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‘Through Various Tinted Cosmopolitan Glasses’: Vernon Lee’s Travel Writing of the British Isles

Abstract:

Vernon Lee is regularly upheld as a model of late-Victorian cosmopolitanism, with her travel writing, in particular that dealing with Italy, displaying an openness to other places and cultures. Yet, as this essay argues, there is in Lee’s model of topographical writing a neglect of the people who live and dwell within landscapes. Examining in detail her critically neglected travel writing of the British Isles, published between 1899 and 1916, the essay surveys her hostility towards English landscapes and towards the forces of industrial modernity that shape them. From her antipathy to London to her celebration of the empty landscapes of Northern England, Lee’s travel writing suggests her cosmopolitanism raises ethical questions about her relationship to those people and places that do not accord with her aesthetic taste.

Keywords: Vernon Lee; Travel Writing; Cosmopolitanism; Topography; London.

Vernon Lee’s cosmopolitanism sits somewhat uncomfortably with her Englishness. Perhaps Lee’s description of Baldwin, that fictional figure of her philosophical and aesthetic dialogues, is also apt for her: a peripatetic life had resulted in a case whereby “this very English Briton sees questions of all sorts through variously tinted cosmopolitan glasses” (1886, 5). In criticism there has been a tendency to focus on this cosmopolitan lens, on Lee’s finely attuned sensibility to cultures and places, rather than on the fact that, she remained a “very English Briton”. Yet what happened when the cosmopolitan turned her gaze on England? This essay will examine the neglected travel writing Lee produced of the British Isles,¹ arguing that Lee’s famous *genius loci* could only be found in England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales, when those places, through topographical uncanniness, were shorn of all the features of modernity, an uncanniness, that as Leonie Wanzel notes could manifest itself as a homesickness for a place never visited (2016, par 17-19). Her method of landscape writing tends to depopulate, to focus on line, colour, and form, to aestheticise rather than to humanise. This tendency becomes far more pronounced in her travel writing dealing with the British Isles. As I will argue, her British travel writing suggests a series of limit-points to her cosmopolitanism. While she is routinely held up as a model for fin-de-siècle cosmopolitanism, her hostility towards the inhabitants and culture of England in

particular suggests Lee can only be a citizen of the world by imagining herself in the hills of Tuscany, by rejecting Britain of the fin de siècle and those living in it.

Lee and the Politics of Fin-de-Siècle Cosmopolitanism

The past ten years has seen a pronounced transnational and cosmopolitan turn in the study of fin-de-siècle literatures. Such a development has seen not just a recognition of the ways in which radical European, in particular British and French, texts circulate across national borders, but of the interdependent relationship between global cultures of this period, whereby European authors were deeply influenced by non-European writing and art, and, moreover, how writers in Spanish America, China, or Turkey adapted and repurposed European avant garde art as they articulated their response to their own modernity. As Matthew Potolsky has argued, Decadent writers developed forms of non-national, cosmopolitan networks through shared artistic enthusiasms, their collections of texts and friendships functioning as “an idiosyncratic and cosmopolitan counter to the feverish scholarly activity that consolidated national literary canons in the period” (2013, 14). On a more global level, Leela Gandhi has argued that writers of the fin de siècle, including Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, and Manmohan Ghose, produced an anti-imperial politics through the production of affective communities, attempting to find “expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging” (2006, 10). For Regenia Gagnier, the European literatures of Decadence and aestheticism may have dramatised the dialectical struggle between interdependence and individualism, but it was non-western cultures that truly “perceived these crises of individuation and interdependence, separation and solubility” (2010, 23). Her impassioned call for a globalised understanding of Decadence has been followed by a much more expansive transnational study of Decadence, a major development in which was signalled by Robert Stilling’s 2018 analysis of the ways in which postcolonial poets of the twentieth century drew on Decadent concepts and motifs to articulate the disappointment that resulted from the failure of revolutionary nationalisms (2018).

Within the cosmopolitan turn in Decadence and Aestheticism, the work of Lee has come to be regarded as paradigmatic. Born in France to British expatriate parents, Lee spent most of her life living just outside of Florence. Each summer she would spend some weeks, or months, in Britain where she met publishers, fellow writers, artists and friends. She also spent a great deal of her time travelling in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. As Francesca Billiani and Stefano Evangelista note, Lee “exploited her identity across nations and languages, bringing her special

experience as a cosmopolitan woman writer into her work on aesthetics and using her international background to criticize the limitations of the English literary culture of the *fin de siècle*” (2013, 147-8). Lee’s cosmopolitanism gave her, according to Sondeep Kandola, “a simultaneous sense of intimacy and alienation” from both European and British culture (2010, 3). The most sophisticated treatment of Lee’s in-betweenness is provided by Hilary Fraser who argues that “Lee’s interest in the foreign and the hybrid, and her own occupation of in-between cultural and sexual territories, inflect her ways of seeing and her writing about history, art and place in fundamental and defining ways” (2004, 119). Fraser reads Lee’s interstitial identity manifesting itself in the very principle of looking, her gaze becoming multiplied and refracted. Yet, as this essay will argue, Lee’s cosmopolitanism was limited to buildings, landscapes, and works of art. If cosmopolitanism is, at its core, about ethical relations it demands an acceptance of difference. In Lee’s travel writing of the British Isles we see a hostility towards modern Britain and its population which suggests that her cosmopolitanism is one of place, not people.

