



## Beauty and the Beast

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The article is a reflection on the category of the beautiful in the work of Professor Hilary Fraser in the context of Victorian Studies at Birkbeck College.

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In the lockdown summer of 2020 I got an urgent message from the Head of the English Department at Birkbeck to call asap. It was regarding ‘the Tillotson Chair situation’. Right, I thought: thinking cap on. Since Hilary had just retired, we obviously needed a shortlist for replacements for Birkbeck’s chair of Victorian Studies. What a line of women scholars the appointee would have to live up to! Barbara Hardy, Isobel Armstrong, Hilary Fraser. As I tinkered with a wish list of eminent women scholars over a coffee, I realized we hadn’t done this kind of senior appointment for a very long time: since Hilary herself had been appointed, in fact.

The call completely threw me: ‘No, no, no’, my Head exclaimed. ‘We *obviously* can’t do that kind of hire in the midst of this current crisis, much as we’d like to. We need *you* to take it over to keep the Chair occupied.’ That spluttering noise that started up in the background was, I suspected, the sound of Geoffrey Tillotson just beginning to rotate in his grave. In no doubt graceless confusion, I said I would have to think about it. And my first thought as I put the phone down was this: *Exit Beauty; Enter the Beast*.

I didn’t mean this as shallowly as it sounds. It was more that Hilary’s work, from her first book, *Beauty and Belief* (1986) to her most recent, *Women Writing Art History* (2014), had always focused on the aesthetic category of the beautiful while I scrabbled through Gothic graveyards, rooting around in the grave mould for vampires, mummies, or zombies and assembling ugly, undead monsters from any available body parts. I spent much of the first lockdown walking around the streets to find the location of the lost inner city burial grounds of Clerkenwell, sitting in parks that had once been sites of legendary toxic miasmas and notorious corpse fires that burnt for days (Spa Fields, if you fancy a visit), reading my colleague David McAllister’s *Imagining the Dead in British Literature and Culture* (2018). In stark contrast Hilary’s focus has been on canonical high art forms and writers and artists with intimidating bodies of work and scholarship in their wake, while I have been steadfastly drawn to the marginal and the lowly. And although I knew that Geoffrey Tillotson — who was at Birkbeck from 1945 until his death in 1969 — had a perhaps surprising penchant for supporting contemporary avant-garde cinema in the 1960s, Antonioni in particular (*very good taste, that*), he had also been the foremost critic of mid-Victorian literature of his generation. Michael Slater, Birkbeck’s world-leading Dickensian, had been sent to ‘that Tillotson chap’ in the 1950s by Lord David Cecil (speaking imperiously from the bath from which he tended to conduct his tutorials, as Michael tells it), as Oxford ‘didn’t really “do” Dickens’. Tillotson wrote with equal poise on Dickens and Thackeray, Carlyle and Clough, Arnold and Pater. There are three essays on John Henry Newman in Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson’s *Mid-Victorian Studies* (1965); Hilary’s *Beauty and Belief* opens with the Oxford Movement and Newman’s religious struggles. There is a discernible passing of the baton between these generations of Victorianists. I wasn’t sure that I would add much to this team except to fluff the handover.

The beauty and the beast made me think then of Marina Warner's critical study, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), and how Hilary, when stepping into the role of dean of the newly minted School of Arts in 2010, had orchestrated Marina's arrival at Birkbeck. And then I also recalled that the last time I had seen Jean Cocteau's magical film adaptation of *The Beauty and the Beast* it had been in the main auditorium at the National Film Theatre. Quite early in the screening, it became apparent that there was someone reading out the subtitles in a somewhat penetrating whisper to a small child, who was slightly too young to read them for herself. This kind of behaviour is normally severely frowned upon at the NFT, as you can imagine. However, most of the audience seemed to recognize that the whispering voice belonged to none other than Laura Mulvey, the leading feminist film critic, one of the virtual inventors of film studies as an academic discipline, reading out the subtitles to her tiny granddaughter. Here was another Birkbeck professor, who appears in a rather sustained way in the opening pages of Hilary's *Women Writing Art History*, because Laura is the great granddaughter of the leading Victorian art critic Alice Meynell. The passage from Meynell to Mulvey indicated a continuity down the generations of those interested in sexuality in the field of vision — a phrase Hilary uses in her introduction to her study on women art critics in a surely deliberate echo of the title of one of Jacqueline Rose's influential collections of essays — yet *another* leading professor that Hilary had also helped come to Birkbeck in the 2010s.

