Maverick Modernists: Sapphic Trajectories from Vernon Lee to D.H. Lawrence

A century after Ezra Pound's exhortation to 'Make it New' and Virginia Woolf's declaration that 'something had fundamentally changed in human nature on December 1st 1910', the relationship of the Modernist movement to its Victorian forebears continues to be interrogated and revised.[1] Jessica Feldman, for example, has challenged the temporal and artistic rupture identified by Woolf, Pound and others as inaugurating the New School by instead recovering artistic continuities between it and its Victorian precursors.[2] Similarly, Vincent Sherry offers a corrective to the originary narrative of high Modernism perpetuated by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and others by highlighting its strategic excision of French and British Decadent writers from its annals in favour of the more palatable Symbolist school because of the perceived threat of emasculation posed by any association with the less than salubrious reputations of the so-called 'Tragic Generation' of the 1890s.[3] By contrast, George Steiner and Susan Sontag have variously argued for the centrality of Victorian queer masculinity in the formation of Modernism's iconoclast agenda.[4] And, in turn, critics such as Shari Benstock and Cassandra Laity have sought to recuperate a parallel tradition of 'Sapphic Modernist' writing to offset not only the manifest androcentrism of the Modernist movement, itself, but also, as seen above, one that appears to be shared by some of its modern chroniclers.[5] In this respect, Laity's proposition that 'Sapphic Modernists' (here, identified as Willa Cather, Violet Hunt, Katherine Mansfield, H.D. and Renee Vivien) looked back to Decadent writers such as Swinburne and Wilde to create a 'female' tradition of sexual dissidence that stretched back to Sappho, in part, anticipates Sherry's discussion of the erasure of a palpable Decadent influence from the history of Modernism. Yet, concurrently, Laity is also aware that her observation that 'H.D. and others used the Decadents to fashion a feminist poetics of desire' is equally open to the disapproval of a 'feminist revisionary process' because of its conception that the Decadent effect negatively re-inscribes the very masculine sexual imperatives that Sapphic Modernists sought to evade.[6]

More recently, Laura Doan and Jane Garrity have rerouted 'Sapphic Modernism' and its attendant controversies in favour of a more 'inclusive' and

cross-media recovery of a 'Sapphic Modernity', a project which for them is 'bound up with the circulation of medical and sexological knowledge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the publication of works such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) and Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, vol. II Sexual Inversion* (1897), to name two studies that were most influential in identifying the category of "sexual inversion" in Britain and North America.'[7] That the relationship of the novelist and art-historian Vernon Lee and her then lover the poet Mary Robinson was, at one point, seriously considered as a case study for Ellis's pioneering sexological text tantalisingly suggests the existence of a Victorian precursor to the Sapphic Modernity of the twentieth century. [8]

MODERNISM(S)?

For Modernists such as T. S Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Vernon Lee was undoubtedly an anachronism. In a cancelled draft version of 'The Fire Sermon' from *The Waste Land* in which Eliot parodied 'The Rape of the Lock', his cultured lady 'Fresca' is 'baptised in a soapy sea/Of Symonds – Walter Pater – Vernon Lee'.[9] In a letter to Violet Dickinson in 1909 Virginia Woolf unkindly described the now semi-deaf Lee as 'a garrulous baby' and later declared herself to be morally outraged by Lee's experimental anti-war plays 'The Ballet of the Nations' (1915) and *Satan the Waster* (1920) for what she described as their 'unpatriotic' pacifism.[10] For the critic Dennis Denisoff, it would appear that Woolf was suffering from a severe case of 'the anxiety of influence' as he identifies the indebtedness of Woolf's *Orlando* to Lee's story of 1886 'Oke of Okehurst' and Hilary Fraser highlights the Dadaist inflections of *Satan the Waster.*[11] Was Lee, as understood by the Modernists, a literary anachronism or a Modernist foremother? Poignantly, it seems that Lee herself plumped for the former as in 1932 she came to privately regret that old age and infirmity now prevented (in her own words) 'all possibility of personal contact with the generation to which I ought to have belonged'.[12] Notwithstanding Lee's personal pessimism about her seemingly superannuated status, Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham

observe that 'We have now begun to appreciate that Vernon Lee's work, far from being irrelevant to modernism, is crucial to its development.'[13]

