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# In the Footsteps of Winckelmann: Vernon Lee in the Roman Galleries at the Fin de Siècle\*

by LENE ØSTERMARK-JOHANSEN

While Italy makes one think of the past; England, inevitably, leads one to speculate upon the future:  
each country is a key to what is not yet, or no longer, mere present.

VERNON LEE, *JUVENILIA* (1887)

*Abstract.* Violet Paget (1859-1935), publishing under the pseudonym 'Vernon Lee', wrote more than 40 books on aesthetics and the spirit of place. Resident in Italy for the major part of her life, she frequently found her subject matter in Italian art and literature of the past, whether that of Antiquity, the Renaissance or the eighteenth century. This essay discusses her dialogue with the eighteenth-century German antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) whose writings on ancient sculpture influenced more than a century of European archaeological and art historical literature. In Lee's early writings of the 1880s Winckelmann features as an authoritative voice of the past on the encounter between the living body and mind of the spectator-critic and the cold, immobile marble of ancient sculpture. Winckelmann's subjective descriptions of sculpture provoked Lee into thinking about the interrelationship between word and image, past and present, with Rome as a cosmopolitan palimpsest of history as a natural backdrop. Her early essays revisit Winckelmannian sites like the Villa Albani and the Vatican as part of her formative education as an art critic, and the essay uncovers this early stage in Lee's career.

Vernon Lee wrote the lines above as part of the dedication of her *Juvenilia* to her Italian friend Carlo Placci who had just returned from a lengthy visit to England. Conjuring up images of the ugly pollution of the industrial North of England as testimonies to the hideousness of the modern world, Lee wished to direct Placci's attention to his native country as a site where the beauty of the past was still far more prevalent than the signs of modernity. For her – well aware of approaching the age of 30 – youth, beauty and goodness went hand in hand, and the youthfulness

alluded to in the title of her book is one that encompasses Botticelli's frescoes, Raphael's *Apollo* in the *Stanze* in the Vatican and the baroque harmonies of the Venetian composer Baldassare Galuppi. Her critical essays in the book explore the beauties of the past while inevitably questioning the significance of the present, of the mid-1880s as a moment torn between the past and the looming future of an industrialized and recently unified Italy. Lee questions her own place and her own life span within the larger historical framework of past and present, as indeed any thinking individual



Fig. 1. Anton von Maron, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann*, 1768, oil on canvas, 136 x 99 cm., Weimarer Stadtschloss.

faced with Italy as a palimpsest of history must inevitably do. This essay juxtaposes the familiar with the less familiar, the eighteenth with the nineteenth centuries, German art history with Victorian aestheticism, the male gaze with the female. The purpose of these binaries is to consider Rome as a site of education, a site of an ever ongoing dialogue between past and present, a cosmopolitan centre where scholars, artists, and writers mix and mingle with their peers from all over the world, both the living and the dead.

#### *Winckelmann and his nineteenth-century legacy*

The name of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) is known to most travellers to Rome: frequently referred to as one of the founding fathers of the disciplines of art history and archaeology, Winckelmann came to Rome rather late in life in 1755 at the age of 38, the same year as he published his influential treatise *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works*

*in Painting and Sculpture*. The aesthetic ideals of “Noble Simplicity and Quiet Grandeur” (“Edle Einfalt und stille Grösse”) detected even in a piece of Hellenistic sculpture like the *Laocoön*,<sup>1</sup> was to inspire more than a century of Neoclassical sculpture, following Winckelmann’s argument that only through an imitation of the art of the Greeks would modern art have a future. Until his arrival in Rome, Winckelmann’s knowledge of ancient sculpture had been based solely on engravings and sculptural works in German collections. His encounter with ancient sculpture in the Roman galleries became a spiritual, erotic and artistic awakening for him which he conveyed through a series of ekphrases, verbal descriptions of individual works of sculpture, which soon became set pieces, learnt by heart and quoted by Winckelmann’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers.<sup>2</sup> These ekphrases contributed strongly towards the canon formation of ancient sculpture: the *Laocoön*, the *Belvedere Torso*, the *Belvedere Antinous*, the *Belvedere Apollo*. His description of the *Apollo* gives us a sense of the extraordinary merging of subject and object, spectator and artwork in a language of profuse enthusiasm:

In gazing upon this masterpiece of art, I forget all else, and I myself adopt an elevated stance, in order to be worthy of gazing upon it. My chest seems to expand with veneration and to heave like those I have seen swollen as if by the spirit of prophecy, and I feel myself transported to Delos and to the Lycian groves, places Apollo honoured with his presence – for my figure seems to take on life and movement, like Pygmalion’s beauty. How is it possible to paint and describe it! Art herself must advise me and guide my hand to convey henceforth the main features that I have sketched here.<sup>3</sup>