Do you see the figure in the carpet yet? It's all about communality and collaborative network-building among what Sally Ledger (ah, there's another one) christened the 'Victorian Ladies' at Birkbeck. And although our colleague David Feldman fondly recalled his status as an honorary 'Victorian Lady' at Sally's memorial event in 2009 (reading out, in a halting, puzzled, donnish way the lyrics to Kool and the Gang's 1979 disco masterpiece 'Ladies' Night' as if it were a particularly obtuse fragment by Gerard Manley Hopkins), being asked to move into this chair felt like blundering into the wrong space. 'Someone had blundered!', the exhausting, self-piteous Mr Ramsay keeps shouting in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, quoting from Tennyson's glorification of that pinnacle of Victorian male military stupidity, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'.

But all these implicit binary oppositions I have just constructed of course need to be pulled down. In Jean Cocteau's brief afterword to a 1963 reprint of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's original *Beauty and the Beast*, the director talks about a secret passageway between the poles set up by the story: that Beauty recognizes not the *Other* in the Beast, but the *terrible beauty* it monstrously embodies.<sup>1</sup> The conservative closure of the tale, where Beauty's beauty subsumes all and transforms the Beast, is a belated sticking plaster over the transgressive moment of identification between the beautiful and the ugly. This subversion is what electrifies the story for Cocteau. If I'd paid enough

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, *Beauty and the Beast*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

attention, I could have learnt this lesson from Birkbeck's Luisa Calè, another link in this chain of scholarship, whose work on William Blake's 'bestial metamorphoses' of Dante's medieval bestiary unearths a similar logic of subversion or transgression.<sup>2</sup>

The Gothic thinks it is the sulky rebel that trumps the just proportion, the ethics and aesthetics of the beautiful. Against the orderly frame that contains and in fact produces disinterested beauty, the sublime bursts the boundaries with a properly holy terror. If the high Victorians sought the consolation of form, poetic and natural beauty fused with religious affirmation in harmonious design in the works of Keble and Newman (as Hilary expounds in the opening chapter of *Beauty and Belief*), then the Goths seemed more aligned with Rudolf Otto on this matter. Otto, writing *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) amidst the ruins of the Great War, wanted to return to the idea of divine wrath and awe, of the overwhelming terror that underpins religious experience:

It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering.<sup>3</sup>

We move from the harmonious balance of the beautiful, synthesized by the poetic imagination, to the body horror of the uglified sublime.

Yet Hilary's trajectory through the nineteenth century seems to me to track a more subtle and interesting story than this about the crisis in the category of the beautiful, the widening tear between the natural and the supernatural, ethics and aesthetics. Newman and Keble, Ruskin and Arnold, fight rearguard actions against the withdrawal of the faith that the sacred can be accessed via the beautiful signs and symbols of the mundane world (as *Beauty and Belief* puts it: 'the world as symbol or economy of the *invisibilia*').<sup>4</sup> From this wound that can't be healed flow the symptoms that form the focus of Hilary's later work: Pater's aestheticism; Wilde's inversions; Vernon Lee's psychologized aesthetics. The last of these ends up, suitably enough for my theme, writing *Beauty and Ugliness, and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, in collaboration with her partner Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, in 1912.