Strikingly, in its promotion of art in the service of good health, both physical and moral, and its championing of an empathetic (female) homosociality, Lee and her co-researcher and lover Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson's investigation into the field of 'psychological aesthetics' between 1888 and 1912 appears to anticipate both the counter-Decadent and Sapphist strains of the Modernist movement(s). In this, revisiting Lee and Thomson's project also promises to further assuage Lee's elision from the developmental narrative of Modernism. At the turn of the century, Lee's search for invigorating intellectual activity both in the face of her own bouts of ill health and the cultural degeneration diagnosed as symptomatic of the Victorian *fin de siècle* saw her reject the 'intellectual rebellion and lawlessness' of the Aesthetic School and its Decadent successor in favour of exhorting contemporary artists to produce healthy and morally educative art.[14] And yet, contemporaneously, in the context of the feverish atmosphere of the 1890s, Lee, also bravely laid claim to a 'queer comradeship' with the 'outlawed thought' of the literary avant-garde.[15] In pursuit of mental and physical equanimity for herself and others, Lee now reframed Aestheticism's clarion call for 'art for art's sake' as 'Art not for art's sake but art for the sake of life – art as one of the harmonious functions of existence'.[16] In this less than pithy aphorism, Lee suggested that the psychological affect of art could be manipulated to induce physical and mental wellbeing.

Prone, as Lee was, to sustained bouts of neuralgia and nervous depression from a young age, one of her main struggles in life appears to have been to achieve and maintain physical health and psychological equanimity for herself. Where her older half-brother, the minor poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton, had succumbed to what appears to have been a psychosomatic illness in the 1870s which left him paralysed for over twenty years and which required Lee and her mother to be in constant attendance, it was not until 1894 that she came (in her own words) to 'recognize that on one side [her] family is, acutely neuropathic and hysterical'.[17] Here, despite her sustained pursuit of aesthetic health, Lee's private self-diagnosis unexpectedly appears to internalise the emotive terms

with which Cesare Lombroso's *Man of Genius* (1888) and Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) had popularly pathologized the New Schools. Her most sustained bout of neurasthenia appears to have taken place in 1888, directly after the collapse of her relationship with her first love Mary Robinson when she had broken with Lee to become engaged to the eminent French philologist and Orientalist, James Darmesteter, a man crippled by a childhood spinal disease. A disgusted Lee cruelly described her rival as a 'Quasimodo', 'dwarf', 'cripple' and 'humpback' and she and her equally prurient brother spent several months writing to the affianced pair to exhort them to keep the marriage Platonic.[18] The entrance of the expert horsewoman and Judo player Kit Anstruther-Thomson at this juncture as both nurse *and* acolyte proved timely for Lee who later recalled how 'these strange dream-like months of illness and hopelessness, of misery' were offset by the 'enveloping happiness out of which [Kit's] patience and loving kindness drew me, a new creature.'[19] While the tortured and hysterical state of mind engendered by the split from Robinson is perhaps best evinced in Lee's highly-coloured 1896 fairytale 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', a feverish story based on her ostensibly recuperative journey to the warmer climes of southern Spain and Tangiers, the sustained emotional sustenance that Thomson afforded Lee also appears to have been similarly sublimated into her work. Although the concept of 'psychological aesthetics' was explicitly generated out of Lee's desire for mental and physical health, underpinning it all was Lee's wounded obsession with Mary Robinson's reproductive health, the spectre of the 'humpback' fiancé and finally, her own undoubted attraction to Thomson's 'boyish' beauty.

In Thomson, Lee, who had been reading and researching the works of William James, Grant Allen, Theodor Lipps and Karl Groos in the comparatively new field of psychology for over a decade, found a uniquely invaluable subject for her nascent research into psychological and attendant physiological responses to art. Squiring her through the galleries of Western Europe, Lee discovered that Thomson was a 'motor' type who was acutely sensitive to the changes in her breathing and concomitant muscular tensions induced in her subject in the presence of all manner of art objects from classical statues, to paintings, Gothic churches and pieces of Chippendale furniture. Lee devoted months to listening and watching her subject in order to document in her gallery

notebooks the minute physical sensations that Thomson experienced. Lee and Thomson first showcased their experiments in psychological aesthetics in an 1897 article published in the *Contemporary Review* called 'Beauty and Ugliness'. Although jointly authored, Lee's voice dominated the article interpreting and analysing Thomson's description of the bodily responses that various art objects elicited in her. The opening of the article expressed Lee's belief that their model of psychological aesthetics superseded earlier conceptions of how the aesthetic phenomenon affected the viewer. Thomson's body was a living prescription for good health since it was in the (almost imperceptible) physical responses that she described to Lee in front of chosen art objects that Lee founded her belief that viewing beautiful form was physiologically restorative. As Thomson described it to Lee, looking at a chair affected the movement of the eyes, changed her breathing pattern and made her subtly mime the position of the object in her own stance. Physical sensations were divided into the agreeable and disagreeable, these sensations pertaining to beauty and ugliness, respectively. Beauty induced tensions of 'lifting up' and 'pressing downwards' which effected an 'agreeable arrangement of agreeable movements in ourselves' that constituted 'a harmonious total condition of our adjustments.'[20]

