

Haunted by Italy and the Past: Edith Wharton and Vernon Lee

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I

From the 1890s to the 1900s, Edith Wharton, the well-known realist writer of the early 20th century, published various magazine writings on Italian culture. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, she recalls the 1890s as “the happiest I was to know as regards literary hopes and achievements” (885):

My long experimenting had resulted in two or three books which brought me more encouragement than I had ever dreamed of obtaining, and were the means of my making some of the happiest friendships of my life. The reception of my books gave me the self-confidence I had so long lacked, and in the company of people who shared my tastes, and treated me as their equal, I ceased to suffer from the agonizing shyness which used to rob such encounters of all pleasure. (*BG* 885)

Wharton not only emphasizes the reception of her writings as encouragement to become a writer but also greatly appreciates the friendships and company of people “who shared my tastes.” In the last decade of the 19th century, her Italian essays and new acquaintances helped Wharton develop self-confidence as a novice essayist and short story writer.

Wharton was born in the United States in 1862, but in 1866, her family moved to Europe, where they spent six years travelling between Rome and Germany. She enjoyed a happy childhood in Rome and deeply “felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities” (*BG* 817). As Robin Peel demonstrates, Wharton is “forever stimulated by Italian history and culture” (285), and Italy remained the “spiritual home” (Peel 292) that “offered an older, more romantic and more nationwide version of the Old New York Society” (Peel 286). In addition to this “background of beauty and old-established order” (*BG* 817), Hermione Lee points out another significance of Italy for Wharton’s writing career: “To a great extent Italy made her a writer, and provided the space for her to grow up and out of the confines of her class and sex. . . . It was partly by means of her journeys to Italy that Wharton spread her roots and burst through the vessel that was meant to hold her”(88). Certainly, her enduring fascination with Italy as well as her essays on that

country contributed to her development as a novelist.

More specifically, Wharton's writings on Italy show Vernon Lee's great influence and Wharton's intense interest in Italian architecture and gardens. Vernon Lee was one of the foremost female intellectuals and writers of the 19th century. Lee's vast knowledge and understanding of Italian culture attracted Wharton to such an extent that many of her essays and novels reflect Lee's profound influence. As Hermione Lee argues, "Vernon Lee gave Wharton a model for a way of invoking the past, an authoritative woman's voice confidently taking on the male terrain of travel and aesthetics, and a deep knowledge of and passion for Italy, especially its eighteenth-century history" (100-01). This paper elucidates Lee's influences on Wharton through an examination of their writings on Italian culture and their short stories, especially how Lee affects Wharton's style of writing, during her early literary career. Thus, I hope to clarify the significance of Lee's narrative technique and thinking for Wharton, who was at that time in the process of discovering the themes and style that would take her to the heights of literary achievement.

II

In the 1890s, Edith Wharton "was passing through what later parlance would call a severe crisis of identity" (Lewis, "Introduction," *The Letters* 27-28). From 1889 to 1893, she published four poems and four short stories in several magazines. In 1893, just a year before Wharton met Lee, Wharton was proposed by Edward Burlingame, the editor at *Scribner's Magazine*, to bring out a volume of her short stories. Wharton's reply to Burlingame on March 26, 1894, shows how she felt to the offer from him. In the letter, she expresses to him her deep sense of gratitude for his "encouragement," saying that "I feel myself so much complimented by the Messrs. Scribners' request that I should publish a volume of stories," but she also frankly confesses, "[I have] lost confidence in myself at present" (*Letters* 33). This telling letter also reveals great concern about her style: "I seem to have fallen into a period of groping, & perhaps, after publishing the volume, I might see better *what direction I ought to take* and acquire more assurance (the quality I feel I most lack)" (*Letters* 32-3; emphasis added). While Lewis points out that "Burlingame's invitation had the effect upon Edith of asking her to commit herself at last to a career of writing" (75), her letter clearly states that she had not yet decided on a direction for that career.

It was during the turbulent year of her life that Wharton met Vernon Lee for the first time. According to Wharton's autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, the first encounter of Wharton and Lee was in the spring of 1894 at Lee's villa in Italy:

Before telling the story of "Italian Villas" I must speak of the friend whose kindness made its writing possible. Several years earlier, on starting on our annual pilgrimage to Italy, I had taken with me a letter from Paul Bourget to Vernon Lee (Miss Violet Paget), the author of "Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy", "Belcaro" and "Euphorion", three of my best-loved companions of the road. . . . Hitherto all my intellectual friendships had been with men, and Vernon Lee was the first highly cultivated and brilliant woman I had ever known. (882-84)

Vernon Lee, the first female intellectual that Wharton had ever met, published her first book *Studies of*

the Eighteenth Century in Italy when she was twenty-four. She was “the authority on all things Italian and most especially on the Italian eighteenth century” (Colby 184).

