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# The Art of Feeling: Subjective Criticism and Emotional Resonance

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This article is a personal reflection on the importance of 'feeling' and affective response in Hilary Fraser's work, focusing on her chapter, 'Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines in Vernon Lee's Library', in *Dalla stanza accanto: Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo* (2006) and her article, 'Grief Encounter: The Language of Mourning in *Fin-de-Siècle* Sculpture', published in *Word & Image* (2018). It considers the similarities between the kind of subjective criticism adopted by Walter Pater and Vernon Lee and Rita Felski's advocation of postcritical reading as a means of coproduction to highlight how, in Fraser's work, reflective emotion and critical analysis coalesce.

In his 2006 essay 'Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling', Joseph Bristow asks: 'What are the relations between art and emotion?'[1] As he observes, the vexed nature of this question has preoccupied us for centuries; in the nineteenth century, it took a scientific turn when art and the emotions — both independently and in tandem — became topics of psychological scrutiny. More recently, in *The Limits of Critique*, her fascinating analysis of the hermeneutics of suspicion common to twentieth-century literary criticism, Rita Felski has suggested we might adopt 'postcritical reading' as a different means of engaging with literature. She argues that instead of 'looking behind the text — for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives — we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible'.[2] Self-avowedly drawing on Bruno Latour, Marielle Macé, and Yves Citton, Felski asks us to think of criticism as 'a coproduction between actors rather than an unraveling of manifest meaning, a form of making rather than unmaking' (p. 12).

Any attuned reader of Hilary Fraser's work will recognize the importance of 'feeling' in her writings. What follows is a personal engagement with the richness afforded by the kind of coproduction suggested by Felski in two of Hilary's essays and the emotional resonances they elicit. The first, 'Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines in Vernon Lee's Library', forms a chapter in *Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo*, a collection that emerged from a conference of that name which took place in Florence in May 2005; the second is an article, 'Grief Encounter: The Language of Mourning in *Fin-de-Siècle* Sculpture', published in *Word & Image* in 2018, a stunningly beautiful meditation on grief and loss expressed through critical analysis.[3]

I had the privilege of hearing earlier versions of both of these essays before they appeared in printed form. In 2005 I attended the conference in Florence, finally able to cover my costs thanks to being appointed to my first permanent lectureship following three years of short-term contracts. Here, Hilary gave the keynote lecture on Vernon Lee that eventually became the published chapter. Much later, in 2015, many of the sentiments expressed in 'Grief Encounter' contributed to the Memorial Lecture Hilary gave in honour of her wonderful friend and Birkbeck colleague, Sally Ledger, who remains much missed and remembered not only for her groundbreaking scholarship, but also for the kindness and support she gave to a generation of younger scholars.

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[1] Joseph Bristow, 'Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 25 (2006), 117–39 (p. 117).

[2] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 12.

[3] Hilary Fraser, 'Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines in Vernon Lee's Library', in *Dalla stanza accanto: Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo*, ed. by Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto (Florence: Consiglio Regionale Toscana, 2006), pp. 231–41; Hilary Fraser, 'Grief Encounter: The Language of Mourning in *Fin-de-Siècle* Sculpture', *Word & Image*, 34 (2018), 40–54.

In 2005 'Writing in the Margins' felt especially significant to me. Having completed my PhD on Vernon Lee and published some short pieces about her, I was in the process of turning my thesis into a monograph. For me, the essay is memorable on a personal level for two reasons: firstly, for Hilary's generosity in referring to one of the early essays I had published on Lee (that thrill of knowing that someone out there has actually read one's article); and secondly, because, for the first time, I saw my own experience of researching in the Vernon Lee Library at the British Institute in Florence mirrored in Hilary's words. In the essay Hilary writes how, while working in the archive, she felt 'as if the ghost of Vernon Lee herself', that 'aficionado of hauntings', was sitting by her as she thumbed through her books, how Lee's presence 'was palpable, those feisty marginal notes [seeming] like her own ghostly imprint on the books that she read' ('Writing in the Margins', p. 232).

