulate aesthetic palimpsest hints at the nineteenth-century idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total work of art'. Rooted in Romantic organicism, the concept was introduced by the German philosopher Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff and made popular by Richard Wagner, whom Lee had appreciated since at least the 1880s.

In Wagner's view, music, dance, and poetry were perfectly reconciled in Greek tragedy, but began to diverge with the collapse of the Athenian state. 'As the spirit of Community split itself along a thousand lines of egoistic cleavage', the German composer argues in the essay 'Die Kunst und die Revolution' ['Art and Revolution'] (1844), 'so was the great united work of Tragedy disintegrated into its individual factors'.⁴⁷ Against such a split, Wagner's desire was to produce a total work of art that could harmonize dance, gesture, music and poetry, and thus elicit an emotional as well as an intellectual response.

The aesthetic achievement that Wagner aimed to attain is not devoid of political implications. Such consideration, it should be noted, is all the more relevant when one reflects on the historical contingency in which Lee conceived *The Ballet of the Nations*. 'The Art-Work of the Future', Wagner states in the homonymous essay he published in 1849, may only arise 'in the fullest harmony with the conditions of our whole Life' – that is, only once 'the ruling religion of Egoism' is finally banned.⁴⁸ Wagner specifically addresses artistic selfishness, which he blames for splitting the sister arts into separate, incomplete genres that barrenly compete against each other. With the outbreak of World War I, however, creative selfishness arguably takes on new meanings. In *The Ballet of the Nations*, it also becomes a locus for representing and exposing the tragic consequences of unbridled nationalistic drives. Aesthetics and politics thus converge in an osmotic fusion, which inspired Lee's search for an artistic form apt to voice her zealous commitment to pacifism.

¹ Vernon Lee, 'Vernon Lee Would End the War', *The Evening Post: New York*, 3 October 1914. Emphasis in the original.

A digital reproduction of the article is available in *Vernon Lee: Manuscripts, Published Works, and Typescripts*, 28, https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/vl_published/28 [accessed 30 December 2021].

² For an overview of Lee's antiwar articles and essays before and during World War I, see Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 200-09, and Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 292-309. These aspects are also discussed in Rachel Baldacchino, *Being in Borders: Empathy and Pacifism in the Essays of Vernon Lee (1900-1935)* (unpublished doctoral thesis, KU Leuven, 2018, https://limo.libis.be/prim-explore/fulldisplay?docid=LIRIAS1992573&context=L&vid=Lirias&search_scope=Lirias&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US [accessed 4 January 2022]). After the Dreyfus Affair, *Correspondances* became the newspaper of the Union pour la Verité, which was led by Paul Desjardins. Lee and Desjardins's 'Lettres d'une Anglaise et d'un Français sur les affaires présentes' appeared in *Correspondances*, 20.5 (1912), 233-34.

³ Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 201.

⁴ Baldacchino, *Being in Borders*, p. 108.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 240-58: 'When even genocide becomes cultural property in committed literature, it becomes easier to continue complying with the culture that gave rise to the murder' (p. 253).

⁶ Vernon Lee, *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes & Introduction* (New York: John Lane, 1920), p. v.

Lee conceived the ballet as a prose morality to be read at a meeting of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), for which she also authored the pamphlet *Peace with Honour: Controversial Notes on the Settlement* in 1915. Subsequently, she performed two readings of the *Ballet* in Chelsea in 1915 – the first at Armfield's studio, and the second at the Margaret Morris theatre. In 2018, a film version was released as part of a research project led by Grace Brockington at the University of Bristol with the theatre company Impermanence. In 2019, *The Ballet of the Nations* was staged at Il Palmerino under the supervision of Angeliki Papoulia and Federica Parretti. See 'Living Well in Wartime: Experimental Performance in Britain during the First World War', <https://bristowinstitute.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/project/living-well-in-wartime-experimental-performance-in-britain-during-the-first-world-war/> [accessed 12 February 2022], and Sally Blackburn-Daniels, 'A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*', *SKENÈ: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*, 6.2 (2020), 225-33.

⁷ Lee, *Satan the Waster*, p. vii.

⁸ Grace Brockington, 'Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in *The Ballet of the Nations*', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 143-59 (p. 144).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Elisa Bizzotto, 'Blurring the Confines of Art and Gender: Aubrey Beardsley's Legend of *Venus and Tannhäuser*, "The Fragment of a Story"', in *Strange Sisters: Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Francesca Orestano and Francesca Frigerio (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 213-32 (p. 241).