For all of Lee’s cosmopolitan in-betweenness, she never expressed a love of place, a sense of deep dwelling, in England. Italy, in particular Villa il Palmerino, was always home. As her biographer Vineta Colby explains, for Lee “Italy was a refuge, an escape from what she perceived as the encroaching evils of modern society,” but also the space in which she could free herself from the pressure of the patriarchal, heteronormative social world of England (2003, 1). It was through travelling that Lee was able to articulate her own cosmopolitan sensibility, to demonstrate her propensity to be moved by the places she visited, to separate herself out from the British tourist who consumed without feeling. While the late nineteenth century saw a dramatic development in tourist infrastructure as the growth of railway networks, the proliferations of guidebooks and package holidays, and a burgeoning middle class made travel so much more accessible. Vernon Lee, like so many “cultured” travellers of the period, was adamant that not all travellers were created equal. As James Buzard has argued, the “Snobbish ‘anti-tourism,’ an element of modern tourism from the start, has offered an important, even exemplary way of regarding one’s own cultural experiences as authentic and unique,” and for Lee it was a particular emotional receptivity to places, not people, that characterized her own travel (1993, 5). Unlike the masses clutching their Baedekers and Murrays, Lee was what she would call a “sentimental traveller,” one for whom “the passion for localities, the curious emotions connected with lie of the land, shape of buildings, history, and even quality of air and soil, are born, like all intense and permeating feeling, less of outside things than of our own soul. They are of the stuff of dreams, and must be brooded over in quiet and void” (1908, 3). The pleasure

of travel for Lee must take in the imagination, the fancy, and should come before the experience of place itself. The predominance of the imagination in Lee's concept of *genius loci* means that the reality of the material physical place becomes almost irrelevant, for, as Alison Rutledge claims, "the individual, with sufficient desire and imaginative powers can create a 'perfected copy' of the place based solely upon one's imagination" (2019, 358). Yet how do we explain those instances in which imaginative power fails, in which there is no desire to unearth the *genius loci*, only the need to assert aesthetic revulsion?

Throughout her writing Vernon Lee maintained, like so many of her contemporaries, a distinction between Northern and Southern Europe. That distinction might be related to religion, language, or culture, but for Lee these distinctions were principally their relationship to the past. As she wrote in her essay on Brive-la-Gaillarde: "In Northern countries ... the Past may remain as a thing of peace and prosperity. But in the South, with few exceptions, there is always the trace of a wrench, a catastrophe, a sudden lamentable breaking-off (monuments and institutions hanging rag-like) ; or else the crumbling of long periods of slow depression; a mournful no to life" (1905, 69). While the South may be haunted by the past, its climate was just as vital: "the nobility of an excellent climate; the sort of purity and vigour of life due to abundant air and sunshine as opposed to the deathliness and ignominy of our English fields, which I had left steeping in cold or steaming in lukewarm vapours" (1907, 195-6). Britain then, and in particular England, always took on a complicated series of associations for Lee. She found Southern England lacking in the violent histories of the Italian countryside, while London was, for her, the great example of everything that was wrong with homogenising, mechanistic modernity. Her responses to the British Isles are, in their way, far more revealing about Lee's aesthetic politics than the copious travel sketches devoted to Europe, broadly, and Italy in particular. Cosmopolitan empathy did not, in Lee's case, extend to London or the industrial towns of Northern England. Perhaps more than anything Lee's travel writing of the British Isles reveals a limit to her cosmopolitan imagination.

Cosmopolitanism must be, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued, a form of ethics, a way of living with, and honouring our universal obligations to, those who remain strange to us. Whether they be people of different nations, ethnicities, religions, political positions, economic positions, or cultural conviction, the cosmopolitan will never homogenise or trivialise the experiences of others. As he notes "there will be times when these ideals – universal concern and respect for legitimate difference – clash. There's sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the

solution but of the challenge” (2006, xiii). Appiah wants to salvage the term from some of its more problematic associations, in particular “an unpleasant posture of superiority towards the putative provincial” (2006, xi). Vernon Lee’s particular form of cosmopolitanism can feel a little like superiority, as if her elevated ability to experience the world with imaginative sensitivity is precisely what allows her to celebrate the places in which she finds herself. Yet, as will become evident over the course of this essay, the conditions that facilitate her experience are often the product of social and economic forces which she abhors, and the outcomes of which are the lives of others for which she has little sympathy or understanding. Her cosmopolitanism is, I will suggest, one that is found in places, not in people. As we explore the cosmopolitan idealism of writers of the fin de siècle we need to be alert to the problematic class politics and elitism that is often the darker side of celebrations of cultural difference.

