volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 5, Issue 2

Autumn/Winter 2022

From Crystal Palace to the Grand-Guignol: Vernon Lee and the First World War

Sally Blackburn-Daniels

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 September 2022

Date of Publication: 23 January 2023

Citation: Sally Blackburn-Daniels, 'From Crystal Palace to the Grand-Guignol: Vernon Lee and the First World War', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 5.2 (2022), 40-62.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v5i2.1665.g1778

volupte.gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

From Crystal Palace to the Grand-Guignol: Vernon Lee and the First World War

Sally Blackburn-Daniels

Teesside University

In July 1893, in a letter to her mother Matilda, Vernon Lee wrote that she would be attending the Crystal Palace exhibition in Sydenham, and whilst there she would 'witness some Dahomey people war dance'.[1] The promotional material, which featured heavily in the July, August, and September 1893 timetables of the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway, noted that the Dahomey were to be exhibited alongside 'Prandi's Royal Italian Marionettes' as 'The Greatest Novelty in Europe'. Across London, advertisements billed the Dahomey as

> THE FAMOUS AMAZON WARRIORS,
> *A REGIMENT OF POWERFUL WOMEN,*
> Natives of Dahomey, the Suite of Behanxin, King of Dahomey, taken Prisoners by the French Army, under the command of General Dodds. The finest of the Races of Africa.
> THE GREATEST NOVELTY IN EUROPE.
> EXCITING MARTIAL DISPLAY. SHAM FIGHT. THRILLING SCENES.[2]

The regiment performing at the Crystal Palace were a predominantly female militia, from the kingdom of Dahomey in Western Africa, now Southern Benin. Dahomey had been – outside of the royal line – a meritocracy, with the majority of palace attendants, politicians and administrators being made up of women from a cross-section of society including 'slaves, war-captives, free-born commoners, and women from well-to-do households'.[3] Historian Edna G. Bay notes that dress in the Dahomean society reflected position rather than gender, with women who oversaw male ministers being required to wear 'male' (Bay's term, not mine) garments.[4] John Duncan's *Travels in Western Africa, in 1845, & 1846* suggested that the women, particularly those in the nation's army, wore skirts or tunics with trousers underneath for freedom of movement, with their abilities being described as exceptional, who 'excel in martial appearance' beyond that of 'any body of native troops'.[5] Duncan continues: 'all [were] well armed, and generally fine, strong, healthy women, and doubtless capable of enduring fatigue […] if undertaking a campaign, I should prefer the females to the males of this country'.[6] Traditionally, when not in battle, the Dahomean army would

alternate 'the rhythm of war and ritual', with war becoming ritualized and ritual becoming militarized.[7] The ritual performances included songs that 'played on farming imagery, contrasting the drudgery of farm work with the glories of soldiering'.[8] Due to the horrors of colonialism during the nineteenth century, the French saw what they believed to be an endemic 'savagery' in its people (again, Bay's term) and 'felt justified in colonising Dahomey'.[9] The result was the capture and enslavement of the outnumbered and outgunned Dahomean army by General Dodds, and their exhibition as the greatest novelty in Europe at the Crystal Palace and the Paris Zoological Gardens.[10] During the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 in Paris the Dahomey were exhibited on the hill of the Trocadero Palace as part of the colonies and protectorates, and during 1907 the people were on display at the Bois de Vincennes 'human zoo' on the outskirts of the city. The exhibition of this female militia was undoubtably unusual to its nineteenth and early twentieth-century audiences, particularly one so seemingly rigid in its gender roles.[11]

This article takes from this brief anecdote several things about Lee's approach to women during wartime and their participation in violence. The first being that towards the late nineteenth century, the study of other cultures and peoples (often problematic in its approach) had caught the public's imagination, and second, that within the Crystal Palace exhibition space the Dahomey existed for their audience as symbols of the barbaric past. Yet their race did not disbar their physical displays of strength, drawing comparisons with the 'classic' warrior women, the Amazons. It is my proposition that the figure of the warrior woman's performance of violence within the exhibition space and the ritualistic and spiritual origins of these performances suggested the artistic form for Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*. Furthermore, I would argue this paper is unique in its approach in drawing a line of influence from Dahomey, via the *Ballet Russes* and the Grand-Guignol theatre in Paris, to *The Ballet of the Nations*, illustrating the ways in which Lee is particularly interested in violence enacted by women – notably women presenting in a masculine way.

Lee's *Ballet* was written during the early years of the First World War, initially to be read aloud as a 'one-act symbolical war play' at an evening for the British pressure group the Union of

Democratic Control, at the Chelsea Studio in Glebe Place, London. The studio event was hosted by the playwright Constance Smedley, whose husband Maxwell Armfield later illustrated the volume.[12] This reading by Lee was followed by a second at the Margaret Morris Theatre. The publishers in the audience (according to Smedley) were 'so carried away by Vernon Lee's rendering and the audience's enthusiasm, that the next morning three offers [to publish] came'.[13] Chatto and Windus published *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* at Christmas 1915, with Maxwell's Hellenic style puppet-show illustrations. The narrative follows Satan and Ballet Master-Death as they put together an Orchestra of Passions who will drive the Nations to an unceasing, devastating, wasteful war. Instead of presenting war as a reaction to a single act of aggression, Lee highlights the ways in which the 'Politicians and Armament Shareholders have long got the stage-property in readiness, and the Scene-Shifters of the Press' were 'only waiting for the signal'.[14] This is not, Lee notes, the first dance staged by Death and Satan, the latest in a long line of performances have been in 'South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently'.[15] In *Being in Borders: Empathy and Pacifism in the Essays of Vernon Lee (1900-1935)*, Rachel Baldacchino notes how the 'Christmas book was largely ignored by readers and critics and the few reviews that covered it were either lukewarm or completely dismissive'.[16] She continues:

> [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'.[17]