For Lee, classical art stood as the epitome of the beautiful and she argued that ideal forms on display in antique sculpture could invigorate the viewer's experience of their own body. In their extended meditation on the medicinal function of Greek sculpture, they noted that the 'antique statue' had a 'much finer muscular system' than a human being and that the act of 'miming' this perfected form 'gives us the benefit of the finer organism represented'. A series of 'muscular adjustments' was elicited in the 'beholder' where the 'sight of the easy carriage of body' illustrated by the statue gave the viewer 'a sense of increased lightness and strength' in themselves. [21] Believing that the act of recognising beauty was an empathetic action because in 'looking at the Doric column for instance, and its entablature, we are attributing to the lines and surfaces, to the spatial forms, those dynamic experiences which we should have were we to put our bodies into similar conditions', Lee concluded that the 'projection of our own life into what we see is pleasant or unpleasant …facilitates or hampers our own vitality.'[22] Psychological aesthetics presented itself as more

than a dynamic model of aesthetic criticism, rather, beauty, according to the data amassed from Thomson's responses, could, as seen above, engender good health as the 'correct' viewing of beautiful form would, by extension, regulate the viewer's nervous system into a state of invigorating physiological equanimity.

The search for what Lee privately called a theory of 'absolute aesthetics'[23] was very much a product of the post-Wildean *fin de siècle* having, as it did, a Counter-Decadent remit. Lee 'discard[ed]' her own 'doubtful assumptions concerning association of ideas' and publicly rejected Grant Allen's latest theory of the 'new hedonism', the recourse to 'sexual selection' to account for the aesthetic response.[24] That the search for invigorating aesthetic experience was an antidote to hedonism and Decadent ennui was the animating principle of the article is signalled by Lee's declaration that appreciation of aesthetic form 'implie[d] an active participation of the most important organs of animal life'.[25] This counter-Decadent note is made even more strident in Lee's assertion that the desire for beauty was 'no unaccountable psychic complexity, but the necessary self-established regulation of processes capable of affording disadvantage and advantage to the organism'.[26] And in reaction to Wilde's controversial aphorism that 'All art is quite useless', Lee countered that 'The aesthetic instinct is never so utterly the master as when art is described as the servant of utility.'[27] In light of the 'sickly sensuousness' and 'superlative nauseousness' that 'sound and healthy' people associated with the French and British Decadent movements, Lee and Thomson's alternative prescription for aesthetic health appears to literalise counter-Decadent discourse.[28]

To this day, questions of Lee's lesbianism (sublimated or otherwise) and its attendant impact on the couple's research remain contentious. Christa Zorn has found the application of a single lesbian identity to Lee to be reductive and argues that 'we need to see (Lee's) lesbianism … as one of the many contingencies that shape her "difference" as a writer and critic'.[29] And, while Kathy Psomiades has read the project as a sublimation of Lee's lesbianism where '[k]nowing the beloved's bodily sensations' operated as Lee's substitution 'for a carnal knowledge of [Thomson's] body', in turn, Joseph Bristow rejects Psomiades' reading because it 'seeks to disclose …the astonishing lengths to which Lee could, through her aesthetic practice, sublimate her erotic yearning

for another woman'.[30] For Bristow, Psomiades's central misapprehension resides in reading Lee's 'disavowed "lesbian aesthetics" …her renunciation of same-sex passion' as one that nevertheless paradoxically 'maintains a "sexual style"'.[31] Not only because of the public obloquy that attended events such as the Wilde trials of 1895 and, later, the dancer Maud Allen's 'Cult of the Clitoris' libel action in 1918 but also the fluidity of female homosocial relations in the period *per se*, the precise nature and extent of Lee and Thomson's intimacy will necessarily remain hidden to us. However, it is significant that from its first public appearance in an article for the *Contemporary Review* in 1897 to its final appearance in the valedictory that Lee wrote to Thomson in *Art and Man* (1924) (fragments of Thomson's art criticism that Lee had edited after her death), that the project reveals an emboldening of Lee's sense of the socially regenerative power of female homosociality. Where preceding texts by Lee such as her novel *Miss Brown* in which she envisioned a sexless gender identity for women 'made not for man but for humankind' reveal her commitment to strategically developing non-normative and socially engaged gender roles for women, her decision to accent the same-sex modality of their project for the first time in *Art and Man* is certainly arresting.[32]

Where in the original articles, in using the initials C. A-T, Thomson's body was figured as gender neutral, Lee's introduction to *Art and Man* explicitly restored the homosocial aspect of their work. Lee, who had devoted her life to aesthetics, made the poignant confession that:

> 'It was only as a result of intimacy with Kit Anstruther-Thomson that I became aware that, as much as I had written and even much as I had read about works of art, I did not really know them when they were in front of me [.] And, becoming aware that, in her sense of seeing, I saw half nothing, I tried to learn a little to see by looking at her way of looking at things.'[33]

Here, Lee was explicit about looking upon Thomson looking at art and thus, effectively incorporated her body as instrumental to experiencing art clearly for the first time. While this act of submission on Lee's part partially rebalanced the relationship of teacher and acolyte between herself and Thomson that Lee had earlier immortalised in her dialogues *Althea*, Lee was keen to emphasise that it

was Thomson who took the lead role in practising and maintaining a socially reformist agenda for the project. On a public level, 'psychological aesthetics' was conceptualised by both practitioners as a form of therapeutic Platonism for the masses; this theory that looking at ideal forms could induce universal physical health would inspire Thomson to perform her Delphic role in front of working-class women in public galleries. Describing Thomson's political leanings as 'socialistic', and 'democratic', Lee recalled how Thomson desired "to show the galleries to the East End People" and how she had spent the summers of 1892-3 lecturing at Toynbee Hall and teaching drawing classes for working men in London.[34] For Thomson, Lee declared, 'art could never be in her eyes a mere private pleasure, still less an amusement for leisured folks. She saw it rather as a semi-religious side of life, into which every one, and the disinherited foremost, must be initiated by those who were specially gifted and fortunately circumstanced.'[35] In retrospect, Thomson's agenda was perhaps only Socialistic in that peculiarly obtuse late nineteenth-century mode where the upper-class Thomson played a real-life 'Princess Cassamassima' by herding the London proletariat into museums to watch her demonstrations. The image of the 'specially gifted' Thomson leading the 'disinherited' to the sacrament of healthful art is certainly ideologically problematic for us today. Moreover, it is deeply ironic that what had started as a curative project for Lee ended in physical collapse for Thomson. In confessional mode in *Art and Man*, Lee chastised herself that her own 'preoccupation of rendering our new-fangled notions less startling by an array of already accepted psychological facts and theories … may have been done at the expense of my collaborator's already strained nerves.' 'Kit', Lee concluded, 'may have felt as if her very personal and living impressions were being deadened under what perhaps struck her as philosophical padding.'[36] Diluted down to fragmentary impressions on art-objects in *Art and Man*, Thomson's role as the gallery Messiah continued to be directed and circumscribed by Lee into the 1920s.

LAWRENCE AND (COUNTER)DECADENCE

Notwithstanding Lee's influence (after Denisoff) over Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and recent critics linking Lee and Lawrence through their attempts to capture the *genius loci* of Italy in their travel writings, Kirsty Martin has placed the evolution of the three writers' fictional and non-fictional works on the subjects of the emotions and empathy in circumstantial relation to each other. For Martin, "Lee, Woolf and Lawrence are not obvious writers to place together' and she continues that while 'They were ambivalent and sometimes hostile towards each other's work, … they did not exert direct influence on each other's writing'.[37] In light of the aforementioned examples and the commitment to a counter-Decadent ethos that can be elicited from Lee's research in psychological aesthetics and, as we shall see, from Lawrence's novels *The White Peacock* and *Women in Love*, Martin's caveat begins to appear tenuous. And, while a counter-Decadent animus drives the work of both writers, it is also striking that, like Lee before him, Lawrence sought to assuage the feeling of national and cultural decline that prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond by advancing the ideal of a socially regenerative (male) homosociality. Faced with the heightened psychosexual anxieties engendered by national events such as the Wilde trials of 1895, the dancer Maud Allen's notorious libel action in 1918 against M.P. Noel Pemberton-Billing and the censorship of James Joyce and Lawrence's own novels on the grounds of obscenity, both Lee and Lawrence bravely struggled to define, understand and, to a certain degree, exercise these non-normative sexualities for themselves. Tantalisingly, that the influence of Lee and Thomson's ground-breaking work can also be elicited in the pivotal 'Moony' chapter of *Women in Love* suggests (after Steiner et al.) another palpable line of influence from Victorian queer sexualities to male Modernists. Ironically, not only does this association engender a timely reappraisal of the homophobia famously ascribed to Lawrence but also it begs the question to whom exactly the term 'Sapphic Modernists' should be applied.