Vernon Lee had incorporated elements of travel sketches into her writing from the beginning of her career, but it was not until the mid-1890s that she began to publish clearly recognisable travel narratives, and to reflect on the nature of modern tourism. She continued writing these sketches for the rest of her life and they were collected in a number of volumes: *Limbo, and Other Essays* (1897), *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (1899), *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Place* (1905), *The Spirit of Rome: Leaves from a Diary* (1906), *The Sentimental Traveller: Notes on Places* (1908), *The Tower of the Mirrors and Other Essays on the Spirit of Places* (1914), and finally *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (1925). It is an extraordinary body of travel writing and the fact that all of these works were published by John Lane suggests that sales were strong. Yet some of Lee’s travel writing was never collected and, at her death, two volumes were, and remain, unpublished: the first “‘Genius loci’ Unpublished Essays” collects sketches from the years 1913-1928, primarily on locations in England and Italy, while “A Vernon Lee Notebook, 1898-1934” contains a number of further sketches. Among the essays published that were never collected in her lifetime are the series “Greek Notes” published over a period of four months in the *Westminster Gazette* in 1910, and a series of essays “An English Writer’s Notes on England” that were variously published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1899/1901), and then *Scribners* (1913).² Lee had conceived of a collection of sketches from her travels of the British Isles, yet as the gap in publication between the articles suggests, she struggled to place the sketches initially in periodicals, and then as a single volume with publishers; they were of little interest to a British readership, and so she tried her hand at American publication.

Lee's idea for a book-length account of her travels in England may have begun when the first two essays were published at the turn of the century, but it was after a chance correspondence with a well-known American author that Lee returned to the idea. She responded to a complimentary letter from the popular American novelist and short story writer Sarah Orne Jewett in 1907 in which Jewett encouraged her to cross the Atlantic for the first time. Lee declared that she could not make the trip, complaining of her age, work commitments, and lack of money (she had also turned down an invitation from Edith Wharton to undertake a U.S. lecture tour), but conceded that she was developing an interest in the country, in particular having read Henry James and H.G. Wells, one presumes James's *The American Scene* (1907) and Wells's *The Future in America* (1906), both of which had been recently published. If travel writing had piqued her interest in America, it was also the same genre that compelled her to write again to Jewett six months later:

I want to make an *English Writer's Notebook on England*, but I want to get paid for it, & therefore to put it through a serial. *The Atlantic Monthly* took the two instalments I am sending herewith, but it has refused the remainder which I had had laboriously copied out. The only people wanting to read about England are Americans, & America doubtless contains magazines besides the *Atlantic* (1970, 230).

Lee proceeded to ask Jewett to effectively act as her literary agent, approaching periodicals to offer serial copyright for the essays. Perhaps she had been inspired by the publication of Henry James's *English Hours*, which had been published by William Heinemann and Houghton, Mifflin and Company in 1905. Lee's work had never made quite the same impact in America as it had in England, and the reception of some of her more later travel writing State-side was far from complementary. The *Literary Digest* said of *The Spirit of Rome* (1906) "Only an unreasoning enthusiasm for past performance or an ill-advised charity can account for the praise these crude inanities have evoked in certain quarters" (1906, 632-4). The correspondence with Jewett petered out and Lee was unable to interest any American publisher in taking her sketches which remain uncollected and largely forgotten in Lee criticism.³

"The horror and disgrace of London"

The opening to Lee's first travel sketch of England hardly set a note of romance or whimsy that might attract American readers: "Back again in England. Early morning: the sea and downs in

gray, misty sunlight; everything inexpressibly clean, refined, pure, and in a way (how express it otherwise?) *general*. This country in fine weather, like its inhabitants when in happy circumstance, has a singular look of newness and good breeding.” The word *general*, italicised here suggests a homogeneity that comes with cleanliness and with a lack of dark secrets, a traumatic past. As Lee strolls through the Kentish countryside she reflects that it has barely changed since the Romans set foot on the island. Where, on the Continent, Lee was usually taken by an unbroken continuity between past and present, in England that continuity underscores a lack of history, not an excess of it. As Lee notes, “England is the only country which was not merely prosperous, but on the whole peaceful, during the Middle Ages. Hence its sort of bourgeois-bucolic (not Theocritan idyllic) character even nowadays”. Peace and prosperity might be good for trade, but they are anathema to artists who seek out violence and tragedy, hence why, Lee notes, the Elizabethan playwrights had to ransack the histories of other countries for their great tragedy. As she laments, “there is no trace of bloodshed and tragedy in this English past, as everywhere on the Continent; it is the past of yeo- men and burgesses and cottagers and quiet country squires, not of kings and princes. There are no scars of fire on blackened stones in this country” (1899, 99). Italy’s medieval past is violent and terrible, England’s relatively peaceful, and each landscape wore its past in the present. The bourgeois-bucolic though, as Lee recognises, it only one part of England, and its peace and prosperity is in direct contrast with its towns “at whose expense” the bucolic idyll exists.

The bourgeois-bucolic landscapes of the Home Counties had, Lee suggests, a noticeable impact on its inhabitants and their culture. Reflecting on the Thames in semi-rural Surrey she explains: “it strikes me that the English upper classes take their poetry, their aestheticism, in their field-sports, hunting, cricket, and certainly the river. That is perhaps why they don’t want much art or literature: a life of impressions, more or less beautiful, of rhythmic movement, lazily contemplative or bracingly rapid” (1913b, 616-7). The neglect of art and poetry in favour of field games and water sports is only one explanation for Lee’s animosity towards the English. It is, at root, a certain vulgarity that she finds so objectionable in “our strenuous civilization”. Such is the hold of capitalism that the “aristocratic spirit” of the upper classes no longer exists, replaced with the “spirit of get and hold,” this “English energetic appreciation of material advantage and tenacious, though not necessarily rapacious, belief in private property. I think I can admit the usefulness of this spirit in the past and even its respectability in the present, but I confess it stifles me” (1913b, 617). Lee sees herself as a part of this civilisation, but also stifled by it, unable to accept its utilitarian and individualistic emphasis on acquisition and social isolation.