The suggestion in the *Saturday Review* that Lee's pacifist *Ballet* was irrelevant beyond the period of warfare was perhaps partially correct. Yet Lee reworked this text into *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes and Introduction* (1920), with the work becoming even more prescient after Lee's death which preceded the Second World War. Today, the work has received a resurgence of interest. The dance company Impermanence, supported by the Paul Mellon Trust and research from art historian Grace Brockington, adapted and filmed *The Ballet of the Nations* in 2018.[18] In 2019, the first theatrical performance of *The Ballet* was staged at the Villa Il Palmerino in Florence, and was brought to life by Angeliki Papoulia and Federica Parretti.[19]

Aside from a recent focus on the performance of the text, scholarship has frequently concentrated upon *The Ballet*'s variety of dramatic techniques and stylistic modalities. Elisa Bizzotto's focus on *The Ballet* as 'inscribed within a revival of medieval drama' was a response to both the text and the Villa Il Palmerino performance, in which Bizzotto highlights the similarities between Walter Pater's 'Denys L'Auxerrois' (1886) and Lee's *Ballet,* particularly in the use of allegory and 'late-medieval and early-modern performative practices'.[20] Katharina Herold's analysis of Lee's use of allegory and the ways in which the allegory enables a criticism and destabilization of boundaries has also been formative in thinking about these styles during the re-thinking and editing of this paper.[21] Herold's contention that women are actors in wartime violence was particularly suggestive, and while Lee's weapons were 'intellectual' and allegorical, and resulted in her ostracization, Herold notes that Lee refused to stand passively by. In 'Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in *The Ballet of Nations*', Grace Brockington contends that the dissonance between the classical-style illustrations and Lee's narrative creates discordance between words and image.[22] Patricia Pulham's 'Violence and the Pacifist Body in Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*' draws parallels between the Lee's rendering of violence and the Spanish *auto da fé*.[23]

Lee and the Amazons

The exhibition of the Dahomey was not only notable for the skill and athleticism shown by the warriors, but for the way in which the public and the press responded to an all-female militia, dubbing them 'Amazonians' [see fig. 1]. *The Pall Mall Gazette* (19 May 1893) states the warriors will provide:

> [a]n exhibition of the customs of their country, from sorcery to sword-dancing, and from prayer-dancing to sham-fighting. There are male warriors in the troupe, but it was upon the stalwart fighting-women with their black shining arms and shoulders, their naked feet with anklets of cowries shells which form their coinage, their sinewy strength, and their dexterity in the use of the arms they have borne in various engagements against the French in their recent campaign that the interest centred.

The displays by the Dahomey at the Crystal Palace combined examples of the kingdom's culture (sorcery and prayer-dancing), objectified female bodies (naked arms, ankles, and feet), and a performance that came to interest Lee from an anthropological position: 'sham-fighting' or the war dance.

Fig. 1. Advertisement for the Crystal Palace, Sydenham. Amazon Natives of Dahomey, 1893. Copyright of The British Library Board.

The *Daily Telegraph* (19 May 1893) enthused about the performance stating that

> [a]s to their Entertainment, let it at once be said that nothing so original has been seen in England for many a long day […]. The Greatest and most Thrilling Novelty to be seen in England during the Season of 1893. Admission – Sixpence and One Shilling.[24]

Even the press as far north as *The Yorkshire Post* was affected by the 'sensational' Dahomey Amazons. The journalist writes that these

> dusky ladies are fine specimens of muscular womanhood, and with their gleaming black skins, and rude adornments and costume, present a wonderfully picturesque spectacle […]. Seeing them in action, one can easily realise how it is that the French found Dahomey such a very hard nut to crack.[25]

The women arouse both an aesthetic pleasure from the viewer and a sense of awe: they are beautiful and deadly violent, a fearfully attractive combination. These women are the survivors of a colonial genocide, forced to perform by their captors for profit and gain. The war dance is simultaneously a display of physical prowess, and evidence of their defeat at the hand of the French.

The Dahomey Amazons' strength, agility and 'Greekness' fascinated anthropologists and visitors alike, disrupting Eurocentric ideas of beauty and female decorum with their 'figure such as Phidias or Praxiteles need not have disdained to model'.[26] Kate Nichols in '"[M]anly beauty and muscular strength": Sculpture, sport and the nation at the Crystal Palace, 1854-1918' suggests that by referring to celebrated classical Greek sculptors, The Dahomey Women's bodies transcended racial boundaries.[27] The European ideal of beauty championed by aesthetes and anthropologists of the period was essentially disrupted by this display of African 'Greekness' and feminine power.[28]

The aesthetic similarities between the Dahomey women and the ideal beauty of the Amazons would not have been lost on Lee. In 'The Child in the Vatican', an essay from Lee's collection *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1881) she discusses how her author's training began in 'the presence of statues' such as the Polycletan Amazon in the Vatican [see fig. 2].[29] From these figures Lee learned at a very young age (around seventeen) that 'the only intrinsic perfection of art is the perfection of form, and that such perfection is obtainable only by bodily

altering, or even casting aside, the subject with which this form is only imaginatively, most often arbitrarily, connected'.[30] Lee had crystalized this philosophy of aesthetics well before *Belcaro* through a discursive correspondence with her brother, Eugene in March 1873. On 15 March she writes of the sculptor of the wounded or Polycletan Amazon: 'Immediately after Phidias, Polyclete and Scopas died, decadence started […] because Greek art was content with certain types of beauty regarded as all artist's common aim'.[31] It is the body – the form – of the sculpture that attracted the young aesthetician Lee, not the suggestion of female physicality and violence.

Fig. 2. James Anderson's photograph of *Amazone. Vatican. Braccio nuovo*, 1859. Albumen silver print, 24x12.8 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XO.251.3.67.