While Wharton does not emphasize that they formed an intimate relationship, saying, “we are seldom together” (BG 884), her short article “A Tuscan Shrine” written on terra-cottas in Tuscany shortly after they met, shows Lee’s strong impact on Wharton. As Wharton proudly states in a letter to Burlingame on July 30, 1894, “It [‘A Tuscan Shrine’] is an account of some rather remarkable terra-cottas which I found last spring in a small place in Tuscany.” Even Vernon Lee “who has lived so long in Italy & devoted so much time to the study of Tuscan art, never having heard of them or of San Vivaldo” (*Letters* 34). It can be presumed that Wharton tried Lee’s method and thinking in this article to explore her own style as a writer, because two points seem inspired by Lee and her essays on Italian culture.

First, Wharton employs the first-person plural to narrate her discovery of the terra-cottas. She begins by lamenting the inability for the continental tourist “to plan a tour of exploration without” reference to any guide-book (289). She hopes, however, “still [to] find here and there, even in Italy, a few miles unmeasured by the guide-book,” so that “we stepped out of the train one morning at Certaldo, determined to find our way thence to San Vivaldo” (290). After “we” enjoy “an unknown world which lay beneath us in the early light” and the landscape that “recalled the golden ripples running over the grass in the foreground of Botticelli’s ‘Birth of Venus’” (292), “we” arrive at San Vivaldo. The monastery of San Vivaldo has about 20 chapels of the Passion, approached through the wood adjoining the monastery. In one of the chapels Wharton is introduced to the terra-cottas, attributed to Giovanni Gonnelli.

The first-person plural narrative is a method that Vernon Lee employs in her essays. For example, in her famous essay “The Child in the Vatican” from *Belcaro*, Lee uses “we” to narrate and describe the beauty of marble statues:

Going to a gallery of sculpture, we must be prepared to isolate what we wish to enjoy, to make for it a fitting habitation in our fancy: it is like going to read a page of Homer, or the Georgics, or Shelley, in some great musty, dusty library, redolent of crumbling parchment and forgotten rubbish. Such is this Vatican, even for us accustomed to it and knowing what we do and do not want . . . (18-9)

Lee’s first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* also begins as the following: “In the course of our studies of the eighteenth century we were so continually coming upon the Academy of the Arcadians . . . it so pervaded the whole of the Italy of those days, that we began to feel curiosity concerning this once renowned institution, and to wonder what had become of it in our own day” (3). Furthermore, Lee focuses explicitly on the importance of narrative techniques in *The Handling of Words*, in which she expounds a theory of psychological aesthetics of literature. For Lee, the ideal author should guide the reader on the right path to the very end, so that the reader experiences the same feelings and thinks the same thoughts as the author. Thus Lee seems to use “we” to develop a comfortable intimacy and considerable trust between the author and the reader.

Wharton also regards the development of trust between the reader and the author as key for writing short stories. She argues in *The Writing of Fiction*, “One of the chief obligations, in a short story, is to

give the reader an immediate sense of security. Every phrase should be a sign-post, and never (unless intentionally) a misleading one: the reader must feel that he can trust to their guidance” (30). Employing “we” in “A Tuscan Shrine,” Wharton successfully presents herself as an intellectual traveler with broad knowledge of Italian history and culture as does Lee.

Secondly, the method Wharton adopts to approach the previously hidden terra-cottas is reminiscent of the “empathy,” which Vernon Lee introduces in *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics*.

. . . Empathy exists or tends to exist throughout our mental life. It is, indeed, one of our simpler, though far from absolutely elementary, psychological processes, entering into what is called imagination, sympathy, and also into that inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world . . . (41)

Lee argues that we cannot completely understand a work of art until we have knowledge and experience enough to appreciate it. Indeed, the artist cooperates with the audience, viewer, and reader to create art. In “A Tuscan Shrine,” Wharton discovers through her experience that the terra-cottas, said to be imitations of 17th century works, are actually originals from the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

The more closely I studied the groups, the more the conviction grew that they were the work of an artist trained in an earlier tradition, and still preserving, under the stiffening influences of convention, a touch of that individuality and directness of expression which mark the prime of Tuscan art. . . . as I looked I was haunted by a confused recollection of a Presepio seen at the Bargello, and attributed to Giovanni della Robbia or his school. (100-01)

To confirm her hypothesis, Wharton “went at once to the Bargello” as soon as she went back to Florence (101). To prove her theory, she closely examines the resemblance between the terra-cottas in San Vivaldo and that in the Presepio of the Bargello according to “certain details of hair and drapery” and “the recurrence of the same type of face” (101). Wharton’s experience perfectly exemplifies empathy: her recollection and knowledge of the Presepio allows her to fully appreciate the terra-cottas.