While Max Nordau conceived of literary Decadence, sexual permissiveness and other ''90s manias' in his 1893 treatise *Degeneration* as the cause *and* effect of the perceived social and physiological decline of fin de siècle Europe, the First World War saw Lee and Lawrence invert the terms of this debate. For Lee, who wrote two stylistically innovative and politically

controversial anti-war plays in 1915 and 1920 and, for Lawrence, who was the subject of political surveillance during the war years, the Great War was not the natural apotheosis of a rampant culture of permissiveness (Nordau's so-called Dusk of the Nations) but rather that of a worn-out social conservatism and growing political intolerance. In 1915 Lawrence, in responding to the suppression of *The Rainbow,* opined that "I think there is no future for England: only a decline and fall' and that 'This is the dreadful and unbearable part of it: to have been born into a decadent era, a decline of life, a collapsing civilization'.[38] As masterfully described by Vincent Sherry, the prevalent feeling of social decline that haunted Lawrence can be elicited in the taxonomy of (Counter-) Decadence that shapes *Women in Love*, a novel which both frightened its author for being so 'end of the world' and yet also encouraged him that ''The people that can bring forth the new passion, the new idea, this people will endure'.[39]

GLIMMERINGS: *THE WHITE PEACOCK*

Letters from 1908 to 1910, written while Lawrence was crafting both his first collection of poems and his first novel *The White Peacock* articulate a conflicted response to the turn of the century French Decadent and Symbolist schools and their British confreres. Lawrence described buying a second-hand copy of the ur-text of French Decadence, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal,* as (p.179) 'a fine capture' and he later teased Louie Burrows (briefly his fiancée) that he would read Paul Verlaine's poems to her and anticipated what 'fun' it would be to see how they would make her 'eyes swing round'.[40] Although he claimed to 'like[ ]' Verlaine's 'vague suggestive' poetry more than the 'Plaster cast' poetry of English contemporaries like A. E. Housman, Lawrence was adamant that he, himself would not practice Verlaine's style because 'Before everything I like sincerity and a quickening spontaneous emotion' and he could not bring himself to 'worship music or the "half said thing"' of Symbolist verse.[41] Simultaneously drawn and repelled by French Decadence and its Symbolist compeer, ironically, Lawrence's determination to avoid stylistic opacity resulted in a reaction to the work of British Decadents Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley in *The White Peacock* that verges on the prurient. As we see below, Lawrence's novel, somewhat disingenuously, offsets the putatively 'immoral' aspects of Wilde's play *Salome*

and Beardsley's final illustration for it with one particularly unabashed scene of homoeroticism. In this, Lawrence's first novel appears to evince a compelling, if contentious, homologue to Cassandra Laity's vision of Sapphic Modernists' reliance on a male Decadent tradition to forge their own sexually dissident works.

Depicting middle-class life in rural Nottinghamshire, *The White Peacock* is narrated by the figure of Cyril Beardsall, a character that Lawrence tellingly observed was 'too much *me',* who recounts the ill-fated love affair of his sister Lettie and the young farmer George Sexton.[42] The title of the novel refers to the fifty white peacocks that Wilde's lecherous King Herod offers Salome for performing 'The Dance of the Seven Veils' for him in order to forestall her vengeful demands to be presented the head of John the Baptist (Iokanaan) because he has rejected her sexual advances. Where Kristin Morrison observes that 'The association of peacocks with Salome's perversity in Wilde's text, and … the identification of peacocks with Salome herself in Beardsley's illustrations, establish the white-peacock woman as decadent, possessive, and deadly', an actual, rather than a figurative, peacock reveals a nascent antifeminism on Lawrence's part.[43] When Cyril, in the company of the gamekeeper Annable, sees a peacock befoul a churchyard statue of an angel, the incensed Annable decries 'The proud fool!-look at it! Perched on an angel, too, as if it were a pedestal for vanity. That's the soul of a woman – or it's the devil. …A woman to the end, I tell you, all vanity and screech and defilement'.[44] In Lawrence's novel, like *Salome* and Beardsley's illustrations before it, the peacock exemplifies the insatiability of female desire and the inherent corruption of the sex.

The novel's references to Wilde's *Salome* are amplified further when Cyril somehow acquires prints of Aubrey Beardsley's "Atalanta' and his tailpiece to Wilde's play which he initially intends to show to Lettie. Having got hold of the prints in the first place, Cyril's later claims to be 'fascinated and overcome' and 'yet full of stubbornness and resistance' to them appear disingenuous especially in light of the transparently erotic response that George Saxton has to them.[45] When he tells Cyril that 'The more I look at these naked lines, the more I want (Lettie). It's a sort of fine sharp feeling like these curved lines. I don't know what I'm saying – but do you think she'd have me?' George is clearly picturing Lettie as

Beardsley's naked and prone Salome.[46] In comparison to Cyril's sensitive bewilderment, George's reduction of Beardsley's art to the level of pornography not only diminishes the high art status of Decadence but also exposes Cyril's apparent naiveté to be self-deceptive, at best.