As she developed her aesthetic ideas, Lee re-visited the Vatican sculpture rooms frequently, with the Amazon figures helping her to consolidate her personal theory of *Einfühlung*. In 'Aesthetic Responsiveness: Its Variations and Accompaniments Extracts from Vernon Lee's Gallery Diaries, 1901-4' from *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912), Lee records visiting the *Braccio Nuovo* on 17 April 1901 and on 17 February 1902.[32] After this second later visit, she writes:

> I am not sure, but it seems as if the quality of *flesh*, possible softness and warmth, certainly helped us to look at her, perhaps by a kind of physiological *Einfühlung*. It may perhaps be merely a question of planes, as in a mountain. But I suspect something more than the form interests, the suggestion of a beyond, a life more than the skin […].[33]

Like the 'duskiness' of the Dahomey, the flesh of the 'Wounded Amazon' engages an empathetic responsiveness, in which she perhaps 'feels into' the figure her own masculine femininity. Like the Dahomey warriors, the Amazon is both a symbol of physical power, but also defeat; she is wounded, arm raised in the air, showing the softness of her form, and leaving her body vulnerable to penetration. Lee continues that '[a]fter the first day I found that I was examining not only the work of art, but the consciousness in which this work of art was reconstituted'.[34] On the contrary, on one of her visits to the Vatican during which Lee walks around to look at the form she feels 'not the faintest tendency to mime, in the sense of imitating the action of […] the Polycletan Amazon': Lee does not feel herself into the wounded woman warrior, her interest in the figure is aesthetic not dramatic.[35] She is a student of the figure, and of the form: she cannot imagine herself into the woman of violence, for to commit violence is to open oneself up to violence from others. She can neither celebrate the Amazon's war injuries nor the capture and enslavement of the Dahomey by the French colonisers.

I would like to suggest that is possible to see from Maxwell Armfield's first illustration in *The Ballet of the Nations* [see fig. 3] the resonances of Amazonian imagery in the aesthetic art of the early twentieth century. Armfield's Amazon shares the pose and dress with the Wounded Amazon frequently visited by Lee. In the bottom-left of Armfield's illustration, the reader is presented with a supine female dressed in a gathered robe, but with right breast bared and with a sword and

diadem on the bottom step. The figure's pose is evocative: the wounded position of the figure suggests a battle that has already been staged – and lost – by these formidable warriors. Yet unlike the stasis experienced by the statuesque Amazonians of the Vatican, Armfield's illustrated figures return to battle in the turn of a page. Like the Dahomey women's exhibition routine, the *Ballet of the Nations* is a performance, which is to be repeated scene by scene. This suggestion of a shared inspiration between Lee and Armfield does not of course mean that the disharmony between writer and artist pointed out by Brockington in 'Performing Pacifism: The Battle Between Artist and Author in *The Ballet of the Nations*' is an error, but that there perhaps was some convergence of influence.[36] Brockington describes the antagonism between author and illustrator as deriving from Armfield's choice to 'illustrate, and vindicate, the Aestheticism which Lee's text lampoons, rather than visualize the battlefield which is the real subject of her polemic'.[37] Armfield focused upon the form and the statuesque beauty of the Nations, rather than the 'flesh pellets' and bloody mangled forms of the dancers as *The Ballet* progresses.

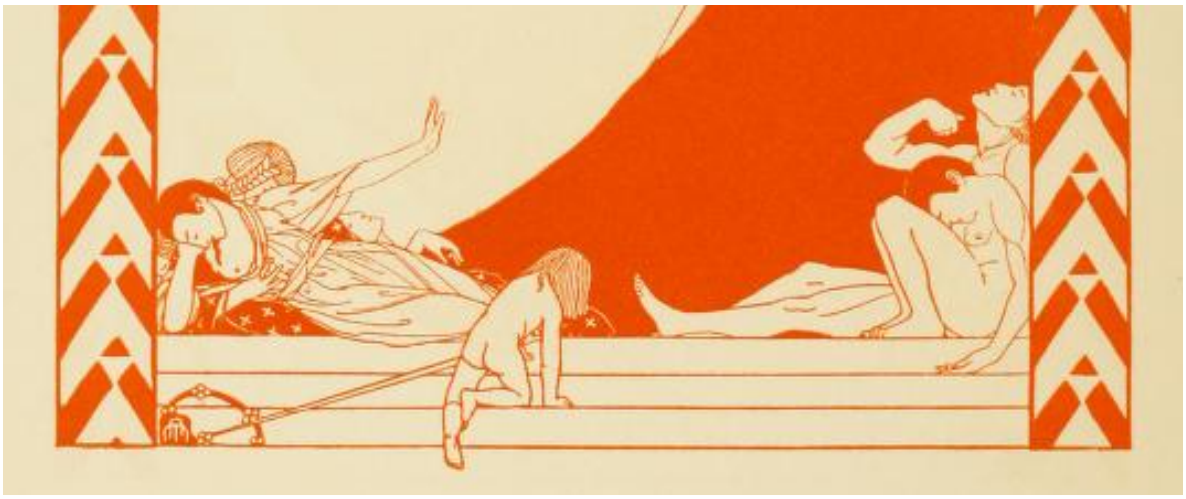

Fig. 3: Detail from Maxwell Armfield's illustration in Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), p. 1.