Winckelmann is alluding to the myth of Pygmalion:<sup>4</sup> the critic’s own body would seem to be a piece of dead marble, suddenly transformed from dead immobility to living

movement, as it imitates the posture of the *Apollo*. The reader may even feel his or her own chest expanding when reading the passage. The invigorating powers of this sculptural encounter are not merely physical, but also mental, as the critic imagines himself transported out of the Cortile del Belvedere to Apollo's Greek island, before giving in to what one might call the "ineffability topos": this experience is so wonderful that it can only with difficulty be rendered adequately in language. The impressionable mind and body of the critic invites us to think about the interrelationship between sculpture and language: can three-dimensional form be rendered adequately in language, and can the powerful encounter between one mobile and another immobile body ever be captured in words?

Winckelmann's three Roman patrons – the Cardinals Archinto, Passionei and Albani – employed him as librarian and antiquarian in the collections of the Vatican and the Villa Albani from 1755 until his sudden death in 1768. His daily handling of manuscripts, books and marbles undoubtedly provoked him into thinking about the interrelationship between word and image, and the somatic language in which he conveyed his enthusiasm for sculpture also conveyed his own sense of a rebirth, of a personal renaissance brought on by the encounter with ancient sculpture. Winckelmann spoke of the need to familiarize oneself with ancient sculpture to the degree of establishing a friendship with them; Michelangelo and Raphael had been on such intimate terms with the works of antiquity, he claimed, as to enter into their very spirit.<sup>5</sup> Winckelmann's concept of the Renaissance becomes a complex one, of both bodily and spiritual forms transmitted through love and familiarity across the centuries. For him Rome became the encounter with a cosmopolitan world of colleagues: among them the Danish sculptor Johannes Wiedewelt, the Scottish architect Robert Adams, the German painter Anton Raphael Mengs, and the Italian sculptor and restorer Bartolomeo Cavaceppi. To Winckelmann the love of sculpture and

the love of Rome were social experiences, embodied in an intricate network of friendships across the nations and across the centuries.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the critical engagement with Winckelmann's ideas in the writings of Lessing and Herder, in the Winckelmann cult of Goethe, Mme de Staël and Hegel, contributed towards the wide proliferation of Winckelmann's ideas.<sup>6</sup> When in the 1860s Otto Jahn and Carl Justi published their biographical accounts of Winckelmann,<sup>7</sup> both the man and his writings were firmly established, not just in Germany, but certainly also in France and England. The dichotomy outlined in Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* (1810) between the cold rational north and the warm sensuous south met in the body and spirit of Winckelmann as the northerner who experienced a personal rebirth of Renaissance proportions in his encounter with Rome and antiquity:

He felt in himself an ardent attraction towards the south. In German imaginations even now traces are often to be found of that love of the sun, that weariness of the north (*cette fatigue du nord*), which carried the northern peoples away into the countries of the south.<sup>8</sup>

An essay on Winckelmann appeared as the concluding chapter in the Victorian writer Walter Pater's book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.<sup>9</sup> Published in England in 1873 it soon became a cult book for the members of the aesthetic movement, among them Oscar Wilde who declared that it was his "golden book", always with him when he travelled, and that "the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written."<sup>10</sup> Winckelmann appeared alongside essays on Leonardo, Michelangelo, Botticelli and Pico della Mirandola as a late manifestation of what Pater called the "movement of the Renaissance":<sup>11</sup> a sensuous engagement with the ancient pagan world and a celebration of the beauties of the body as represented

in art. Pater challenged the conventional periodization of the Renaissance by bringing it up to the eighteenth century, and thus relatively close to his own century, with his depiction of Winckelmann as a late survivor, a *revenant*, of the Renaissance spirit. When speaking of “the movement of the Renaissance” he was suggesting rebirth as an ever ongoing process, not confined to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but rather a series of renaissances. For the Victorians Winckelmann became an authority on ancient art and a source of inspiration for how one might write about sculpture and evoke the experience of becoming inspired, invigorated – reborn even – by the encounter with sculpture. He became an aesthete *avant la lettre*, a model on how to write artfully about art.<sup>12</sup>

In Rome the Villa Albani had opened as a private museum in 1868, and to many people it was as much a museum to Winckelmann as to the Cardinal’s collection of marbles. The collection had been significantly reduced



Fig. 2. *Winckelmann's bust*, Villa Albani, Rome. © Collections CEGESOMA - Brussels.