Even in that most aesthetically pleasing of cities in which one may imagine Lee would feel at home she is profoundly unmoved. Of the beauty and harmony of Oxford she writes: “There is, to me, always a little flat and insipid about this exquisite, swept and garnished old England of privilege and tradition” (1913a, 177). She finds herself in the city accompanying a French friend who, visiting for the first time, is taken with the charm of the place. While the city may seem to her friend when viewed from the top of the Sheldonian “dapper, unlikely, exquisite, venerable”, to Lee it is merely “childish; so utterly without the haggard, tragic quality of similar tower-views in Latin countries” (1913a, 178). Eventually her French friend’s enthusiasm rubs off on Lee: “It made *me* understand Oxford, and indeed England a little better, through a series of feelings of surprise, of mingled delight, amusement, and the respect one has before anything very old, traditional, unreasoned, every instance of the world’s automatic, unlogical ways” (1913a, 178-9). That Lee requires an outsider’s perspective to see the *genius loci* of a city famed for its beauty and heritage underscores that her cosmopolitanism is not a default position, that she does, despite her desire otherwise, feel a sense of British identity that manifests itself as cultural cringe.

As Lee travels towards London by train, her antipathy becomes clear: “The horror of Bermondsey and the like, with its millions of squalid houses the train looks down upon, and its sickly smell of kiln and beer; the Thames, with its great barges and shipping, which, from the railway bridge, is so evidently a magnificent gigantic drain” (1899, 100). Lee can find nothing in the functional world of modernity to kindle her imagination. That faculty is, for her, inspired by the ancient, and the unknowable. Where for so many of her contemporaries London can become a site of uncanny alterity, for Lee it will always be far too banal and modern to ever fire her imagination. As she states in the preface to *Hauntings* (1890): “The supernatural can open the caves of Jamschid and scale the ladder of Jacob: what use has it got if it land us in Islington or Shepherd’s Bush?” (2006, 39). Lee could see no supernatural or Gothic qualities in a city that was, for her, so blighted by industrial capitalism.

Lee’s dislike of London is briefly tempered in the sketch by a sojourn to the East of city where she finds “a stranger and finer impression than any to be got in well-to-do, philistine, western London”. The energy and vitality of the area around the docks speaks to Lee in a way that bourgeois London cannot:

All this, seen superficially and with the fancy, is a piece of life as it should be, — of the life of body and of soul, of near and distant, of complexity and simplicity, in which we would all of us fain participate, — and therefore, as much as anything in field or mountain, church or study, a piece of the ideal. But the ideal a little, I fear, as a delusion; the ideal in the same sense, for instance, as Tangier: horror behind it, quite as much as good; a bit, in short, of that barbarism which our one-sided progress has isolated and accentuated, — barbarism which contains so much we would gladly have for ourselves, and so much which we shrink from perceiving (1899, 102).

Lee's self-awareness here is striking: she is aware that her fetishization of alterity is a product of a modernity that delivers to some banal comfort, to others impoverishment and exploitation. While it is clear that here, as elsewhere, she has some empathy with industrial workers, she is also aestheticizing and therefore flattening out the scene, depopulating the docks of London so they become like a church or a mountain, invariably naturalising inequality.

If Lee can find some sort of primitive energy to admire in the East End, the West End of London is symbolic of everything she detests about modernity. A drive from Charing Cross to Chelsea is able to stir within her “puddles and poisons of stored-up hatred”. Lee enumerates the sources of her disdain: “the foul atmosphere, fouling wherever it enters and deposits its grime and grits”; “the polluted roadways”; the “philistine monotony of mean well-to-do houses and blank picturesque squalor of mews and slums behind; the bedizened and feathered ladies hurrying in cabs, the smug men with polished hats and flying flock coats”; the ragged poor spilling out of the innumerable pubs. All of these phenomena though are merely symptoms of a much more profound malaise that is at the root of Lee's horror of the great metropolis:

all this which means stupid hurry and graspingness and stupid acquiescence with bad things, this acceptance of all spoiling, soiling, wasting, destroying processes so long as they accompany some immediate profit or indulgence. And I feel that the possession of this other side, this empty, sweet country, these swept and garnished houses and parks smelling of potpourri, is what reconciles, in a way hardens, the people of England to the horror and disgrace of London (1913b, 611).

Lee again demonstrates an awareness of the symbiotic relationship between the rapacious greed of London and the peace and gentility of the English countryside. Lee freely admits in the same article that spending time in country houses and in Oxford had given her a misleading view of the British upper-class as “leading aesthetic lives”. This false impression is, in its way, a consequence of her comparing conditions between England and Italy, “between foreign slatterliness and a certain swept and garnished quality in English domestic arrangements”. Where the countryside in Italy or France may be marred by poverty, industrialisation has led to England’s cities being the home of social inequality. It is, for this reason, Lee notes, that “London represents everything most obviously odious to those very upper middle classes who inhabit it: they have their way in the country, inside their houses, in foreign travel” (1913b, 611-12). These elite Londoners of course spend time in the country without ever engaging with its inhabitants, just like in her novel *Miss Brown* (1884) where “a perfect colony from aesthetic London had settled itself, to the amazed terror of the vicar and his parishioners, in Wotton Hall and the inn of the adjacent village” (1884a, 70). For Lee, the economic and class structures of England have produced in the country and the city two sides of the same coin.

