

EVELYN DE MORGAN, VERNON LEE,
AND ASSIMILATION FROM WITHOUT

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In 1894, the art historian, aesthetician, essayist, and fiction writer Vernon Lee published a volume of "Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties" under the title *Althea*. The book includes a chapter "On Friendship," in which her character and spokesperson Baldwin, the eponymous hero of an earlier companion volume who makes a reappearance here, declares that "we grow, as in the physical, so in the moral order also, by assimilation from without." Baldwin/Lee continues:

Our self ... is, to a large extent, the rearrangement of those other selves whom we have met and lived with: the originality of our personality being shown in the new pattern made out of these old materials.... Where do I end, and you begin? Who can answer? We are not definite, distinct existences, floating in a moral and intellectual vacuum; we are for ever meeting, crossing, encroaching, living next one another, in one another, part of ourselves left behind in others, part of them become ourselves: a flux of thought, feeling, experience, aspiration, a complex, interchanging life. (145)

Just one of a number of interestingly modern reflections displacing the idea of a discrete and unified individual self with a vision of shifting and amalgamating subject positions, in a book comprising a series of vigorous arguments of which the author nevertheless claims that "the ideas and tendencies distributed among my half-dozen speakers are my own ideas and tendencies" (x), Baldwin's declaration provides a suggestive way of framing a discussion of Vernon Lee's friendship with the Pre-Raphaelite painter Evelyn De Morgan. At the time Lee wrote it, De Morgan was at work on what was to become her best known painting, *Flora*, claiming her Renaissance heritage, like earlier generations of Pre-Raphaelites, with this striking modern amalgam of two of its most famous iconic female figures, Botticelli's Venus and Spring.