by Napoleon; out of the 677 items in the eighteenth-century catalogue, 518 works had been abducted to France and had not all been returned, so the scattered marbles, which met the nineteenth-century visitor, were a ghostly reminder of the former grandeur of the collection.<sup>13</sup> In the garden, Emil Wolff’s colossal bust of Winckelmann conjured up the residing spirit of the German antiquarian; placed in an almost Lycian grove, the enormous Winckelmann, all head and no body, looks with a wistful gaze at the spectator. In the 1888 and 1893 editions of *The Renaissance* Pater had given his Winckelmann essay the epitaph “Et ego in Arcadia fui” as a classical touch, recollecting Virgil’s *Eclogues*, Poussin’s landscapes but also echoing the motto of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* (1786): “Auch ich in Arkadien”. The experience of visiting the Villa Albani in the late nineteenth century was one of entering a lost world where death and time had made their presence felt. Wolff’s bust was a gift from the Bavarian Ludwig I; it was the third statue of Winckelmann which he commissioned. In 1808 Salvatore de Carlis had carved one for the Schloss Tegel and in 1814 Rudolf Schadow had carved another for the Walhalla in Regensburg.<sup>14</sup> Wolff’s colossal bust in the Villa Albani, however, reflects a mid-nineteenth-century nostalgia for a lost century of antiquarianism, and in Vernon Lee’s engagement with the eighteenth century we find a similar sense of nostalgic wistfulness, a longing for a century just out of reach.

#### *Vernon Lee and her Roman education*

Vernon Lee, the woman writer masquerading under a male pseudonym, was born in 1856 in France to English middle-class parents.<sup>15</sup> Violet Paget, as she was christened, became from an early age a true cosmopolite, dividing her time between Germany, France and Italy, privately taught by a string of house teachers, employed by her mother whenever the family moved to a new location. As a result she mastered all four languages perfectly and published in German, French, Italian, but primarily in English. A child prodigy, she eagerly devoured the major



Fig. 3. John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), *Vernon Lee*, 1881, oil on canvas, 53,7 x 43,2 cm. © Tate, London 2016.

works of literature in all four languages, took piano and singing lessons and decided from a very early age that she wanted to become a writer. Her first publication at the age of 14 was in a Swiss journal called *La Famille*. It is a so-called “it-narrative”, a genre begun in the eighteenth century, in which the story is told from the point of view of an object.<sup>16</sup> *Les Aventures d'une pièce de monnaie* was a first-person narrative, recounting the story of a copper coin from the time of the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Made from the copper of a Macedonian helmet, the denarius came into the possession of a sculptor working at Hadrian's new villa at Tivoli. The coin was subsequently stolen by a Roman merchant who escaped to Naples when the Barbarians sacked Rome. After the lapse of centuries it received a new lease of life when it came for a brief moment into the hands of the painter Guido Reni in the sixteenth century, resurfaced when the young Mozart played in the Sistine Chapel and witnessed Napoleon's imprisonment of Pope Pius VII before, in the nineteenth century, it became part of the numismatic collection of a

certain M. X. It concluded its narrative with the words “*N'est-ce pas que j'ai eu de belles aventures?*”<sup>17</sup> Apart from being the fanciful narrative of a bright fourteen-year-old, the plot reflects Lee's early interest in narrative point of view, in the layering of history, and a vivid imagination, bringing the past into the present.

The narrative reflects her fascination with Rome as a palimpsest of history. She had spent the winters of 1868, 1869 and 1870 in Rome, chaperoned by the American Mrs Sargent, mother of the American painter John Singer Sargent. The two children were born in the very same year and remained life-long friends. Mrs Sargent was a water-colourist who energetically toured the Roman galleries and parks with John and Violet, and introduced them to the large international community of Rome. For the highly receptive young Violet, her Roman winters were a formative experience. Denied the privileges of her brother, who was sent to Oxford for his further education, Violet imbibed an alternative education, undoubtedly much broader than anything Oxford could offer in the 1870s, as the first women's colleges were just opening, giving women access to a university education.<sup>18</sup> Although Violet Paget would later become very familiar with several members of the first generation of university-educated women in England, such as the archaeologists Jane Harrison and Eugénie Sellers, she never seems to have regretted her own alternative education. Rome offered a plethora of artistic, social, intellectual and creative experiences, and in the course of the 1870s she began writing essays which would appear, first in English periodicals in the 1870s, and subsequently in book form in the 1880s. She moved to Florence in 1873, where she would remain for the rest of her life, from 1889 until her death in the Villa Il Palmerino in Maiano, very close to Bernard Berenson's Villa I Tatti. At the age of 19 she changed her name to Vernon Lee, fully aware that “no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but mitigated contempt”.<sup>19</sup> She initially intended the name

to sound tantalizingly androgynous: "The name I have chosen as containing part of my brother's and my father's and my own initials is H.P. Vernon-Lee. It has the advantage of leaving it undecided whether the writer be a man or a woman."<sup>20</sup> Soon it was shortened to Vernon Lee, a pseudonym she kept until her death in 1935. During her long career as a writer, she produced more than 40 books and countless articles and essays, ranging from some of the best ghost stories of the nineteenth century to studies in the spirit of place, in literary stylistics, a First-World-War pacifist morality play and detailed studies in psycho-aesthetics, in the perception of artworks.<sup>21</sup>