For all her disdain for London, there are moments when Lee admits that her own prejudices blind her to the city. One of these comes when, reflecting on the frenetic energy of life on the Thames, she concedes: “I admit it. There is more keenness of life, more enjoyment, most likely, in this England of Bermondsey and foggy City and excursion trains and houseboats than Italy: the human energies are full-cock, and probably the human power of feeling.” Yet Lee, as a traveller, rarely feeds off energy, and certainly not the energy that betokens industry. As she asks: “is it not a pity that human sensitiveness, energy for appreciation and enjoyment, should require to be got up, like the power of some badly constructed machine, by pure waste of movement?” Lee, as a general rule, prefers her landscapes depopulated, and the human quality to them comes not from the vitality of life but from the discerning gaze of the civilised traveller: “does not this peculiarity of our civilization show that the inner man is uncommonly little civilized? Resources! But why have we, who find so many in minerals and vegetables, found so few in ourselves?” (1913b, 614-6). There were, however, certain pockets of London life where she could discover a certain resourcefulness, modest monuments to a life and spirit more in sympathy with her own. One of the most moving is her account of attending a working women’s college in Bloomsbury with a lecturer, one “Miss F.”, who is most likely her friend Frances Martin who established her own Working Women’s College in 1874.⁴ It is with this “audience of shabby people with rumpled, pathetic, eager faces; bent on a future which, alas, will never be open to them” that she

feels a certain kinship: “I feel in England, these are the people I would live with; these and those few, as much out of the running as they, as far from all successful competition, who belong to the Past, and who know nothing of the sordidness of the present: privileged persons, whom privilege has withdrawn from the race of life, and who live as independent, and in a way as genuinely and humbly as these” (1913b, 619). One might be cynical as to the genuine parallels between these working class people embracing education and the elite cosmopolitan aesthete. Once again Lee seems to find a sort of nobility and authenticity in those who, by virtue of structural inequalities, are denied property and opportunity. Lee’s London, despite these small instances of authentic intellectual endeavour, is still blighted by all the energy of industry. As she travelled north though she was able to find in the landscapes emptied by the lure of urbanism, a certain aesthetic consolation.

Lee’s Topographical Travel Writing

Ultimately the England Lee can bring herself to celebrate (and there isn’t much of it) is one that is elemental and inhuman. Unable to locate a violent barbarism in the traces of the past she turns her aestheticising gaze to landscape instead: “These little ridges of solitariness, narrow domains of clouds and winds, utterly aloof from man, explain much that is finest and most delicate in the English soul, a certain primeval quality, the power of being moved and chastened by the free contact of the elements, a possibility of dispensing with vain talk and worthless properties, of finding companionship in silence” (1899, 104). As Lee celebrates the silence of the countryside she tends to silence those who dwell within it, their “vain talk” anathema to her aestheticised vistas. Her appreciation of the topographical charms of certain vistas in England will tend to be at the expense of their human elements, enabling her to experience a landscape uncanny, whereby a particular view can be elevated by its reminding her of her beloved Italy.

If Lee found the countryside of the south of England lacking in history, but somehow ennobled by its elemental emptiness, a journey to the north of the country confirmed her sense that the value of English landscape was solitude which took on a profound quality in modernity. Lee’s sketch of Northern England begins with an environmentalist note which was often to characterise her travel writing. Moving around Sheffield and environs she is “struck once more by the ruthless barbarity of this industrialism; not merely the wholesale pollution of water and ground, the killing off of trees and blackening of the sky, but the litter, the heaps of refuse everywhere, the country dealt with worse than the lazy indifference of its inhabitants deals with a

southern or Oriental town” (1901, 511). Passing over Lee’s problematically stereotypical association of idleness and indifference with southern Europe and the East, it is telling that she prefers landscapes untouched, or at least not outwardly showing, the effects of industrialisation. The vista from a Yorkshire hilltop conjures up for her Blakean “dark satanic mills”, with a view of “the innumerable chimneys, the vague, endless roofs, the steaming smoke of Leeds; I was going to say, of hell!” (1901, 511). If industrialisation was the province of the devil, Lee could find greater pleasure in one of its consequences: the almost prelapsarian qualities of the more remote countryside from which workers had fled to the cities.

In Adel, outside of Leeds, her mood changes as she comes across a blackened church and enclosed fields seem to “acquire deeper significance just because this country is so bleak, its trees so wind-warped, and itself so empty of all past” (1901, 511). The belching industrial chimneys of Leeds and Newcastle had drawn the inhabitants of villages and hamlets into their orbit, leaving the moorland and hillsides emptier than they had been for hundreds, if not thousands of years. As she moves further north, towards Scotland, she finds the “sense of depopulation, of emptiness of all human life” reaches a “crescendo” (1901, 511). That emptiness, she knew, was a relatively modern phenomenon: “Modern industry, paradox though it sounds, has emptied these dales” “more effectually than all the Border Wats of Percies and of Douglasses” (1901, 512). In North Tyne, near Kielder Water, Lee reflects: “what a cumbersome thing, in the midst of this nature reduced, so to speak, to the fewest lines and elements (mere gray grass, sky, and constantly shifting banners and torn sails of cloud), is modern civilization!” The sight of a few brace of recently shot grouse send her into a telling aesthetic reverie:

very lovely birds, dark tortoise shell over delicate gray, with a beautiful geranium-red round their dead eyes. How much better looking, bow infinitely more desirable and precious, than the inhabitants of those Newcastle slums, whose labor, whose flocking into the great black city, has given the open country to the grouse and the grouse slayers! (1901, 515).

