

VERNON AND KIT

Vernon and Kit were real people, who made real contributions to art theory - Vernon is credited with conceiving our modern notion of aesthetic empathy. This play assembles key ideas from their works published a century ago, but is ultimately fiction, creatively imagining crucial moments in their life together.

Characters

Clementina "KIT" Caroline Anstruther-Thomson (1857–1921) was a Victorian-era writer and art theorist. She was born in Fife, Scotland, but spent much of her adult life in England and Italy, where she wrote on art theory, both in her own right and as co-author with Vernon Lee. Later in life Kit was active as a leader in the Scottish Girl Guides, introducing generations of young women to ideas of self-sufficiency and practical resilience. At the opening of the play, Kit is early 30s, still speaking with a Scottish lilt despite spending time in continental Europe. She is tall (Vernon called her 'Amazonian') and athletic.

VERNON Lee was the chosen name of French-born English fiction writer, aesthetics theorist and art critic Violet Paget (1856 – 1935). Always short-haired and dressing, from her late teens onwards, in masculine clothes, Vernon was a feminist and a pacifist. Vernon and Kit's relationship lasted from 1888 to 1898. They spent much of that time living between England and Italy, and Vernon later settled permanently in Villa il Palmerino, Florence. Vernon's library collection can still be viewed in the British Institute of Florence, and her writings on art theory were greatly influenced by her Florentine community of writers and painters.

Setting

British Museum, sculpture room, circa 1890. Then, a picnic in the Italian countryside circa 1895. Then, a breakfast room at Vernon's villa in Florence, 1898.

VERNON and KIT

(KIT is standing staring intently at a sculpture only she can see. VERNON circles her, watching her watching the art.)

VERNON

I have neither your splendid muscles nor your painter's habit of standing indefinitely looking at things.

(KIT breathes in and rises a little onto her tiptoes, filled with the experience of the art. She does not hear VERNON, who waits a moment then continues speaking.)

As we trudge evening after evening through the atmosphere of gas and fog to gaze on these plaster casts I keep expecting they will give us – like some wonder-working Madonna – a sign. A revelation of one-half of life, of the ways of the spirit. But instead, all I get is a sense of the presence of you, a goddess among goddesses, poised in intent contemplation before your broken and battered antique sisters.

(KIT turns slowly to face her, as though coming up from deep water and hearing VERNON's voice for the first time.)

You go where art has rid you of all sense of the passing of time. Somewhere safe and serene, in a little railed-off and mysteriously guarded circle of existence. While I wait patiently for the mystery of art to be solved. Yet all that fills my mind is an insistent longing for tea at the Viennese Bakery in Holborn.

KIT

Feel my pulse.

VERNON

(Taking her wrist).

It races. And your breathing too, elevated, and your cheeks flushed, and your hips swaying in expectation as though we were alone in intimacy. But you were alone with the marble, with the lines of it, and I was not there with you. Eri in isolamento.

KIT

There are worlds different from our own. The sculptor opens a corridor.

VERNON

(In an agony of feeling left out)

I want to know it too – tell me what you feel!

KIT

Her eyes are closed but I read in them what she might have seen. This half-face is Diana, the far-shooting arrow-pourer, bringer of light, defender of women's right to choose their lover, or to take no lover at all if they so please. As I look, I smell and feel too - the dust and sweat on her dogs as they pant from the hunt, the coarse fabric of her cropped tunic slapping against my knee, the cold waters of Lago di Nemi rushing over my head, the sharp press of the bowstring tightening along my cheekbone.

VERNON

In German I would say you are 'einführung' -- feeling into the sculpture. Or perhaps in Greek it is empatheia, physical affection or passion that you feel. I am jealous!

KIT

I do feel awakened. Roused to a purpose. To want to do something better for all women.

VERNON

That part is all you. You give the art too much credit. Art comes to us proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality of our moments as they pass, and simply for these moments' sake.

KIT

That last is from Pater.

VERNON

Yes, Walter Pater.

KIT

Why didn't you say so?

VERNON

Because I knew you knew.

KIT

Shall we go and have tea?

VERNON

Let's go and have tea.

(Exit together, lights down, scene change to countryside, lights up on KIT seated, arranging food from a hamper on a picnic rug. VERNON arrives on a bicycle, throwing it vivaciously to the ground and expostulating with joy.)

VERNON

I cannot explain how much I love to cycle! I must apologise for lateness, but I cannot say it was wrong of me. A wrong turn is no hardship; it merely gives additional knowledge of the country, a further detail of the characteristic lie of the land, a different view of some hill or some group of buildings. I bicycled half an hour round the church to watch its transepts and choir fold and unfold, its towers change place, and its outline of high roof and gargoyles alter on the landscape.

KIT

(Fondly.)

And I have eaten all the bacon and egg pies, and that too was no hardship.

(Pulls VERNON to the ground and kisses her in greeting.)

I did save you some fruit and seed-cake.

VERNON

(Still talking about bicycling.)

One speeds along the straight road, flying into the beckoning horizon, conscious only of mountain lines or stacked cloud masses; living, for the instant, in air, space become fluid and breathable, earth a mere detail.

(Waving away KIT's offer of food.)

I cannot eat— I am freed of mortal cares.

KIT

That is what I feel when I look at the Venus de Milo or lines of a Raphael, or anything in the Etruscan collection. But I have never been one for bicycling.