Even a cursory glance through Lee's letters gives one a sense of how she had the most extraordinary talent for catapulting herself into the intellectual and artistic centres of London, Paris, Rome and Florence.<sup>22</sup> She soon knew everyone worth knowing: Henry James, Walter Pater, Robert Browning, Oscar Wilde, G.B. Shaw, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Richard Wagner, H.G. Wells, Bernard Berenson, Adolf von Hildebrand, Paul Bourget, Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy, Gustave Moreau, the Rossetti family – the list seems endless. Lee was a highly social being and the pleasures of engaging with literature and art were social events for her. The presence of a friend with whom to share the aesthetic experience was important for her, and nearly every single one of Lee's 40 volumes is dedicated to some friend or other, often with a long, very personal, dedicatory note. Her second volume of essays, *Belcaro*, published in 1881, was dedicated to her friend, A. Mary F. Robinson, and her long dedicatory note outlines the importance of the friend, whose presence is either real, or at least, imaginary:

I have always, in putting together these notes, had a vision of pictures or statues or places, had a sound of music in my mind, or a page of a book in my memory; I have always thought, in arranging these discussions, of the real individuals with whom I should most willingly have them: I have

always felt that some one else was by my side to whom I was showing, explaining, answering; hence, the use of the second person plural, of which I have vainly tried to be rid: it is not the oracular *we* of the printed book, it is the *we* of myself and those with whom, for whom, I am speaking; it is the constantly felt dualism of myself and my companion.<sup>23</sup>

To Lee, gifted with a vivid imagination, friends could be both living and dead, and the dedication to her volume *The Spirit of Rome: Leaves from a Diary*, published in 1906, gives us a sense of a city peopled as much by the living as by the dead:

TO ALL THE FRIENDS  
LIVING AND DEAD  
REAL AND IMAGINARY  
MORTAL AND IMMORTAL  
WHO HAVE MADE ROME  
WHAT IT IS TO ME.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Traces of Winckelmann in Lee's writings*

Winckelmann was among the dead friends who contributed towards making Lee's Rome something special. He hovers in many of her writings of the 1870s and 1880s as a benign and haunting spirit of the past, an authority on art whose revival of antiquity saved Rome from the onslaught of Northern Romanticism. In an early novel like Lee's *Ottolie: An Eighteenth-Century Idyll* of 1883, set in Germany in the 1770s, when Lessing, Herder and Goethe were engaging critically with Winckelmann's ideas, the great master's writings constitute the formative reading of the young protagonist Christoph, converting him to the charms of antiquity. Enriched by a lengthy sojourn in Italy, the more senior Councillor Moritz is a devoted admirer and imitator of Winckelmann, some twenty years after his death. We get a sense of a new type of masculinity which has emerged in the post-Winckelmannian era: that of the sensitive aesthete antiquarian.

Lee's life-long fascination with the

eighteenth century began already in her first book, *Studies in the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, published in 1880. The opening essay discusses the Arcadian Academy on the Janiculum.<sup>25</sup> Founded in the seventeenth and thriving in the eighteenth century, the Accademia degli Arcadi was a meeting place for learned men and women. Both Italian and foreign intellectuals were members and were given names of shepherds and shepherdesses. Goethe was a member, Winckelmann was not, but Lee emphasizes Winckelmann's importance as one for whom the very idea of an intellectual Arcadia was fundamental, with his revival of antiquity as a golden world of the past, a much-needed beautiful contrast to the ugliness of the modern world. The arcadians were conducting learned disputes inside the

elegant building and in the gardens on the Janiculum, which architectural historians have seen as a precursor of the Spanish Steps. With Queen Christina of Sweden as one of the founding members, the Academy had a respect for intellectual women, and Lee's fascination with both the institution and its site, deserted and derelict in the nineteenth century, reflects her own nostalgia at the thought of a recently lost beautiful world where bright women were taken seriously. Her case study of Maria Maddalena Morelli (1727-1800), writing under the pseudonym of "Corilla Olimpica" traces the precursor of Mme de Staël's Corinne: a woman poet who – like Petrarch – had herself crowned poet laureate at the Campidoglio. Lee's essay begins with the author herself in search of



Fig. 4. *Orpheus and Eurydice*, marble bas-relief, Villa Albani, Rome.

the remains of the Accademia degli Arcadi on the Janiculum; by chance she stumbles on the gate, gains access to the overgrown garden as a solitary Romantic traveller, visiting a place haunted by the ghosts of the past, the individual seen against the background of the collective literary society of former times.