Cyril's disingenuousness is again in evidence in a later chapter when he and George take a naked swim together after which Cyril allows himself to be towel dried by his friend and luxuriates in the experience of 'the sweetness of the touch of our naked bodies one against the other'.[47] That the chapter is entitled 'The Poem of Friendship' signals that for Lawrence, at any rate, the unabashed homoeroticism of the scene was to be understood in terms of a homosocial rather than homosexual bond, one which 'satisfied in some measure the vague, indecipherable yearning of [Cyril's] …soul', a feeling which tellingly he also presumes to be shared by George.[48] Cyril's declaration that their love 'was more perfect than any love I have known since, either for man or woman' certainly was to perplex E. M. Forster who privately read this scene as 'the queerest product of subconsciousness that I have yet struck' and one in which he thought Lawrence had 'not a glimmering from first to last what he's up to'.[49] More recently, Howard Booth has similarly also conferred a degree of sexual naiveté to Lawrence in this scene.[50] And yet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential observation that 'For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men"' inevitably compromises both the putative homosociality with which Lawrence framed this encounter and the unwitting innocence that Forster and Booth respectively impute to him.[51]

(WO)MEN IN LOVE

Lawrence's biographer, Mark Kinkead-Weekes argues that in 1913 Lawrence came to accept himself as bisexual.[52] However, by 1915 Lawrence was writing letters that reveal a nascent homophobia which, at the very least, suggest a conflicted sexuality on his part. In April of that year, Lawrence wrote to David Garnett that although he 'never considered Plato very wrong, nor Oscar Wilde', seeing the homosexual John Maynard Keynes in his pyjamas 'has been like a little madness to me ever since' which has 'carried along with most dreadful sense of

repulsiveness-something like carrion-a vulture gives me the same feeling.'[53] As this letter reveals, Lawrence's apparent acceptance of homosexuality as an abstract concept was undermined by a sense of visceral disgust when physically confronted with the actual homosexuals of his acquaintance. Moreover, that Lawrence remained uncertain about his sexuality is evidenced by the cancelled 1916 prologue to *Women in Love* which was overtly homoerotic in tenor while, in turn, the finished novel instead avows a deep, if ultimately unachievable, commitment to male homosociality.[54] And, in comparison to Lawrence's oscillating attitude towards the physical act of 'men loving men', his response to 'the woman question' can at best be described as portentous. Here, it is significant that Carolyn Tighman argues that Lawrence initially supported women's suffrage but that by 1915 his letters disclose a 'strong ambivalence about the new freedoms demanded by women.' [55] A letter of 1917 further reveals that Lawrence's uncertainty about first-wave feminism had intensified to the point of seeing the achievement of women's suffrage as a pyrrhic victory of cataclysmic proportions.[56]

While Lawrence offered apocalyptic predictions about female suffrage contemporaneously, he also considered the 'War [to be] a great and necessary disintegrating autumnal process' out of which love 'the great creative process' would emerge and triumph.[57] Although the Great War is never explicitly mentioned in *Women in Love,* it filters into the narrative as an incessant drive towards discord and destruction at every level of society and one that is marked stylistically by an amplification of the counter-Decadent, anti-feminist and homosocial notes earlier evinced in *The White Peacock.* Where, according to Lawrence, love will forestall the negative effects of war, the emotional vicissitudes experienced both by Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen and their respective lovers in their attempts to achieve emotional fulfilment manifest in this time of war and female suffrage as a desire for mastery over each other. For Birkin, in particular, 'The hot narrow intimacy between man and wife was abhorrent' and he seeks to subjugate Ursula and what he considers to be her woman's 'lust for possession, a greed of self-importance in love'.[58] In turn, it is significant that Ursula considers Birkin to be the embodiment of a 'death eating' '*pervers*[ity]', a Decadent *ex post facto* as suggested by his consistent (self)

identification with Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*.[59] Indeed, as identified by Vincent Sherry, Lawrence consistently re-animates the ghost of late-nineteenth century Decadence across the novel in order to underline not only Modernity's continuities with the Victorian past but also Modernism's debt to its Decadent predecessor.[60] And while Birkin conceives of male homosociality as 'something clearer, more open' than the 'dreadful bondage' of heterosexual marriage, the response to this 'other kind of love' with which Ursula closes the novel ('It's an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity') consigns male homosociality to the ignominious fate accorded the Decadent mode in Modernism's originary narrative.[61]