It is then the bleak North of England that Lee can romanticise and aestheticise, celebrating one of industrial modernity’s most pernicious consequences. It is the remote Border country that she thinks of as “the other half of England, – the England which cannot or will not be cultivated, which rejects inhabitants or is forsaken of them”. Without English people the landscape can be abstracted to shape so as to become itself a cosmopolitan non-place: “the country has the

slightly convex lines, the flatness, of a watershed, and the feel of the air, the barrenness, remind one of an Alpine pass” (1901, 516).

To understand Lee’s idea of a cosmopolitan topographical uncanny, her appreciation of places without people, we need to turn to her extraordinary essay on landscape, “The Lie of the Land,” in which she argues that no landscapes can truly be described in language.⁵ While “an adjective, a metaphor, may evoke an entire atmospheric effect, paint us a sunset or a star-lit night,” “no poet or prose writer can give you the tilt of a roof, the undulation of a field, the bend of a road.” It is these topographical features that for Lee give a landscape its individuality, but also its comparability, and the landscape writer can never manage to capture shape and line in language. The unrepresentability of landscape is nothing new, but for Lee the age of impressionism had taken art further away from the mystery of landscapes. The obsession of Monet, Pissarro and Sisley with light and atmosphere had been at the expense of what Lee termed the “*topographical charm*” of landscapes. While the impressionists had no doubt revolutionised painting, allowing humans to see the world anew, Lee didn’t feel that our fancy, our imaginations, had caught up with them, or at any rate hers had not. This was because her love of landscape was not about the universality of movement, but about the uncanniness of topography, a “power of sentiment and fancy” that allowed her to be “in two places at a time, sometimes in several very different ones within a few seconds”. As she goes on to explain:

It is extraordinary how much of my soul seems to cling to certain peculiarities of what I have called lie of the land, undulations, bends of rivers, straightenings and snakings of road; how much of one's past life, sensations, hopes, wishes, words, has got entangled in the little familiar sprigs, grasses and moss. The order of time and space is sometimes utterly subverted; thus, last autumn, in a corner of Argyllshire, I seemed suddenly cut off from everything in the British Isles, and reunited to the life I used to lead hundreds of miles away, years ago in the high Apennines, merely because of the minute starry moss under foot and the bubble of brooks in my ears (1897, 60-1).

Topography is, then, a keynote of Lee’s travel writing, but it is one that is depopulating, turning the lines and shapes of the land into text. Words get tangled in landscapes because the landscape is, for Lee, always and already a text. Her landscapes are, however, not found texts. As Wilde reminds us in “The Decay of Lying”: “Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there” (2001, 173). Lee, too,

inscribed the places of which she wrote with her own very particular ethical and aesthetic philosophy. Yet try as she might, Lee struggles to find her own particular words in the landscapes of Britain. In Italy she has no such problem; Tuscany in particular possesses, she writes elsewhere, “a particular topographical feeling, very strong and delightful, which I can only describe as that of seeing all the kingdoms of the earth” (1909, 183). So often in England she will find her only tonic in landscapes whose topography remind her of home. So, for instance, in *Laurus Nobilis* (1909) she declares her relief to have escaped London and found herself in Melrose in Scotland, “a country which has some of that Tuscan grace and serene austerity, with its Tweed, clear and rapid in the wide shingly bed, with its volcanic cones of the Eildons, pale and distinct in the distance: river and hills which remind me of the valley where the bay-trees grow, and bring to my mind all that which the bay-trees stand for” (1909, 117). Modernity was, for Lee, antithetical to topography. Where we would now see homogeneity, Lee saw banality that destroyed topographical familiarity. “the modern rectangular town (built at one go for the convenience of running omnibuses and suppressing riots) fills our soul with bitterness and dryness” because it “can give us only its own poor, paltry presence, introducing our eye and fancy neither to further details of itself, nor to other places and people, past or distant” (1897, 48-9). For Lee the power of topographical charm lies in “sentiment,” “fancy,” and “association”. The topographical features of landscape are what “enables us to carry about, like a verse or a tune, whole mountain ranges, valleys, rivers and lakes, things in appearance the least easy to remove from their place” (1897, 60). Landscapes therefore are, for Lee, not wholly unique. The Scottish hills, despite obvious differences in vegetation and climate, let alone cultural associations, conjure up the Tuscan hillsides in Lee’s fancy.

If Lee found that the topographical features of one landscape could call up in her mind another, she was certainly not keen on the prospect of finding the same culture in diffuse places. In her essay “On Modern Travelling” Lee took issue with those whose desire for convenience and familiarity threatened to turn “Scotland into a sort of Hurlingham” and rendering Egypt, Japan, or the Holy Land into dependencies of London, Paris and New York (1897, 90). Of those who go abroad to be intoxicated by difference Lee was more fond, although her treatment of this more poetic of tourists is wrapped in gentle irony. To be able to indulge in the romance of the past it is necessary to possess a fundamental ignorance of the present: “There is no doubt that wandering about in the haunts of the past undisturbed by the knowledge of the present is marvellously favourable to the historic, the poetical emotion.” American tourists would find in Fleet Street, or in Oxford or Cambridge the past for which they went looking. In just the same

way an educated Englishman would find the same fantasy of the past in Florence or Venice: “raptures rapturous in proportion almost to his ignorance of the language and the people” (1897, 102). Lee’s topographical travel writing is then founded on an animosity towards travellers and the inevitable cultural homogeneity brought about by the infrastructure of modern tourism. Her affective, elevated form of “sentimental” travel is a product of, because a reaction to, the cultures of modernity that, ironically enough, smooth over cultural difference in a manner analogous to her uncanny topographies.