'Orpheus and Eurydice: The Lesson of a Bas-Relief', the second essay of her second book, *Belcaro* (1881), takes us yet closer to Winckelmann. Set in the Villa Albani it revolves around a Roman relief depicting a woman flanked by two men (Fig. 4). A brief reference in a book to the relief as depicting the leave-taking of Orpheus and Eurydice determines Lee's reading of the piece, and she lets herself be carried away by all the beautiful emotions involved in the moment of separation just before Eurydice returns to the Underworld. Lee quotes extensively from the description in Virgil's *Georgics*.<sup>26</sup> Her emotional reading of the moment captured in marble is, however, suddenly interrupted when she discovers the writing on the label under the artwork:

but as our eyes wander wistfully over the marble, they fall, for the first time, upon a scrap of paper pasted at the bottom of it, a wretched, unsightly, scarce legible rag, such as insult some of the antiques in this gallery, and on it is written: –'Antiope coi figli Anfione e Zeto.' A sudden, perplexed wonder fills our mind – wonder succeeded by amusement. The bunglers, why, they must have glued the wrong label on the bas-relief. Of course! and we turn out the number of the piece in the catalogue, the solemn, portly catalogue – full of references to Fea, and Visconti, and Winckelmann.<sup>27</sup>

The catalogue entry is identical to the text on the label, and the author responds with incredulity:

We put down the catalogue in considerable disgust. What, they don't see that that is Orpheus and Eurydice! They dare, those soulless pedants, to call *that* Antiope with Amphion and Zethus! Ah! – and with

smothered indignation we leave the gallery. Passing through the little ilex copse near the villa, the colossal bust of Winckelmann meets our eyes, the heavy, clear-featured, strong-browed head of him who first revealed the world of ancient art. And such profanation goes on, as it were, under his eyes, in that very Villa Albani which he so loved, where he first grew intimate with the antique! What would he have said to such heartless obtuseness?<sup>28</sup>

The author goes straight home and takes down Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* from her bookshelf, a book for which she has an almost religious reverence: "the work which no amount of additional learning can ever supersede, because no amount of additional learning will ever enable us to feel antique beauty more keenly and profoundly than he made us feel it".<sup>29</sup> Helped by the index, she must, however, make the very disappointing discovery that it was Winckelmann who, based on cool iconographic facts, interpreted the relief as a depiction of Antiope with her two sons.<sup>30</sup> Thus corrected she returns to the villa to study the piece once more. Aware now of the dangers of imposing a mythological and literary reading on a work of sculpture, she finds herself turning into a formalist critic, helped along by an artist in the galleries who sees nothing but light, shade, draperies and vertical shapes in the relief. Lee moves, teasingly, from emotional readings of the work as a narrative to an almost provocative acceptance of it as a *tabula rasa*:

'What then is the bas-relief?' she asks. 'A meaningless thing, to which we have willfully attached a meaning which is not part and parcel of it – a blank sheet of paper on which we write what comes into our head, and which itself can tell us nothing.'<sup>31</sup>

The essay carries the subtitle "The Lesson of a Bas-Relief"; the lesson which the author and the reader learn from their visit to the Villa Albani is one of appreciating each art

form on the basis of its own merits. From a very emotional beginning, we end up with a clear analytical aesthetic theory about the interrelationship between text and image:

To appreciate a work of art means, therefore, to appreciate that work of art itself, as distinguished from appreciating something outside it, something accidentally or arbitrarily connected with it; to appreciate Virgil's lines means to appreciate his telling of the story of Orpheus, his choice of words and his metre; to appreciate the bas-relief means to appreciate the combination of forms and lights and shades; and a person who cared for Virgil's lines because they suggested the bas-relief or for the bas-relief because it suggested Virgil's lines, would equally be appreciating neither, since his pleasure depended on something separate from the work of art itself.<sup>32</sup>

Who teaches us? Winckelmann? The artist in the galleries? The artwork itself? It is not entirely clear, but the figure of Winckelmann is a complex forefather in the field of aesthetics: an enthusiast, conveying his delight in ancient art through impassioned prose, he is also the factual antiquarian authority whose interpretation ends up on the label, in the catalogue and in his acclaimed *History*. For Lee he is a stepping stone towards a new kind of formalism which she would develop more fully in Florence in the 1890s in the company of her friend, the artist Kit Anstruther-Thomson (1857-1921),<sup>33</sup> at the same time as, elsewhere in the Florentine hills, Adolf von Hildebrand and Bernard Berenson would strip the visual arts of layers of mythological readings with their ideas of sculptural form. Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* appeared in 1893, Berenson's *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, with its theories of "tactile values", in 1896, the latter giving rise to lengthy animosities between Berenson and his female neighbour, as Berenson accused Lee of plagiarizing him.<sup>34</sup> Contemporary fellow critics could be highly problematic when

they felt their male authority threatened by Lee's intellect. Winckelmann, by contrast, was safely buried, and Lee herself did not object to having her theories and interpretations corrected, neither by contemporaries nor by those long dead. In the preface to *Belcaro* Lee talked about "the new myself", the birth of the art critic, as something which had taken place during her encounters with artworks as an experience of a personal and professional rebirth not unrelated to Winckelmann's.<sup>35</sup>