While the cancelled (1916) prologue to *Women in Love* and the novel's extant 'Gladiatorial' chapter which sees Birkin and Crich engage in naked wrestling (the 'physical junction of two bodies clinched into oneness') clearly highlights Lawrence's privileging of male homosociality over heterosexual union, Tilghman notes 'the excision of female homo-social desire and sexuality from Birkin's newly carved sexual terrain'.[62] Although Lawrence's patent distaste for lesbianism is in evidence in his earlier depiction of Ursula's failed relationship with Winifred in *The Rainbow*, in *Women in Love*, a momentary scene of female homosociality from which the Decadent Birkin is barred both challenges Tilghman's observation and elicits a closer alliance between Lawrence's work and Lee and Thomson's 'absolute aesthetics'. In the pivotal chapter 'Moony', a key scene animates the possibility of a productively healthful act of a woman looking at, not another woman, in this instance, but the figurative feminine (the Moon) as a means of forestalling the onslaughts of cultural Decadence. Ursula comes upon Birkin in the middle of night throwing stones at the reflection of the Moon in a pond and secretly watches him for some time. Birkin keeps throwing stones until the reflection is absolutely obliterated. Decadent tropes abound: the sinister face of the moon, white and deathly, the inviolable moon as a white body, the fragments of its reflections as tattered rose petals.[63] All these images tangibly resonate to the nexus of moon images present in Wilde's *Salome* as Lawrence focuses on Ursula's overwrought physical response to this visual violation of the Moon that is being enacted through Birkin throwing stones at it. 'Ursula was dazed', Lawrence writes, 'her mind was all gone. She felt she had fallen to the

ground and was spilled out, like water on the earth.'[64] Her physical agitation recedes only when the reflection of the moon restores itself at the cessation of male violence. The description of this process envisions the very physical act of a woman looking at the feminine Moon as an antidote to the Decadent mode:

> 'Gradually the fragments [of light] caught together re-united, heaving rocking, dancing, falling back as in panic, but working their way home again persistently, making resemblance of fleeing away when they had advanced, but always flicking nearer, a little closer to the mark, the cluster growing mysteriously larger and brighter, as gleam after gleam fell in with the whole, until a ragged rose, a distorted, frayed moon was shaking upon the waters again, reasserted, renewed trying to recover from its convulsion, to get over the disfigurement and the agitation, to be whole and composed, at peace.'[65]

Where in Wilde's play, the Young Syrian's description of Salome represents her as 'the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver', the 'Moony' scene inverts this Decadent derealization of the feminine by effecting the material restoration of the moon. Thus, the passage suggests that the act of a woman looking recasts Decadence's sterile account of the Moon (and by extension, femininity) into one of serenity and harmony.[66] Momentarily, Lawrence animates a scene where fellowship between the female viewer and the figurative feminine restores physical equanimity and mental serenity, a process from which, significantly, the Decadent Birkin is banished. A scene of a hieratic female communion through spectatorship is similarly invoked in *Art and Man* by Vernon Lee some four years later. Standing in the Elgin rooms 'bring[s] a sudden feeling [to Lee] – more than a mere recollection – of our expectant wandering among the statues in what, comparatively speaking, had been our distant youth; a sense of the presence of Kit – a goddess among goddesses, poised in intent contemplation before her broken and battered antique sisters'.[67] Poignantly, for Lee the memory of Thomson is 'more than a recollection' and it is this presence of the beloved that enacts a palpable 'rupture in the social and cultural fabric', the quintessence of Sapphic Modernism, as identified by Shari Benstock.[68]

In the final instance, uncovering the counter-Decadence and homosociality that unite Lee and Lawrence's work affords a timely re-appraisal of both the historical parameters and the constituency of the term Sapphic Modernist. Given both Lee and Thomson's circumspection about their relationship, their commitment to performing 'psychological aesthetics' before working-class audiences *and* the aristocratic hauteur later cultivated by Sapphists such as Radclyffe Hall and Vita Sackville-West would Lee and Thomson have embraced the Sapphic nomenclature? Moreover, while the couple's commitment to counter-Decadence pre-empts the high Modernist movement's excision of the 'Tragic Generation', concomitantly the fundamental homosociality of the 'psychological aesthetics' project similarly debars the couple from membership of the androcentric New School. Where Cassandra Laity envisions Sapphic Modernists, such as Willa Cather and Renee Vivien, drawing on a male Decadent tradition to forge their own sexually dissident works, in turn, it is significant that Lawrence's novels *The White Peacock* and *Women in Love* offer a compelling homologue to the intertextual relationship that Laity adduces between Sapphic Modernists and Decadents. And despite Lawrence's patent distaste for lesbianism as evinced in *The Rainbow* and his later short story 'The Fox' and his conflicted response to same-sex relations more generally, it is striking that he chose to use his antipathy towards literary Decadence as a vehicle to articulate his own dissident, albeit conflicted, sexuality. Moreover, that Wilde's *Salome* casts a shadow over *The White Peacock* and *Women in Love* and that the trace of Lee and Thomson's ground-breaking work can also be adduced in the pivotal 'Moony' chapter suggest, after Steiner et al., another palpable line of influence from Victorian queer sexualities to male Modernists. Ultimately, it is hoped that this analysis will, at the very least, help stimulate a re-evaluation of what the precise constituency and provenance of Sapphic Modernist writing might actually be.