¹¹ See Brockington, p. 144.

¹² Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality*, with a pictorial comment by Maxwell Armfield (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1915). The volume is unpaginated; page numbers are indicated hereafter beginning at page one from the first page of Lee's prose, and so on.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ See Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 200, and Herward Sieberg, 'Vernon Lee's German Connections and Her Friendship with Irene Forbes-Mosse', in *Dalla stanza accanto: Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Firenze 26-28 maggio 2005*, ed. by Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto (Firenze: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2006), pp. 285-307 (p. 288).

¹⁵ See Pamela M. King, 'Morality Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 235-62 (p. 235).

¹⁶ Lee, *Ballet*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Patricia Pulham, 'Violence and the Pacifist Body in Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*', in *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature: Bodies-At-War*, ed. by Petra Rau (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46-63 (pp. 49-51).

¹⁹ See Robert Potter, 'The *Auto da Fé* as Medieval Drama', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre. Lancaster, 13-19 July 1989*, ed. by Meg Twycross (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), pp. 110-18 (p. 116).

²⁰ Lee, *Ballet*, p. 7.

²¹ Marie-Claude Canova-Green, 'Dance and Ritual: The *Ballet des nations* at the court of Louis XIII', *Renaissance Studies* 9.4 (1995), 395-403.

²² Lee, *Satan the Waster*, p. vii.

²³ The passages are quoted in Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 40.

²⁴ Lee, *Ballet*, p. 7.

²⁵ Edward Forset, *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* (1606), quoted in Katherine Bootle Attie, 'Re-Membering the Body Politic: Hobbes and the Construction of Civic Immortality', *ELH*, 75.3 (2008), 497-530 (p. 497).

²⁶ Lee, *Ballet*, pp. 13-14.

²⁷ Nicoletta Pireddu, 'Satan the Waster: Peace and the Gift', in *Dalla stanza accanto*, pp. 270-81 (p. 271).

²⁸ Vernon Lee to Linda Villari, 6 September 1879, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935*, ed. by Amanda Gagel, 2 vols (London and New York: Routledge 2017), I, p. 257.

²⁹ Ellen Mary Clerke, 'The Dance of Death in Italian Art', *Cornhill Magazine* (September 1879), pp. 346-60 (p. 347).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

³¹ Pietro Vigo, *Le danze macabre in Italia* [1878] (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1901).

³² Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1884), I, pp. 168 & 198.

³³ The *Trionfo della Morte* at Palazzo Abatellis is conventionally dated to the late fifteenth century and was housed at a hospital in Palermo in Lee's time. See Francesca Orestano who traces the influence of this fresco in Woolf's writing, in 'Jacob's Room: crisi della prospettiva e "Trionfo della Morte"', in *La tipografia nel salotto: saggi su Virginia Woolf*, ed. by

Oriana Palusci (Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1999), pp. 149-66, and Michele Cometa, *Il trionfo della morte di Palermo. Un'allegoria della modernità* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017).

³⁴ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 254-55.

Interestingly, when Lee's former friend Berend Berenson visited Sicily in 1953, he defined the *Trionfo della Morte* in Palermo as 'much more dramatic than the Pisan one'. Bernard Berenson, *The Passionate Sightseer: From the Diaries, 1947-56* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 120.

³⁵ Lee, *Euphorion*, I, p. 209.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁷ Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1895), p. 119.

³⁸ Vernon Lee, *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1908), p. 143.

³⁹ Anna Celenza, 'Death Transfigured: The Origins and Evolution of Franz Liszt's *Totentanz*', in *Nineteenth-Century Music. Selected Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference*, ed. by Bennett Zon and Jim Samson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 125-54.

⁴⁰ Lee *Selected Letters*, I, p. 586.

⁴¹ Vernon Lee, *Music and its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotional and Imaginative Responses to Music* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1932), pp. 302-03.

⁴² Lee, *Ballet*, p. 15.

⁴³ See Alessandra Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 69.

⁴⁴ 'Rassegna musicale', *Nuova Antologia*, 37 (1883), p. 355.

⁴⁵ Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship*, pp. 70-72.

⁴⁶ Brockington, p. 149.

⁴⁷ Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. and ed. by William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1895), I, p. 35.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.