#### "The Child in the Vatican"

The first text in Lee's *Belcaro* volume had likewise taken the reader into Winckelmann's territory: "The Child in the Vatican" is a curious mixture of autobiography, fairy tale, art-theoretical essay and a celebration of the spirit of place.<sup>36</sup> Lee begins with a meditation on the Roman museum experience seen from the point of view of the child, bustling full of life and energy, utterly alienated from the endless rows of white silent statues lined up against the walls. The child is father of the man, Wordsworth reminds us,<sup>37</sup> and the adult narrator still carries within her such alienating museum experiences begun in childhood:

it is a desolate place, this Vatican, with its long, bleak, glaring corridors; its half-lit, chill, resounding halls; its damp little Belvedere Court, where green lichen fills up the fissured pavement; a dreary labyrinth of brick and mortar, a sort of over-ground catacomb of stones, constructed in our art-studying, rather than art-loving times [...]. A dismal scientific piece of ostentation, like all galleries; a place where art is arranged and ticketed and made dingy and lifeless even as are the plants in a botanic collection. Eminently a place of exile; or worse, of captivity, for all this people of marble: these athletes and nymphs and satyrs, and warriors and poets and gods, who once stood, each in happy independence, against a screen of laurel or ilex branches, or on the sun-heated gable of a temple, where the grass waved in the fissures and the

swallows nested, or in a cresset-lit, incense-dim chapel, or high against the blue sky above the bustle of the market place; poor stone captives cloistered in monastic halls and cells, or arranged, like the skeletons of Capuchins, in endless rows of niche, shelf, and bracket. Galleries are necessary things, to save pictures and statues (or the little remaining of them) from candle smoke, sacristans' ladders, damp, worms, and street boys, but they are evil necessities; and the sense of a sort of negative vandalism always clings to them, specially to the galleries of statues, so uninhabited, so utterly sepulchral.<sup>38</sup>

Lee's juxtaposition of the Vatican galleries with the Capuchin catacombs conveys the message: to the child and Lee's adult spectator, sculpture is a negation, it is everything which the child is not, or conversely, the child is everything which sculpture is not. Lee echoes the nineteenth-century criticism of sculpture voiced by Baudelaire in his *Salons*: "*Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse*", "Why sculpture is boring".<sup>39</sup> Yet just as we think we are in for a slaughtering of both ancient sculpture and the hallowed halls of the Vatican, Lee changes tactics. This is, after all, a conversion narrative, an account of the birth of the aesthete, the lover of sculpture and of Rome. From her meditation on the modern museum experience, she moves into the realm of the supernatural, into the realm of fairy tale:

Well, once upon a time (let us invent a fairy tale), a child was brought to the Vatican: just such an one, only perhaps a trifle more wayward, than those we met this morning, demurely led about, or scampering through the galleries: its name signifies nothing, suffice it that it was a child. Now, it so happened, that upon that day the statues [...] were bent upon getting some small amount of amusement in their dreary lives: all the more dreary since the great joyful hope of restoration in the hearts of men which they had conceived when Winckelmann

and Goethe came to them and adored, had been slowly disappointed by seeing that what men cared for was not them, but merely their own impertinent theories and grandiloquent speeches. The Statue-demons [...] sorely wanted excitement, diversion of some sort; and in their idleness, they capriciously determined to amuse themselves, no longer with grown men, but with children. So, as a toy for the moment, they singled out this particular child we are speaking of, who was wandering wearily through the gallery, overpowered like its companions by the sense of negativeness, of greyness, of silence, of want of character and movement and story, and as it passed them, the statue-demons looked at each other with their pupilless eyes, as much as to say: "This is the one we shall take," and determined to cast a spell upon it which would make it theirs. [...] the child remained for a while conscious of nothing at all, never dreaming that it had in any way come in contact with that demon world imprisoned in the stone. It lived its child life of romping and day dreams and lessons and punishments, and, with its companions, fretted to get away from this dreary, horrible Rome of the popes: [...] But little by little, into its everyday life, stole strange symptoms; [...] What was the matter? A vagueness, a want; a seeking, a clinging, but seeking for, clinging to the unknown. [...] [The] child would watch the bank of melting colours, crimson, and smoke-purple and gold, left by the sun behind the black dome of St. Peter's; and as the white vapours rose from the town below and gathered on the roofs like a veil, it would feel a vague, acheless pain within it; and at any stray, trifling word or bar of dance music, its eyes and its whole little soul would fill with a mist of tears. The spell cast by the statues was not idle, the mysterious philter which they had poured into it was working throughout that childish soul: the child was in love; in love with what it had hated; in love intensely, passionately, with Rome.