Wharton is faithful to Lee’s instructions in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* as well. In 1903, when Wharton revisited Lee in Italy, Lee kindly introduced her to many private villas, to which she would not otherwise have gained entrance:

Vernon Lee’s long familiarity with the Italian country-side, and the wide circle of her Italian friendships, made it easy for her to guide me to the right places, and put me in relation with people who could enable me to visit them . . . it was thanks to her recommendation that wherever I went, from the Lakes to the Roman Campagna, I found open doors and a helpful hospitality. (BG 885-6)

Lee’s introductions enabled Wharton’s writing on architecture, which resulted in the publication of *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. Wharton refers to Lee’s Italian essays in the acknowledgement: “To Vernon Lee, who, better than any one else, had understood and interpreted the garden-magic of Italy.”

In *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, Wharton seems to emphasize most that to fully appreciate the garden-magic of Italy is to foster “an understanding of the gardener’s purpose, and of the uses to which he

meant his garden to put it” (13).

One must revert to the architect’s plan to see how admirably adapted it was to the difficulties of the site he had to deal with, and how skillfully he harmonized the dense shade of his ilex-groves with the great open spaces and pompous architectural effects necessary in a garden which was to form a worthy setting for the pageants of a Renaissance court. (29)

Wharton regards the garden architect as artist and the garden itself as art. We, viewers of the garden, should consider the original design of the architect through our knowledge, so that we can properly evaluate its beauty: we need Lee’s version of “empathy.”

In “A Tuscan Shrine,” Wharton not only tries Lee’s style and narrative technique, but also applies Lee’s thinking through an examination of the meaning of art and the relationship between the artist and the audience. Vernon Lee’s essays must have acted as a beacon to Wharton, who was groping for her themes and style of writing at that time. As Hermione Lee asserts, “just when Wharton needed it,” Vernon Lee was “an inspiring intellectual example” (98).

III

Wharton chose 18th century Italy for the background of *The Valley of Decision*, her first novel published in 1902. The novel reveals how highly Wharton thought of Vernon Lee’s authority on the 18th century Italy. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton tenders her gratitude to Lee: “No one welcomed ‘The Valley of Decision’ more warmly than Vernon Lee, and it was a great encouragement to be praised by a writer whom I so much admired, and who was so unquestioned an authority on the country and the period I had dealt with” (884). However, this praise actually seems rather restrained in its acknowledgment of the effect of Lee’s writings and thinking. In fact, after publishing *The Valley of Decision*, Wharton distanced herself from Italy, resolving to write about America, especially New York. Her resolution came to fruition as *The House of Mirth*, published 1905. As Hermione Lee detects, “Wharton had to outgrow Vernon Lee, as she did her other ‘introducers,’ ” it can be presumed that Wharton was determined to detach herself from Lee’s influence while she explored her own style of writing. Several short stories written by Wharton and Lee and *A Backward Glance* indicate why Wharton and Lee should be separated.

During her lifetime, Vernon Lee was famous for her essays, especially those on Italian culture and history, but today, she is remembered for her supernatural tales. Zorn summarizes the characteristics of most of her ghost stories as the following:

With its staging of hesitation, fear, and subversion, the fantastic can give expression to the marginal, the invisible, and the unacceptable— notions that characterize Lee’s complicated attachment to her writerly identity. In her stories “Amour Dure” and “Dionea,” the fantastic occurrences unsettle her male narrators’ inflated sense of themselves shaped by their confidence in professional scholarship, which yet cannot satisfy their emotional need for the past. . . . In other words, art can create a more immediate contact with the past than can historical scholarship. Lee’s supernatural, which stages our intuitive and subjective connections with the past, thus can be seen as a metaphor for an unrealized historical method.