Lee also encountered these Amazonians almost twenty years after viewing them in the flesh and in stone in Robert R. Marett's *Anthropology* (1914). Her copy of Marett's book is held by

the Harold Acton library at the British Institute of Florence. In his chapter on 'Social Organisation' Marett calls the Dahomey the 'lowest type of barbarian', with numbers of no more than one hundred thousand, and the protection of human life equivalent to that of medieval Europe. While anthropology and ethnology are disciplines which both sit across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, they occupy slightly different disciplinary spaces, and are defined differently. Anthropology is the study of human societies and cultures, and their development. Ethnology is the study of the characteristics of different peoples and the differences and relationships between them. Ethnology is the study of cultures; anthropology is the study of man. Ethnology is considered a subset of anthropology. To what extent then, was Lee aware of the sciences of anthropology and ethnology, and what impact did these disciplines have on her work? Lee was conscious of English anthropologist E. B. Tylor as early January 1875, at the age of nineteen. In a letter to her mentor Henrietta Jenkin, Lee confirms that she is 'reading a book by Tylor which [Jenkin] had recommended […] some time ago'.[38] Tylor was a professional anthropologist – firstly a reader, and then later a professor in the discipline at Oxford – and Lee was reading *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*.

The British Institute holds many of Lee's copies of works within this field, for example Osbert Crawford's *Man and His Past* (1921) – which includes an undated and anonymous review of the work from *The New Statesman* which has been cut out, folded, and placed within the leaves of the book. Crawford's work, *The New Statesman* argues, makes the reader pursue 'not only historical and anthropological tracks' but also 'material ones as are hidden in bog and heath'.[39] Marett's *Anthropology* (1912), also in the archive, argues that anthropology should be interdisciplinary and engaged with 'the whole study of man'.[40] Robert H. Lowie's *Primitive Man* (1920) is also present. Due to this polygenic position of some anthropologists, Lee's relationship to these works is often one of questioning and critique. Nowhere is this more so apparent than with Ernest Crawley's *The Tree of Life* (1905) which is the subject of Lee's 'Anthropological Apologetics' chapter, the first in Volume II of her *Vital Lies*. Crawley, Lee argues, dredges up

wisdom and morals from the 'primeval filth' of barbarous thought and through them traces the origins of Original Sin and the Trinity.[41] Whilst Lee's edition of Crawley's *The Tree of Life*, and his earlier work *The Mystic Rose: a Study of Primitive Marriage* (1902) are unfortunately not part of the British Institute holdings, we know Lee read these works diligently, through the intertextual allusions and direct quotations from these works within the chapter. Crawley was a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute and wrote for the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* and the *Eugenics Review,* including an essay considering 'Primitive Eugenics' (1910). For Crawley 'what we term "religious" marks a psychological predisposition of biological character, which is of supreme evolutionary importance'.[42] That religion in its multiple guises has survived throughout the evolutionary process suggests to Crawley that it has some advantage to humankind. For Lee, the opposite is true, these practices are primitive, and Lee argues that we are not. Religion is to Lee a return to the instinctive and unthinking. There must be a move away from the importance of life itself, and instead a focus on how that life is to be lived:

> Many of these beliefs and rites, which appear to us as ridiculous, obscene or ferocious, may have been at the time of their origin, respectable scientific hypotheses and moral humanitarian practices. Moreover, they were not only useful in keeping our savage ancestors alive, and inducing them directly to beget and nurture us, but they were even more useful even than that in securing mental attitudes of reverence, of obedience, of conservatism.[43]

Therefore, Lee suggests, religious belief becomes a 'vital lie', that stifles human evolution and moral responsibility. There are parallels to be drawn between the primitive practice of religion, and that of warfare. She brings this to our attention by suggesting that its perpetual presence not only in society, but also in the arts, is not a product of successful evolutionary development, but of an instinct that must be worked at. Despite Lee's mauling of Crawley's 'vital lies' she remained firmly interested in anthropological and ethnological discourse, and nowhere more so than *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915) and *Satan the Waster*. As allegorical satires of the First World War, both texts are concerned with the pervasive atmosphere of nationalism across Europe. While such explicitly political works do not immediately seem to intervene in the debates

connecting anthropology, I would like to suggest the existence of multiple strands of anthropological influences between *Vital Lies* and *The Ballet*, via Crawley, and through the work of Jane Harrison (1850-1928).

Stefano Evangelista in his monograph *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (2009) has shown that in the early 1890s 'Lee came into contact with the pioneering classical scholarship of Eugénie Sellers and Jane Harrison', during which time 'she drew on their ideas to formulate a critique of classicism' which marked the end of her identification with aestheticism.[44] Harrison was a classics scholar and anthropologist who had made Lee's acquaintance in the early 1880s. The relationship soon soured after the publication of Harrison's work *Introductory Studies in Greek Art* (1885) in which Lee found issue with the 'style, theory and content' of the work.[45] Despite the friction between the pair, in 1915 Lee presented a lecture on *Harrison's Unanimism*. Unanimism focuses on ideas of a collective emotion, or a collective consciousness: it is a facet of crowd behaviour in which the individuality of members of a group are lost and overridden by simultaneous action. Kirsty Martin discusses how Unanimism's oneness of spirit fits within an anthropological discourse where 'primitive peoples' believe in a 'co-existent and intertwined' participation of souls.[46] I would argue that this interest in the collective conscience – which appears in *The Ballet of Nations* as the Orchestra of Patriotism – and Harrison's work on anthropology provides a framework for Lee's public pacifism.

The Ballet begins onstage with the rousing of the Passions by Ballet Master Death. The Passions are organized into the Orchestra of Patriotism, and the boy Heroism leads the Nations' macabre dance to the play's finale. The Aestheticism of Greek culture – to which the illustrator of the volume Armfield subscribes – is itself descended from earlier primitive civilizations and is integral to Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual*. Harrison links the primitive person or the 'heathen' as a 'being of strange perversity' willing to bow down to any god, and notes his 'blindness': this aligns him to Lee's blind boy, Heroism.[47] Harrison suggests that understanding the psychology of the heathen is of benefit to contemporary readers 'since we realize that our own behaviour is based

on instincts kindred to his – in order that, by understanding his behaviour we may understand, and it may better, our own'.[48] If we follow Harrison's argument, Lee's use of the blind boy Heroism in *The Ballet* is for a didactic rather than a worshipful motive. In the unseeing and unquestioning sacrifice, there is the recognition of the futility of his waste on the battlefield. There is a link evident between this sentiment, and that of Baldwin, in the reciprocity of the soldier to 'fight and die miserably' for the nation that has protected him.[49] Harrison writes (and Lee underlines) in *Ancient Art and Ritual* that:

> and so arises the war-dance, or the death-dance, or the hunt dance [it is not] after a battle or hunt that he dances in order to commemorate it, but before. Once the commemorative dance has got abstracted or generalized it becomes material for the magical dance, the dance pre-done […]. The dance, as it were, a sort of precipitated desire, a discharge of pent-up emotion into action.[50]

Satan's ballet is a precursor to the war dance for real. Lee's interest in Harrison's comment that the war dance is a precipitated desire is fascinating. Using Harrison's timeline of the ritual we can ask: is Lee's *Ballet* a commemoration or a preparation for a successful war? Was Lee's performance of the piece to fellow Union of Democratic Control members at the Glebe Theatre a magical ritual aimed at discharging the tensions of the Nations, and by some supernatural force avoiding what became the First World War? Through this ritual enactment, Lee metaphorically shares a stage with the exhibited Dahomey or a plinth with the wounded Amazons, but her aim is not to provide a talisman for the success of Britain in the war, nor to show the strength and glorious beauty of female fighters, but as a way of showing the potential wastefulness of battle and highlighting the corrupt political and economic benefits which befall the classes whom the war serves. These thoughts are certainly crystalized by Lee, as I will demonstrate, in her personal notebooks.

The Orchestra figures include Self-Interest who is 'busy', Widow Fear and her daughters Suspicion and Panic 'wrapped in yesterday's *Daily Mail* and *Globe'*, and Lady Idealism and Prince Adventure:

> There came also Death's mother (or wife, for their family relations are primitive and not best inquired into) […]. With her came her well-known crew, Rapine, Lust, Murder and Torture, fitted out with bull-roarers and rattles and other cannibalish [sic] instruments.[51]

Surprising though it may be in this context, Lee seems to draw in the 'The Ballet' upon Crawley's study of the instincts of primitive peoples, religion, and marriage. Crawley specifically notes that the bull-roarer is a primitive instrument, a 'downright oddity' and integral to fertility rites. It is, simply, a thin piece of wood, with a long cord attached and swung in a circular motion. Lengthening or shortening the cord changes the vibrated sound produced by the instrument, enabling communication via tonal differences. Marett argues the instrument has ceremonial significance, a 'mystic purpose'.[52] Crawley's *The Tree of Life* argues for the link between the bull-roarer and primitive socio-religious ritual. Each tribe treasures the sacred bull-roarer or churinga 'like heirlooms and regalia': they play an integral part in intergenerational communication and ceremony.[53] That the bull-roarer is so entwined with Crawley's transmission of vitality and sacred knowledge makes it (in Crawley's eyes) a primitive precursor to Christian religious artefacts. But Lee acerbically attacks Crawley's opinions on the sacredness of the bull-roarer in 'Anthropological Apologetics' using his own argument from *The Tree of Life* to justify her point. She quotes: 'that the spirit creature whom up to that time he has regarded as all-powerful is merely myth, and that such a being does not really exist, and is only an invention of the men to frighten the women and children'.[54] Her final line 'So let this be the last but not least lesson of comparative mythology and its sacred bull-roarer!' suggests that it is not only those primitive women and children confounded by the supposed spiritual powers of the bull-roarer, but contemporary anthropologists as well.[55] So why include the bull-roarer in *The Ballet*?

> In their anxiety to prove that religious beliefs, specified or unspecified, are desirable and indispensable, our apologists ignore that the essence of a religious belief is that it should be held to be true […]. And they will cease to be *held as true* so soon as it is understood that they originate not in Divine revelation but in the jumbled abortive thoughts and panic-ridden rituals of savage men.[56]

The three systems of human thought as defined by Freud in 'Totem and Taboo' are in evidence here: the *animistic* or *mythological* is represented by 'Sin, whom the Wise Gods call Disease, and her classic crew, Rapine, Lust and Murder, with their bull-roarers and rattles', the *religious* mode by

'Widow Fear with her nimble children, Suspicion and Panic, playing on penny-whistles, fog-horns and that mediaeval tocsin-bell', and the *scientific* with 'Science and Organization' whose 'gramophone and pianola brayed and strummed away unflaggingly'.[57]

There is, furthermore, a temporal triad in place within the text: The primitive individuals dressed in newspapers, the classical Adventure and Idealism, and the modern Science and Organization: a temporal triad that effectively parallels the primitive Dahomean Amazons, exhibited at the Crystal Palace. Passions as they arrive: Self Interest, Fear, Suspicion, Panic, Idealism, Adventure, Sin/Disease, Rapine, Lust, Murder, Famine, Hatred, Self-Righteousness, Science, Organization, Heroism. The Passions exist to fuel the war, but the fuel is never consumed. As Matthew Kibble suggests the moral decline and decay of standards will always return, as will war.[58]

The Form

That Lee uses such a refined and high-art form as ballet is curious: especially when the dance is described as part of the text – in *The Ballet* – and danced, but not seen upon the stage in *Satan the Waster*. In 'Violence and the Pacifist Body in Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*', Pulham argues for the significance of the art form and the physical body, suggesting that the performance of the ballet as an abject 'spectacle of suffering' is also a 'didactic allegory'.[59] It is possible that Lee was influenced by Igor Stravinsky's infamous ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* [*The Rite of Spring*], first performed in Paris on 29 May 1913. There are resonances between *The Rite of Spring* and *The Ballet*, one being the act of *Le Sacrifice,* in which 'The Chosen One' – in this instance a young girl (not the young boy Heroism) – is danced to death in the *danse sacrale. The Rite of Spring* was, according to Pieter C. van den Toorn, inspired by primitivism, a 'loosely aligned succession of imagined prehistoric rites […] to depict a series of primitive ceremonies'.[60] These thematic similarities suggest that Lee may have been influenced by news of the infamous performance, but, like the Audience of Nations in *The Ballet*, Lee was not privy to the shocking movements of the dancers

or musical score of *The Rite*. Lee was almost certainly in Italy during the period of *The Rite*'s performance.[61] But scandalous news travels far and wide, and there is evidence to suggest that Lee met *The Rite*'s impresario Diaghilev – although this is difficult to date, and almost certainly not before or around the time of *The Rite of Spring*. Certainly, prior to *The Rite*, Lee was aware of the impact and the audience of the *Ballets Russes* writing in her 1912 notebook:

> But this I will say. That if ~~the~~ the men & women of the classes who, through our wretched economic & educational inequality, ~~set~~ still governed Europe, had given ~~one tenth of the thought~~ to certain subjects one tenth of the attention wh. they gave to money making, or art ~~pl~~,or ~~imp~~ beautifying, or dirtying their own souls or pursuing any of their philanthropic aesthetic or big game shooting or parliamentary sports if they had ~~mind~~ had ~~disliked~~ cared for peace one tenth as much as they cared for clothes, cards, Russian ballets, post impressionism, ~~xxx, dinner~~ a « getting on », ~~«~~ daring what « has to be done » and ~~suit the~~ even their dealings with their own private sins & with God […].[62]

It is evident in this notebook entry that Lee views the ruling classes of Europe with disdain; their taste for lavish clothes, spendthrift pursuits such as cards, and Russian ballets rather than peace is significant. Lee's private vitriol for the bourgeois pursuits and the immoral inheritance and gathering of wealth is obvious, as is her attitude towards their 'dealings' with God to renegotiate the cost of their private sins. Culture, particularly the avant garde culture of the early twentieth century, of which post-impressionism and the *Ballets Russes* are exemplars, is one of the few cares of the 'elite'. Is the ballet form of Lee's pacifist polemic a way of drawing the attention of the ministers, diplomats, and governors of those countries invested in the war of 1914-1918? Is Lee adapting the form for a didactic purpose?

In 'Vernon Lee at the Margins of the Twentieth Century: World War I, Pacifism and Post-Victorian Aestheticism', Kirsten Mahoney suggests that despite Lee's outsiderism (as an ex-pat, as a pacifist, as a Victorian) 'compounded […] by the war' and the 'advent of new cultural *avant-gardes*', she chose instead to reinscribe the present, 'voluntarily occupying the margins, placing herself of the edges of new thought, on the outside of theories that required correction'.[63] Instead of positioning Lee's outsiderism and re-inscription as something distinct from those shaping the cultural future, Katharina Herold suggests that this is a signifier of the modern:

> Allegorical contemplation aims at the ruination of things so that it can, in its redemptive moment, construct (*baun*) a new whole out of the elements of the old. The rearrangement and displacement of pre-existing […] materials and modes such as allegory paradoxically freed up a blank canvas for modernist authors to deconstruct and reconfigure the world around them.[64]

This sign of modernity – a violent modernity – replaced a climate that Kibble suggests was 'receptive to both homoeroticism and the Decadent sensibility, both of which came increasingly under the attack of the more conservative formulation of Modernism that developed during and after the war'.[65] Kibble continues that the Modernists 'tried to give the impression that they represented an absolute break with the past, especially by disavowing any link with their immediate predecessors'.[66] But what is important here, is the connection between primitive ritual, ancient art-forms and the avant garde, and the way in which Lee – similarly to Diaghilev in *The Rite*, and T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* – utilizes anthropological concepts in boundary-pushing work. Yet Lee's *Ballet,* whilst reinscribing and reconfiguring the war as allegory, anthropological study, and intertext, did not ignore the transition between these eras and did not dissociate this avant-garde performance text from its Victorian, classical, or primitive roots. Lee presents the cyclical and frequent return of warfare though the ages, and suggests that only by peace between nations will there be true civility, allowing humanity to attain its highest form. Of course, writing and publishing such a pacifist polemic in the first years of the war meant that Lee was taking up intellectual arms and committing an anti-nationalistic act of violence. Writing about the Amazons in *Primitive Athens as Described by Thucydides*, Jane Ellen Harrison notes:

> The Greeks, if any people, held firmly the doctrine that
> A WOMAN ARMED MAKES WAR UPON HERSELF
> The woman armed and disarmed, the Amazon in defeat, they made beautiful and poignantly human, but the woman armed and triumphant […] remained a cold unreality.[67]

This is of course applied to the Dahomey; their fierceness somewhat dampened by the repetitive performances they were forced to present to Northern European audiences. The uniformed warrior woman with gun [see fig. 4] was displayed with decorative cowries and swords. The

Dahomey and the Amazon's violence is negated by its display in the safe space of the Crystal Palace or the Vatican Galleries.

Fig. 4. Michael Hanhart and Nicholas Hanhart's illustration 'Seh-Dong-Hong-Beh. An Amazon in the Dahoman army. A woman in uniform, holding a rifle in one hand and a decapitated head of enemy in the other', in Frederick Edwyn Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans: being the journals of two missions to the King of Dahomey* (London, 1851), plate facing p. 23. Copyright of the British Library Board. 10097.d.21. B20050-17.