Lee in the Celtic West

If Lee had antipathy towards, or at best, ambivalence about, the various landscapes of England, she was far more taken by “the Celtic West” of Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland. These regions appeal by virtue of their being less industrialised, less inhabited, but also more decrepit, the past more apparent, ghosts more populous. Looking out over the Cornish countryside near Tintagel, Lee is taken by the melancholy of its blasted landscapes, turning its contours and colours into impressionistic vignettes: “Over the stone walls and hedgetops a moving wall of toppling cumulus, black illumined crimson from a hidden sunset; the sky above pale amber, blue, and wind-swept” (1913c, 712). The demise of the Cornish mining industry had led to emigration and as a result the countryside appeared to Lee a place of “utter dreariness and desolation,” with the landscape taking on a malevolent hue: “These Cornish moors have something angry and sinister in that reddish, yellowish darkness of theirs, so that the blackish rocks of Rough-Tor and the other Tors, seem merely to concentrate, as it were, to be spokesmen of their threat” (1913c, 716). This violent landscape was no longer the home of industry, as it had been some seventy years earlier, but now of ghosts, the spectre of King Arthur and Mordred: “[T]his scantily inhabited end of Europe seems given up to dead folk: Arthurian heroes at every step and odd local saints, unheard of in other parts of the world, and whom one suspects of having been originally giants, and perhaps ogres” (1913c, 717). Gone here is Lee’s dismissive, at times haughty tone that had characterised much of her travel writing of England. Here she seems able to divine something of the *genius loci* of a place that had escaped the ravages of modernity.

Crossing the Bristol Channel into Wales, Lee finds that the *genius loci* of that western land can survive, despite the baleful presence of its collieries. Perhaps, as with the north of the country, it is precisely the impact of modern industries that preserves the countryside, leaving them largely

uninhabited by humans, and therefore amenable to the spirit of the past. Sitting in the lonely churchyard of a dissenting chapel she reflects:

This depopulated country of empty grass-fields and empty roads crowded with birds, very much, one might think, as it was in the days of an unreal Arthur, to the back of a seaboard simply black with coal-pits and chimneys, and traversed on all sides by long black trains carrying coal to and fro the great docks, in vans inscribed with names which sound quite as far from our civilization as those of the heroes of Ossian or the Mabinogion. On the low, green, wind-swept horizon I see a distant little gray church and conical tower, seemingly half in ruins. And, when I take notice, there is always the sound of trains (1913c, 718).

Lee's imagination is fired by the desolate countryside that without modern inhabitants is almost without modernity. Even that great symbol of modern civilisation, the railway, can become, through the Welsh language, foreign, exotic, and mythical. The Arthurian echoes of Tintagel and the Welsh countryside have the capacity to attract Lee, but she is, as is regularly the case in her British travel writing, less captivated by the quality of the past here than in Italy. Of an enchanted wood in Ireland she notes that its isolation from everyday life seems fitting "This suits the spirit of mediaeval romance; feudal, a thing of privileged creatures in a world which is held of no account." Yet this is radically different to Italy, with its air of antiquity: "The village, the fisherman's huts are always at hand; there is the shepherd and the swineherd, just after the disappearance of the gods; there is, in Virgil particularly, the pious peasant; and there is, on the shores of that humane, antique sea, in those kindly, democratic olive groves, Nausicaa herself, not chasing around on a palfrey like Angelica or Britomart, but harnessing the wagon and washing the linen" (1913c, 722). Antiquity lives on in Italy where there is a democratic continuity of the quotidian in the small towns and villages in which the past is a living force, unlike Ireland where the traces of feudalism in the landscape produce no collective life.

Of all the places she visits in her travels on the British Isles, it is arguably an isolated castle in coastal Wales that most piques Lee's fancy. St Donat's lies on the Bristol Channel, halfway between Cardiff and Swansea. A medieval castle, its foundations going back to the twelfth century, St Donat's is most well-known for being the seat of the Stradling baronetcy until the 6th Baronet, Sir Thomas Stradling died in a duel in 1738. The family in the early eighteenth century, it is thought, may have been involved with smuggling, a notion that Lee found captivating,

writing: “Yes, Stradlings, knightly smugglers, wreckers, buccaneers, using their woods and castle for unholy work of all kinds hidden in that glen by the sea, their towers scarcely emerging. Remote in that sort of peninsula of South Wales, which even now seems left aside by the movement, coaling, etc., of our day” (1913c, 720). In this desolate castle on the South Wales coast Lee could forget modernity, immersing herself in a world of savage violence and primitive honour. How horrified she must have been when, in 1925, the American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst bought the castle and undertook to improve and expand it by ransacking architectural features from other properties to create his own medieval melange fantasy. As George Bernard Shaw allegedly said of the restored St Donat’s: it is “what God would have built if he had the money”. But when Lee visited the Castle at the turn of the twentieth century it was still in such a state that she had little trouble imagining its barbarous eighteenth century past.