VERNON

You *could* be. We must be prepared to begin life many times afresh. This is what bicycling teaches me – that the essence of life is variety and alteration of pace. Skimming rapidly over certain portions of the road and precipitating our course to the points where we slacken and linger - life must be phrased, and so bicycling affords an instructive analogy of what things to notice, to talk about and remember on life's high-roads and lanes; and what others, whizzing past on scarce skimming wheel, to reject from memory and feeling.

KIT

(Laughing.)

You have formulated an entire philosophy of life from the seat of your bicycle! Perhaps it will be equally as successful as our little tract on the philosophy of art, which seems to be doing quite well.

VERNON

Extremely well. I have received more letters of praise via the publisher just this week. But already I begin to doubt some of what we did and said.

KIT

What parts do you doubt?

VERNON

Well, was it *empathy*, an inhabitation of the spirit of the artistic endeavour by which the art infected you with its intentions, or were you merely seeing yourself in its image? Your own curves in its cheek, as though in a mirror?

KIT

I suspect you accuse me of Narcissism. And yet, from your collusion with my physical interpretations, given freely to you, has come your own success.

VERNON

No, no, you misunderstand me. I mean it still as ‘feeling into,’ but perhaps it is your feelings put into the painting or sculpture, rather than the artist or subject’s feelings put into you.

KIT

(Disengaging.)

As you will.

VERNON

I mean it as a compliment. You are a strong woman, Kit. The strongest.

KIT

As are you, Vee. As are you. However, I suspect neither of us is as strong as Arcadia or Carmenta, even when all we have left of them is an artist’s imagining in marble or clay.

(Pause.)

In any case, for me it is not want of passion for the bicycle that prevents me, but want of physics: my legs are simply too long to rotate comfortably between pedal and seat.

VERNON

You do have exquisitely long legs, Kitty. That much is indubitable.

(VERNON caresses KIT’s leg, lights down. Scene change. Lights up on KIT and VERNON at a breakfast table, VERNON is reading a letter.)

VERNON

They want my travel essays! To be published in full.

(Clutches letter to her chest.)

I knew there was more still to say about the continent than just what edifice was built when. It is the romance of places, the poetry they strike in our hearts, that matters. The spell they cast upon us. Not dusty dates and matters of battle and conquest.

(Puts down the letter.)

Will you come with me on the next trip? I’m thinking Switzerland again, and Tuscan churches in Summer.

KIT

(Putting down tea cup).

Violet.

VERNON

Don’t call me that. Vernon or Vee. But not that. I’m not that person any more. Thankfully. Nobody ever published a single thing I wrote when I wrote as Violet, but as Vernon they lap it up.

KIT

Vee.

VERNON

You're going to say something horrid. I can see it in your face. Just don't say it, Kitty. Least said, soonest mended.

KIT

Vee. You are that person. Or you take from that person. You may not be Violet any more in name or demeanour, but Violet's inheritance pays for Switzerland and Tuscany.

VERNON

And for this villa, my darling.

KIT

I know: and I can't accept it anymore.

VERNON

What do you mean?

KIT

I can't accept this life any more. I can't flit from gallery to picnic to villa. I can't dart from painting to sculpture and back to painting without doing something about how they make me feel! I have stood face to face with the greatest art of all time and felt it move me, but the sum of that movement was that I gasped and twitched my toes. I resisted anything more. Then you wrote about my gasping and my twitching, and the world thinks we are geniuses, unlocking the secret of art.

VERNON

You have to admit, we have said things that nobody has said before. Observed things that nobody has observed before.

KIT

That's just it, Vee. We observed. I observed the art, and you observed me. But I wanted more. When I looked at Diana I wanted to be a hunter and a ruler of mountains. I wanted to cut off my hair and fend for myself, not just look at a painting and imagine what might have been. When I looked at that sculpture of her, at that determined mouth and fierce brow, I wanted to help other women become defenders of women's right to freedom of choice like her. I wanted to *be someone* with my feelings, someone useful.

VERNON

(Snarkily)

And a child rearer? Don't forget Diana is also goddess of midwifery and fertility and all *that*. Anyway, this is exactly the opposite of what we are lauded for writing about. We have freed art from moral burden, championed it as beauty for beauty's sake, shown how that gasping and twitching you are denigrating is the very stuff of life itself. And you agreed with me. Your name is on the cover too.

KIT

I know, Vee. And I'm sorry, but I disagree now with what we wrote – art is not, cannot merely be, for art's sake. It must change us. It must act upon us, and then we must act upon the world. I'm going back to Scotland, to my homeland and my roots. I have found a community that I can give to. A community of women helping women.

VERNON

You regret this? Us?

KIT

I do not. Not one minute. But as a very wise woman once told me, we must be prepared to begin life many times afresh. A wrong turn is no hardship, but a great liberator. The essence of life is variety and alteration of pace.

VERNON

(Laughing.)

You quote me at myself, you nymph. I cannot argue with my own words. I think that we will remain great friends. And that you will do the things you intend, for they are well within your grasp. We enrich our life, not by the making of far-fetched plans, but attention to doing well that which is close at hand. And as to the goddesses, we need not strive towards them – they walk, majestic, through the universe. And if our spirit is reverent and cheerful, they take us now and then by the hand and lead us a few yards towards what is good and right.

KIT

As we have both felt, in our own way.

(KIT takes VERNON by the hand and leads her, gently and in peace, off the stage. Curtain.)