Notes

[1] Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 320
[2] Feldman, *Victorian Modernism*, 3
[3] Sherry, *Reinvention of Decadence*, 3-4
[4] Woods, *Homintern*, 29
[5] Benstock, 'Expatriate Sapphic Modernism' 183-5, 196; Cassandra Laity, 'H.D. and Swinburne', 218
[6] Laity, 'H.D. and Swinburne', 218-9
[7].Doan and Garrity, *Sapphic Modernities*, 3
[8] Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds*, 223n
[9] Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee*, 2
[10] Maxwell and Pulham, *Hauntings*, 19; Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee*, 2
[11] Denisoff, 'Forest Beyond the Frame', 253; Fraser, 'Assimilation from Without, 88.
[12] Maxwell and Pulham, *Hauntings*, 27
[13] Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee*, 2
[14] Lee, *Gospels of Anarchy*, 14
[15] Lee, *Gospels of Anarchy*, 73
[16] Lee, *Renaissance Fancies*, 257
[17] Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 2
[18] Ibid.,125
[19] Ibid.,146
[20] Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 164
[21] Ibid., 221-2
[22] Ibid., 20
[23] Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 154.
[24]. Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*,172.
[25] Ibid., 157
[26] Ibid., 225.
[27] Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 4; Lee*, Beauty and Ugliness*, 178
[28] Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', 834-5
[29] Zorn, *Female Intellectual*, 23
[30] Kathy Psomiades, '"Still Burning', 36; Bristow, 'Art of Feeling', 124
[31] Bristow 'Art of Feeling', 135
[32] Lee, *Miss Brown*, 2: 308
[33]Lee, intro to *Art and Man,*29.
[34] Lee recalled how Thomson 'had struck up a friendship with the late Clementina Black, and already in 1888 she was assisting that most courteous and witty of socialists in an agitation against the poisonous manufacture of matches'. Lee, intro to *Art and Man*, 26
[35]Ibid, 27.
[36] Ibid., 55
[37] Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and Sympathy*, 10
[38] Qtd in Sherry, *Reinvention of Decadence*, 139
[39] Lawrence, *Letters,* III: 25; Lawrence, *Foreword*, 486
[40] Lawrence, *Letters*, 1: 179, 61.

[41] Lawrence, *Letters*, 1: 63
[42] Worthen, *Lawrence*, 63
[43] Quoted in Stewart, *Vital Art*, 12
[44] Lawrence, *White Peacock*, 166-7
[45] Ibid., 178
[46] Ibid., 179
[47] Ibid., 249
[48] Op. cit.,
[49] Op. cit.; Quoted in Booth 'Homosexual Desire', 88.
[50] Op. cit.,
[51] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89
[52] Cited in Booth, 'Homosexual Desire', 87
[53] Lawrence, *Letters,* II: 320-1
[54] '[A]lthough [Birkin] was always drawn to women…it was for men that he felt the hot, flushing roused attraction which a man is supposed to feel for the other sex…the male physique had a fascination for him, and for the female physique he felt only a fondness, a sort of sacred love, as for a sister', Qtd in Bradshaw, intro to *Women in Love*, xxxiii
[55] Lawrence, *Letters*, I: 320; Tilghman, 'Unruly Desire', 99
[56] Lawrence wrote to Lady Cynthia Asquith that: 'All I can say is that in the tearing asunder of the sexes lies the universal death, in the assuming of the male activities by the female, there takes place the horrid swallowing of her own young, by the woman…I am sure woman will destroy man. Intrinsically in this country…I am sure there is some ghastly Clytemnestra victory ahead for the women', qtd in Tilghman, 'Unruly Desire', 99.
[57] Qtd in Bradshaw, intro to *Women in Love, xiii*
[58] Ibid., 205. 206
[59]Lawrence, *Women in Love*, 319, 177, 400. Emphasis in the original.
[60] Sherry, *Reinvention of Decadence*, 138-147
[61] Lawrence, Women in Love, 205, 499
[62] Ibid., 280-1; Tilghman, 'Unruly Desire', 95
[63] D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, 255–7.
[64] Ibid, 257
[65] Op. cit
[66] Wilde, *Salome*, 584
[67] Lee, intro to *Art and Man*, 33

[68] Benstock, 'Expatriate Sapphic Modernism', 186

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