And as a part of Rome it loved, blindly, for no other reason, that desolate Vatican; to the statues it returned, and in a way, grew up in their presence. And one day the child looked at itself, and perceived that it was a child no longer; knew all of a sudden, that in those drowsy years of childish passion and day dreams, it had been learning something which others did not know. For it heard one day a few pages of a symphony of Mozart's; the first it had ever heard save much more modern music; and those bars of symphony were intelligible words, conveyed to the child a secret. And the secret was: "we are the brethren, the sounding ones of the statues: and all we who are brethren, whether in stone, or sound, or colour, or written word, shall to thee speak in such a way that thou recognise us, and distinguish us from others; and thou shalt love and believe only in us and those of our kin." Then the child went forth from the Vatican, and went in among the pictures, and among the poems and the music, and did indeed find that all those who were of the same kin as the statues spoke to it intelligible words, and returned its love by making it happy. This came of the statues having had the whim of giving to that child the love potion which had made it love Rome.<sup>40</sup>

Like Winckelmann, Lee knew how to produce persuasive word-painting, even at the tender age of 25. Her blending of the spirit of place with the arts of music, painting, poetry and sculpture in this Roman fairy tale testifies to her superior aesthetic sense

and daunting command of language and style. One moment she conveys the dreary tediousness of the apparently endless rows of identical marble figures of the Vatican convincingly through the eyes of the young child, the next she seduces the reader into an atmospheric Roman cityscape, full of sounds, pastel colours and delicate shadings. In her long career as a writer Lee would continue to experiment with the interrelationship between the different art forms, with testing the limits of language and the many intersections of word and image. The sculptural encounters between artwork and viewer begun at an early age would lead her into sophisticated psycho-aesthetic experiments, as the aesthete turned amateur scientist at the *fin de siècle* and gradually departed from the enthusiastic subjectivity taught her by Winckelmann. Founded in the basic activities of looking, thinking, reading and writing about art, Lee's Roman education moulded a career far more diverse than that of Winckelmann, but as one of her many friends, "living and dead, real and imaginary, mortal and immortal", he had served her well as a pioneer in the profession of writing artfully about art.

Dr. Lene Østermark-Johansen  
Associate professor  
Department of English, Germanic and  
Romance Studies  
University of Copenhagen  
128 Njalsgade  
DK-2300 Copenhagen S  
oesterm@hum.ku.dk

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## NOTES

\* This essay is a rewritten version of a lecture given on 30 October 2015 at the Accademia di Danimarca when the author was awarded Queen Margrethe II's Roman Prize Instituted by the Carlsberg Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> The term occurs as the heading of Section IV of Winckelmann's brief treatise and is used repeatedly as a characteristic of Greek sculpture as well as Greek literature. Winckelmann 1987, 33-43.

<sup>2</sup> For Winckelmann's ekphrases, see Potts 1994; Harloe 2013. For ekphrasis as a theoretical term, see Heffernan 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Winckelmann 2006, 334.

<sup>4</sup> In *Metamorphoses* X, 243-97 Ovid recounted the story of the Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion: dissatisfied with the mortal women on his island, he constructed an ideal woman in marble who, through the intervention of Aphrodite, was transformed into a real woman whom Pygmalion took as his wife. Together with the stories of Medusa and Niobe, the Pygmalion myth is one of the most frequently used myths to highlight the problematic relationship between man and sculpture. For its cultural history since the Renaissance, see Blühm 1988; Stoichita 2008.

<sup>5</sup> "The only way for us to become great or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the ancients. What someone once said of Homer—that to understand him well means to admire him—is also true for the art works of the ancients, especially the Greeks. One must become as familiar with them as with a friend in order to find their statue of Laocoön just as inimitable as Homer. [...] With such eyes did Michelangelo, Raphael and Poussin see the works of the ancients. They partook of good taste at its source, and Raphael did this in the very land where it had begun. We know that he sent young artists to Greece in order to sketch for him the relics of antiquity." Winckelmann 1987, 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Harloe 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Otto Jahn's life of Winckelmann appeared in his *Biographische Aufsätze* in 1866; the two volumes of Carl Justi's *Winckelmann: sein Leben, seine Werke und seine Zeitgenossen* appeared in 1866 (*Winckelmann in Deutschland*) and in 1872 (*Winckelmann in Italien*).