I want to conclude by thinking about war as performance once more. Harrison and many other anthropologists believed that the war dance is a ritual fundamentally important in preparation for, or in celebration of, opposing tribal violence. It is not war itself, but presented as such. Lee's war dances, in *The Ballet of the Nations* and *Satan the Waster* were extant whilst Europe was at war: war itself had become the performance. Lee writes:

> The Ballet of the Nations, which constitutes the nucleus of the following drama, was written, in narrative shape, at Whitsuntide of the first year of the war; and published that

> same Christmas as a picture book in collaboration with Mr. Maxwell Armfield. It was in its origin merely such an extemporized shadow-play as a throng of passionate thoughts may cast up into the lucid spaces of one's mind: symbolical figures, grotesquely embodying what seems too manifold and fluctuating, also too unendurable, to be taken stock of. A European war was going on which, from my point of view, was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly 'Grand Guignol' performance.[68]

The Parisian Grand-Guignol was a theatre which produced and performed up to five naturalistic horror and comedy shows per night, in an effect called a 'douche écossaise' [hot and cold showers]. Opened by Oscar Méténier in 1897, the theatre initially was a 'house of naturalism, dedicated to the true-to-life representation of a society dehumanized by capitalism and bourgeois morality'.[69] Like the Dahomey and Amazon sculptures, violence is presented within a safe space, and made impotent, yet is a display that still arouses. The early years of the theatre occurred during a period which was noted for its 'stability, growth and prosperity in France,' yet this epoch, as Lee would have known, 'was hopelessly divided along class lines and exacerbated by the national and international political crises' such as the Dreyfus Affair and the French colonial mission, resulting in the spectacle of the Dahomey warriors at the Crystal Palace.[70]

Romain Rolland, author of *Above the Battle* and the dedicatee of *The Ballet of the Nations,* wrote in *The People's Theatre* that the Grand-Guignol contaminated the audiences who bore witness to its graphic violence and sex. Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson in *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* argue that the 'audience willingly engaged with what was going on', they were complicit in the contamination: 'innocent spectators feel light-headed, morally outraged and yet guiltily stimulated as they stagger out of the theatre to join other people vomiting in the alleyway to the sounds of violent sex emanating from the darkest corners of the street'.[71] The theatre employed psychologists as writers such as Alfred Binet who were able to accurately describe madness, psychosis and delusion, as well as manipulate their audience – often to the point of fainting. Lee was no stranger to the works of Binet: her copy of *Le Magnétisme animal* (1887) has been carefully read and annotated. Lee's recognition of the war as this masterful manipulation, one to which people willingly consent, is interesting. *The Ballet* becomes war – a truthful, corporeal,

visceral representation of a war, early on – 1915 – with an aim of bringing people to their senses. The First World War itself, however, has become little more than a backstreet Parisian horror-show.

> All this air raid business, especially the crowds of sightseers, not merely that Sunday but for somedays a dreadful bicker of bedizened women in fur coats, & bedraggled other women, sodden, weary, with children & prams, snatching a half hour from work to enjoy the horror - all this has brought home to me the need of certain changes in our moral education. We must not put so exclusively a weight upon the idea of responsibility for evil, ~~making~~ leaving evil for which we are not responsible in a kind of platonic, contemplated relation from which the next step is using it for whatever pleasurable excitement or interest it may afford our dullness.[72]

This description in Lee's notebooks of the voyeurism of the middle classes in their luxurious outfits, picking over, and being excited by the ruins left by the arial bombardment of London by the German forces, causes the reader to think about the ways in which the war has become entertainment, and to ask where this voyeurism stands ethically. At what point does the witness to the violence participate in the horror? In 'Directing the Grand-Guignol', Martin Fluger and Dawn Williams discuss the actors' participation in the horror of the theatre, noting the trust between the audience and those on stage, so that all 'feel safe in unmasking themselves, in opening themselves to the perversion of the moment'.[73] The spectacle of war, violence, and misery was not new to the early twentieth century, but the process of witnessing these acts was heightened by the complicity of the witness in the acts of violence enacted on a grand scale.

Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations* draws upon scientific, aesthetic, and philosophical discourses to support her pacifist stance. Her early encounter with the statuesque Amazonians and Dahomey gave Lee the opportunity to consider the place of women in nations at war. The ways in which Naturalism and avant-garde theatre aroused 'primitive' desires to witness violence led to an increased interest and thirst for performed brutality. Lee was able to utilize this predilection as her own instructive weapon against the First World War and the nationalism and populism that stoked its fires.