(146-47)

“Amour Dure,” one of Vernon Lee’s famous supernatural tales, begins with the grief of Spiridion Trepka, the male narrator, who is a scholar: “I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past; and was this Italy, was this the Past?” (41). He so yearns for the past that he resurrects Medea da Carpi, a mysterious noble woman from the 16th century. In “Dionea,” another supernatural tale written by Lee, a male intellectual narrates an unusual resurrection of the past, in this case, the goddess of old, forgotten times. In Lee’s tales, the male narrators are often seduced by “animated fragments of the past” (Stableford). As Zorn mentions, “Lee repeatedly identifies the unknowability of history with the unknowability of woman,” and her supernatural tales can be regarded as an “attempt at a new way of reading the past” (167). In this sense, Lee seems to seek a way of comprehending the past, only to find perfect coalescence of past and present in fiction, rather than in scholarly historical criticism. The narrator must delve deeper into the past so that he loses himself; in other words, the distance between the narrator (the subject) and the past (the object) should be reduced to zero.

Wharton, who was also attracted to the past —not only to Italian culture and history but also to Old New York — does not consider complete elimination of the distance between the narrator and the past essential to grasp and depict the past in a novel. On the contrary, she preserves the distance to maintain the ironic viewpoint, which she needs to illustrate the hypocrisy and gender norms that lurked in Old New York.

Nevertheless, Wharton liked ghost stories as much as Vernon Lee and, in fact, published many ghostly short stories. “Kerfol,” one of her ghost stories, has the structure similar to Lee’s “Amour Dure.” The male narrator seeks the truth about a lady of the past through some old documents, though he fails to bridge the gap between the past and the present. Fedorko points out that in “Kerfol” “Wharton also emphasizes, more than she has done in Gothic stories to this point, the unreliability of the male narrator who rejects his empathy and intuitive knowledge for sole reliance on control and rationality” (66). Wharton employs this narrative technique, telling a story of women from a male’s point of view, more skillfully in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, her masterpieces. In these novels, Wharton uses the distance between the narrator and the object to elucidate the hypocritical gender norms in New York society.

Significantly, Wharton’s *A Backward Glance* is written in a manner that portrays her as a professional novelist like Henry James. A comparison between *A Backward Glance* and “Life and I,” an unfinished version of her autobiography, reveals that Wharton deleted some episodes she may have considered unsuitable to her image as a novelist. Most striking is the deliberate dismissal of her Italian essays as a kind of trial for becoming a professional writer.

. . . I speak of “Italian Backgrounds” only because it is a convenient peg on which to hang an interesting discussion. In the ’seventies and ’eighties there had appeared a series of agreeable volumes of travel and art-criticism of the cultured dilettante type . . . From Pater’s “Renaissance” . . . to the deliciously desultory volumes of Vernon Lee . . . they all represented a high but unspecialized

standard of culture; all were in a sense the work of amateurs, and based on the assumption that it is mainly to the cultured amateur that the creative artist must look for appreciation . . . (889-90)

According to Zorn, the decline of Lee's critical evaluation depends on the trend toward professionalism. Most male intellectuals claimed to draw a clear distinction between the amateur and professional in the modernist era (xi-xxxi). As "the voice of the trained scholar was sounding a note of resistance," Wharton's "deep contempt for picturesque books about architecture naturally made me side with those who wished to banish sentiment from the study of painting and sculpture", to the extent that she "began to feel almost guilty for having read Pater" (*BG* 890). Wharton declares positively that "The application of scholarly standards to the judgment of works of art certainly helped to clear away the sentimental undergrowth which had sprung up in the wake of the gifted amateur" (*BG* 890).

For Wharton, who suffered from "skepticism of the critical capacities of women generally" (Wegener 8), Vernon Lee was "a model for Edith of cultured intelligence and independence of spirit" when they first met (Benstock 78). However, Lee gradually came to be regarded as an old-fashioned Victorian amateur critic. As Wharton's explicit contempt for Mary Wilkins and Sara Orne Jewett in *A Backward Glance* shows, her most important task was freeing herself from 19th century women writers' sentimentalism to be recognized as a 20th century writer and artist. Wharton must have feared that Lee's amateurish style of writing and passionate approach to the past would be connected with sentimentalism. Wharton wanted and needed a more objective narrative strategy to establish her position as a novelist. Since *A Backward Glance* declares Wharton's professional career as beginning after she separated from amateurish writers in the 19th century, her position as a professional novelist must have meant a great deal to her. Yet, some of Wharton's essays and short stories reveal that Vernon Lee served as a beacon to guide Wharton toward that successful literary career.

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