<sup>8</sup> "il se sentit attiré vers le Midi avec ardeur; on retrouve encore souvent dans les imaginations allemandes quelque traces de cet amour du soleil, de cette fatigue du Nord qui entraîna les peuples septentrionaux dans les contrées méridionales." De Staël 1845, 124. The English translation is that of Walter Pater in Pater 1980, 142.

<sup>9</sup> The essay was first published in the *Westminster Review* 31 n.s. (January 1867), 80-110 as a review of Otto Jahn's *Biographische Aufsätze* and G.H. Lodge's translation of Winckelmann's *The History of Ancient Art among the Greeks* (1850),

- the first translation into English of Winckelmann's monumental piece.
- <sup>10</sup> Yeats 1955, 130.
- <sup>11</sup> The phrase is used repeatedly throughout the book. For a discussion of Pater's "movement of the Renaissance", see Barolsky 1987 and Østermark-Johansen 2011, 15-71.
- <sup>12</sup> See Evangelista, 23-54.
- <sup>13</sup> Lomholt 2014, 12.
- <sup>14</sup> See <<http://www.museum-digital.de/san/index.php?t=objekt&oges=33668>> for further information on Wolff's Winckelmann bust. Website consulted on 3 February 2016.
- <sup>15</sup> The three most important biographies of Lee are Gunn 1964, Colby 2003 and Zorn 2003. See also Maxwell & Pulham 2006 for the best collection of essays on Lee so far.
- <sup>16</sup> See Blackwell 2007 and Blackwell *et al.* 2012.
- <sup>17</sup> Gunn 1964, 50.
- <sup>18</sup> Lady Margaret Hall was founded in 1878, Summerville and St Anne's Colleges in 1879, St Hugh's College in 1886, and St Hilda's College in 1893.
- <sup>19</sup> Lee 1937, 59.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>21</sup> A comprehensive, albeit incomplete, bibliography of Lee's writings and secondary material is available at <<http://thesibylblog.com/bibliography/>>, accessed on 3 February 2016.
- <sup>22</sup> So far only a small selection of the letters have been available in print, see Lee 1937. A forthcoming three-volume edition is, however, in progress: Gagel, M. & Geoffroy, S. (eds.) 2016-17 *The Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1859-1935*, London.
- <sup>23</sup> "The Book and its title. To One of my Readers — the First and Earliest", Lee 1887a.
- <sup>24</sup> Dedication, Lee 1906.
- <sup>25</sup> For modern critical literature in the Accademia degli Arcadi, see Dixon 2006 and Minor 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> *Georgics* IV, 464-527.
- <sup>27</sup> Lee 1887a, 53.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.
- <sup>30</sup> There are three references to the relief in Winckelmann, 2006: an insignificant one on p. 162; a more substantial one on pp. 291-92: "in the Villa Borghese and the Villa Albani are two similar reliefs depicting Amphion and Zethos with their mother, Antiope, in which Zethos wears his hat hanging on his shoulders, to indicate the life of a herdsman that he has embraced." And a lengthy one on p. 316: "On the facade of the palace at the Villa Borghese, there is a rare and still seldom-noticed relief depicting Amphion and Zethos flanking their mother, Antiope, as the names inscribed above the figures indicate. Amphion has a lyre, and Zethos, dressed as a shepherd, wears his circular hat thrown back on his shoulders, in the manner of a traveler. Their mother seems to be entreating her sons to take revenge on Dirke. A work showing the same scene, entirely similar but without the names, is to be found in the Villa Albani."
- <sup>31</sup> Lee 1887a, 60.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>33</sup> Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's collaborative efforts in aesthetic psychology can be found in Anstruther-Thomson 1924. For a discussion of their psychological aesthetics, see Lanzoni 2009.
- <sup>34</sup> For these animosities, see Wellek 1966 and Brown 2005.
- <sup>35</sup> Lee 1887a, 4, 11-16.
- <sup>36</sup> Critical literature on this fascinating text is so far very limited, see Evangelista 2009, 56-65, and Siegel 2013.
- <sup>37</sup> The phrase occurs in Wordsworth's 1802 poem "My Heart Leaps Up".
- <sup>38</sup> Lee 1887a, 17-18.
- <sup>39</sup> In his *Salon of 1846*, chapter XVI, with the provocative title "Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse" (Why sculpture is boring). Charles Baudelaire had accused sculpture of being expressionless, primitive and too close to nature. In the *Salon of 1859* he had gone on to speak of "all these great dolls, exact in all their proportions of height and thickness," seen in the modern Salon. Baudelaire 1965, 111-13, 205.
- <sup>40</sup> Lee 1887a, 23-27.