[1] Vernon Lee, letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 28 January 1875. Vernon Lee Archive, Miller Library, Colby College.
[2] July 1893 timetable of the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway.
[3] Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 1998), p. 8.
[4] Ibid., p. 12.
[5] John Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa, in 1845 & 1846*, 2 vols (London: Johnson Reprint, 1967), II, p. 240.
[6] Ibid., p. 240.
[7] Bay, pp. 226-27.
[8] Ibid., p. 204.
[9] Ibid., p. 280.
[10] Ibid., p. 278.
[11] The female warriors of Dahomey have been immortalized as the protectors of Wakanda, the *Dora Milaje* in the Marvel *Black Panther* comics and as part of the film franchise. They have also been brought to the screen in *The Woman King* (2022) directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, in which the Dahomey retaliate against the Dutch colonizers and slave traders in Africa. The film is set in the 1820s before the abolition of slavery, and before French colonisation of the kingdom.
[12] Constance Smedley, *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley (Mrs Maxwell Armfield)* (London: Duckworth, 1929), p. 223; cited in Grace Brockington, *Above the Battlefield: Modernism and the Peace Movement in Britain, 1900-1918* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 163.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), p. 1. *The Ballet* is unpaginated, so all page numbers provided in this article are my own, beginning at page one from the first page of Lee's prose, and so on.
[15] Ibid.
[16] 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/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=LIRIAS1992573&context=L&vid=Lirias&search_scope=Lirias&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US [accessed 4 January 2022], p. 108).
[17] Ibid.
[18] See *The Ballet of the Nations* (2018), a film by Impermanence, and ,'Theatres of War: Experimental Performance in London 1914-1918 and Beyond', *British Art Studies*, 11 (2019), http://pdf.britishartstudies.ac.uk/articles/issue-11-tow-introduction.pdf [accessed 4 January 2022].
[19] See Sally Blackburn-Daniels, 'A Present-Day Morality for the Present Day', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 30 (2020), https://19.bbk.ac.uk/article/id/2931/ [accessed 4 January 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.
[20] Elisa Bizzotto, 'Vernon Lee, Walter Pater, and the Revival of Medieval Theatre' (Blog Guest Post), *Staging Decadence* (12 April 2021), https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/vernon-lee-walter-pater-and-the-revival-of-medieval-theatre [accessed 10 February 2022].
[21] Katharina Herold, 'Allegories on the International Scene: Vernon Lee's, Mina Loy's, and Else Lasker-Schüler's War Plays', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), 203-21.
[22] Grace Brockington, 'Performing Pacifism: The Battle Between Artist and Author in *The Ballet of the Nations*', *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 143-59 (p. 146).
[23] 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: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46-63.
[24] C. T. Brock & Co., *Crystal Palace. The famous Amazons natives of Dahomey* […] *With a lithograph illustration of a female warrior* (London: Charles Dickens and Evans, Crystal Palace Press, 1893). Pressmark Evan.1060, © The British Library Board.
[25] C. T. Brock & Co., Crystal Palace. *The great summer Bank Holiday, Monday, August 7th* (London, Charles Dickens and Evans, Crystal Palace Press, 1893), Pressmark Evan.974, © The British Library Board.
[26] 'Amazons of Dahomey at the Crystal Palace', *Penny Illustrated Paper* (10 June 1893) p. 361; 'Amazons at Home', *Sketch* (15 October 1893), p. 629.
[27] Kate Nichols in '[M]anly beauty and muscular strength': sculpture, sport and the nation at the Crystal Palace, 1854-918', in *After 1851: The Material and Visual Cultures of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham*, ed. by Kate Nichols, Sarah Victoria Turner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 97-121 (pp. 101-102).

[28] Ibid.
[29] Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), p. 28.
[30] Ibid., p. 48.
[31] Vernon Lee, Letter to Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 15 March 1873, in *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee: The Pickering Masters Series*, Volume I, 1856-1884, ed. by Amanda Gagel and Sophie Geoffroy (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 66.
[32] Vernon Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*: *And Other Studies in Physiological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1912), p. 257.
[33] Ibid., p. 275.
[34] Ibid., pp. 253-54.
[35] Ibid., p. 257.
[36] Brockington, 'Performing Pacifism', p. 146. Lee calls the text a 'collaboration' in *Satan the Waster*, suggesting that both she and Armfield played a part in the design of the picture book.
[37] Ibid., p. 153.
[38] Vernon Lee letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 28 January 1875. Vernon Lee Archive, Miller Library, Colby College. *Vernon Lee: Letters Hom*e, 53, https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/letters_home/53 [accessed 10 February 2022].
[39] Article inside cover of Osbert B. Crawford, *Man and His Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921). Harold Acton archive, VL 930.1 CRA.
[40] Ibid., p. 56.
[41] Vernon Lee, *Vital Lies: Studies of Some Recent Obscurantism,* Vol 2 (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1912), pp. 5-6.
[42] Ibid., p. 3.
[43] Ibid., p. 15.
[44] Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Chippenham and Eastbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 20.
[45] Ibid., p. 89.
[46] Martin, p. 74, n. 102.
[47] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), p. 29.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Vernon Lee, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886), p. 158.
[50] Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 43.
[51] Vernon Lee, *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes and Introduction* (New York, NY: John Lane, The Bodley Head: 1920), pp. 36-37.
[52] Ibid., p. 127.
[53] Ibid., p. 208.
[54] Vernon Lee, *Vital Lies*, II, p. 58.
[55] Lee, *Satan the Waster*, p. 58.
[56] Lee, *Vital Lies*, II, p. 39.
[57] Sigmund Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', in *Totem and Taboo and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume* XIII (1913-1914), trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey & Alan Tyson (London: Vintage, The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 2001), pp. 1-164 (p. 77).
[58] Matthew Kibble, 'The "still-born generation": Decadence and the Great War in H. D.'s Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44.3 (1998), 540-67 (p. 542).
[59] Patricia Pulham, 'Violence and the Pacifist Body', pp. 58 and 47.
[60] Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring: The Beginnings of a Musical Language* (Berkley CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 3.
[61] Lee's letter dated 25 May – four days prior to the performance of *The Rite of Spring* – to Carlo Placci was sent from Il Palmerino.
[62] Vernon Lee, 'Credo/Quest. About Primitive Complexes'/N° XXII, Jan. to Feb. 12/1918', in *Vernon Lee, Carnet 9 - Janvier au 12 Février 1918*, transcribed by Cécilia Dalleau. In *Holographical-Lee (HoL),* ed. by Sophie Geoffroy, projet EMAN (Thalim, ENS-CNRS-Sorbonne nouvelle), https://eman-archives.org/HoL/admin/items/show/1761 [accessed 10 February 2022]. Cross marks, spelling mistakes and issues with punctuation accurate to the manuscript document.
[63] Kristin Mahoney, 'Vernon Lee at the Margins of the Twentieth Century: World War I, Pacifism, and Post-Victorian Aestheticism', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 56.3 (2013), 313-42 (pp. 371-18).
[64] Herold, p. 206.
[65] Kibble, p. 542.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Primitive Athens as Described by Thucydides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), pp. 53-54.
[68] Lee, *Satan the Waster*, p. iv.

[69] Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 15.
[70] Ibid., p. 5.
[71] Ibid., p. 3.
[72] Vernon Lee, 'Credo N° XXIV, February 20- March 19, 1918', in *Holographical-Lee (HoL),* https://eman-archives.org/HoL/items/show/1763 [accessed 10 February 2022]. Lee's emphasis.
[73] Fluger and Williams, quoted by Hand and Wilson, *Grand-Guignol*, p. 39.