There is also a veering away, as Hilary's work progresses, from the high canonical giants of the mid-Victorian era. In *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (1992), the

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<sup>2</sup> Luisa Calè, 'Bestial Metamorphoses: Blake's Variations on Transhuman Change in Dante's Hell', in *Bestly Blake*, ed. by Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 153–81.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 42.

chapter on Pater and J. A. Symonds clears the way to a process of recovering the then comparatively eclipsed work of Vernon Lee. Elsewhere, Hilary theorizes Vernon Lee as an overdetermined and interstitial figure, using Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall to think of Lee's position as one of those figures who

belong to more than one world, speak more than one language [...] inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home; who have learned to negotiate and translate between cultures, and who, because they are irrecoverably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, have learned to live with, and indeed speak from, *difference*.<sup>5</sup>

An interest in Lee's in-betweenness signals a now more foregrounded attention to the constructed category of beauty and canonicity, opening new pathways into the late Victorian period. It feeds into her collaborative writing of *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (co-written with Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston in 2003) with a new attention to disregarded forms and cultural figures, but also points forward to the Birkbeck context, where the formidable duo of Laurel Brake and Isobel Armstrong had blazed a way for both the reconsideration of marginalized print cultures and offered a foundationally political and feminist reading of aesthetic theory (as in Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000)). Birkbeck also housed Ana Parejo Vadillo's pioneering work on 'Michael Field' and other cosmopolitan women aesthetes, Emily Senior's addition to the mix of 'colonial ways of seeing' in Romantic and Victorian landscape aesthetics, and Carolyn Burdett's excavation of sympathy and Vernon Lee's key role in bringing the concept of empathy into the critical language of English ethics and aesthetics. Vicky Mills would arrive later, completing another impressive constellation of women scholars. Hilary's *Women Writing Art History* shimmers with the energies of this new network on moving to Bloomsbury, a community so movingly evoked in her Acknowledgements to that volume.

By this point, in this matrix, Beauty has been cracked open, thoroughly embodied, historicized, and politicized, sprung from the prisons of narrow formalism, theology, or canonicity. It is no longer the orderly and prim category of eighteenth-century philosophical taxonomies of taste, but complex, messy, and multiform.

Here's my hope: that beauty and the beast need not be placed in reductive opposition or locked inside the Hegelian dialectic of the ugly as the active negation of beauty.<sup>6</sup> Instead, we might seek the hidden continuum impishly suggested by Jean

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall, cited in Hilary Fraser, 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between', in *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880-1930*, ed. by Marysa Demoor (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 114-33 (p. 115).

<sup>6</sup> The theory posed in Karl Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness* from 1853, as outlined in the introduction to *Ugliness: The Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory*, ed. by Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich (New York: Tauris, 2014).

Cocteau between the two, and hunt for overlapping continuities. Perhaps, then, I can feel less worried holding this Tillotson Chair for the time it takes to be able to hand it on in — well, one can always hope — slightly less apocalyptic times for humanities in the university.

In a mildly unnerving coincidence, I recently wandered into an empty classroom in the basement of the School of Arts at Birkbeck, only to find the official college photograph of Geoffrey Tillotson shoved in a disintegrating cardboard box on a dusty shelf. This image had once looked down on current staff members from the wall of what had been the English Department common room — such a quaint notion of communal space in the modern university! I rescued him from his insecure locale, dusted him down, that dapper, erudite gent, and took him back to my office. I don't discern any softening of that sceptical look just yet, and I don't think he approves of what happens to be my current reading right now, Phil Baker's recent psychogeographical perambulation, *City of the Beast: The London of Aleister Crowley* (2022), which evokes that late Decadent's career dedicated to pulling the sacred down into the profane in true *fin-de-siècle*, *fin-du-globe* style. Still, I think in pondering for this essay the secret link corridor between beauty and the beast I might, after all, have found a way of carrying on the work of my august immediate predecessor, Hilary Fraser. Fingers crossed.

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