Inspired by her visit, Lee set about writing an historical novel, *Penelope Brandling*, which was published as part of T. Fisher Unwin’s Pseudonym Library in 1903. The narrative takes the form of a series of diary entries written by the eponymous heroine after she has left her family in Switzerland having married Sir Eustace Brandling and moved to St Salvat’s Castle in Glamorganshire, a thinly veiled St Donat’s. Lee draws on all the conventions of the Gothic Romance; set in 1772, Penelope has clearly been touched by the contemporary fashion for the genre; on first arriving at the castle she declares her intention “to enjoy it like a play, or a romance which one reads”, and one of her first attempts at consolation, finding herself so far from her Swiss home is to recite lines from Ossian. After a few days she declares the castle “even more romantically situated than I had thought; and with its towers and battlements hidden in deep woods, it makes one think of castles, like that of Otranto, which one reads of in novels” (1903, 33). Diana Wallace has argued, in the only substantial analysis of the novel, that Lee is also incorporating significant elements of Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic into her narrative (2013, 115-30). With Walpole and Macpherson as her guides, Penelope’s responses to the ordeal that follows is couched in the language of sensibility. Yet for all the language of the Gothic, conjuring up her famous ghost stories, Lee infuses the novel with her elemental landscapes. On Penelope’s and Eustace’s journey by road from Bristol to St Salvat’s they pass no villages, barely any cottages, and only the occasional glimpse of a tower in the distance. The absence of human activity leads to Lee’s topographical landscape aesthetic making an appearance: “all along rough hedges and grey walls with stones projecting like battlements. Inland mountain lines like cliffs, dim in the

rain; and at last, over the pale green fields, the sea — quite pale, almost white” (1903, 28). Wales here, shorn of culture, void of people, could be anywhere, its topography generically Gothic.

Conclusion: Vernon Lee in Exile

When war broke out in the summer of 1914 Lee was making her annual trip to England. Concluding it was unsafe to return to Il Palmerino, Lee chose to spend the duration of the War in Britain, a period that saw a shift in her understanding of Britain and her relationship to Europe. The rise of nationalism across the continent, in particular in Germany and Italy, saw her reconsider some of her previously held convictions. Much of her time was spent in promoting pacifism, falling out with many old friends, and making new enemies. She wrote a number of pacifist articles challenging the war effort, and after the war crystallised her hostility to nationalism and militarism in *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy* (1920). She was, as Kristin Mahoney notes, “dwelling in the margins, separate, aloof, apart from the violence and passions of the period” (2015, 84). A key aspect of her distance from the present was her retreat into a Victorian past to which, from the vantage point of total war, had taken on a particular piquancy. Her vehement pacifism was noted by George Bernard Shaw in his review of *Satan the Waster* as belonging to another age than the one currently blighted by Lloyd George’s militarism: “I take off my hat to the old guard of Victorian cosmopolitan intellectualism, and salute her [Lee] as the noblest Briton of them all” (Cary, 1971, 341). As Shaw recognised, to be open to and interested in other cultures was to be, in 1920, out of time, a relic of a more genteel, cosmopolitan world. Lee’s desire to celebrate the values of the cosmopolitan past also saw her return in a series of articles in the *North American Review* to the theme of the *genius loci*, but this time with a sense that so many of the places she had loved, and visited, were being destroyed forever. But as she travelled through Britain she was once again struck by the eerie beauty of the desolated villages to which she had been drawn some fifteen years earlier. In the Scottish Borders she came across one such place, Green Haig, and its quiet desolation recalled for her the tiny hamlets of France and Germany she had visited before the war. But of course the reason why Green Haig lay so empty was not the pull of Glasgow or Newcastle, but of that other great scourge of industrialised modernity:

The sense of such remoteness and seclusion, grim or tender as may be, from the world's beaten ways is one of the most delightful of the intuitions, or perhaps delusions, of travel. One never forgets the places which have given it to one. And now with the

thought of them is coupled the knowledge that thence also the lads have been marched away, thither also the tidings of wounds or captivity or death have been, and are ever being, brought (1916, 927).

Lee is aware that the sense of remoteness, of being free from the pressures of her fellow humans is a delusion. Even though she knows that these desolate villages are tidings of death and despair, she still valorises the emotion, the imaginative possibilities they offer her as reminders of the past. As I have demonstrated, her British travel writing celebrates the spectral, empty landscape of industrial Britain. Her cosmopolitan elevation of the *genius loci* exposes the abstracting, even anti-humanist nature of her ethics and politics, aestheticising as it does the experience of place. While these values may be problematic, she was able to repurpose them in the years of the First World War as cosmopolitanism became ever more difficult to sustain.

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¹ Living in Northern Ireland, I am only too aware of the problematic nature of the “British Isles” as an appellation for the islands West of Europe. I use it here for clarity and convenience, rather than with any conviction.

² For an overview of Lee’s unpublished manuscript works see Mannocchi (1983)

³ The one exception is a brief and largely critical discussion in Colby (2003, 262-4).

⁴ Lee describes to her mother visiting the college in 1884 and watching Martin lecture to three women on the Lake Poets (2017, 364-6)

⁵ It should be noted here that Lee thought that history could also be viewed in a model analogous to a landscape. As she claimed in the introduction to *Euphorion*: “a period in history is like a more or less extended real landscape” (1884b, 9).