This feeling will be familiar to many of us who rifle through archival materials, but there is a particular vividness to the exclamatory nature of Lee's marginalia that makes her come alive. As Hilary says, 'One doesn't have to be immersed in Lee's own explorations of the pyscho-physiology of perception to be moved by the indentation of her pencil on the page when she writes "Aha!" or "Nonsense!" or "Excellent!"' (p. 232). And, in my own experience, it is sometimes the gentler, 'quiet' comments that can touch us the most, as when one reads in the margins of Lee's copy of Edwin B. Holt's *The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics* (1915), 'Mary, always Mary', an allusion to her friendship with Mary Robinson that is redolent of lost love and enduring memory.[4]

The question of tactility — both emotional and physical — that would later inform 'Grief Encounters' also manifests itself here. Hilary notes how, in running her hands 'over the pencil marks' that Vernon Lee's own had made, she was engaging in a very 'nineteenth-century compulsion to make contact with, to be in touch with the dead' ('Writing in the Margins', p. 232). Drawing on H. J. Jackson's study of marginalia, she acknowledges that Vernon Lee's own may have been performative, written, in part at least, for the eyes of future scholars: 'Given her interest in ghosts and spectral connections, it seems likely that Lee would have envisaged this "ghostly audience" of readers, who would struggle to transcribe, and sometimes translate, her vigorous and untidy hand' and find themselves 'drawn into meaningful and living connections with a past that is not quite laid to rest'.[5]

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[4] Edwin B. Holt, *The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1915), Vernon Lee Collection, British Institute, Florence, VL 150. 1952 Holt.

[5] 'Writing in the Margins', p. 232. See also, H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 95.

Yet, it is not simply the tangibility of Hilary's encounter with Vernon Lee that drives this essay. At the heart of it is an analysis of Lee's marginalia as anarchic. For Hilary, Lee writes in the margins *from* the margins; her annotations, 'sometimes in the language of the text she is reading, sometimes in a different language, show her ability to negotiate between cultures, to write from difference' (p. 239). Moreover, she reads Lee's notes as 'emblematic' of 'her interstitial national, historical and sexual identity', and expressive of her willingness to work 'between and outside disciplines' (p. 238). For Lee, marginalia function as a form of intellectual collaboration, one that Hilary finds productive; reading Vernon Lee's emphatic annotations, she considers how to fully understand her interdisciplinarity and explore how her ideas are 'literally and metaphorically interwoven'; Hilary finds that she herself must become interdisciplinary and engage with an extensive range of disciplinary perspectives (p. 239). I had come to the same conclusion when writing my thesis. To work on Vernon Lee is to expand the dimensions of one's disciplinary lens, to accommodate forays beyond literature into history, psychogeography, psychology, art, and aesthetics; to embrace the concept of empathy and to understand how it lies at her core long before the term is explicitly articulated in her writings.

Empathy and feeling are also central to Hilary's article, 'Grief Encounter: The Language of Mourning in *Fin-de-Siècle* Sculpture'. Dedicated to two people whose untimely loss remained acute, it is a moving, courageous, and striking piece of criticism in which public and private memories coalesce. Beginning with a discussion of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, published in 1778 as *Plastik*, Hilary explores Herder's injunction that 'sculpture demands haptic engagement' ('Grief Encounter', p. 40), that to understand it, we must be aware of its relation to our own bodies and to our 'sense of touch'.[6] She goes on to consider how the pervasive idea of 'Pygmalion's life-giving touch on post-Enlightenment sculptural aesthetics speaks of "anxieties of animation"' that find their way into nineteenth-century writings on sculpture ('Grief Encounter', p. 40). Yet such anxieties also highlight the inanimate nature of sculpture, especially in memorial sculpture, where the statue's stillness invokes the rigidity of the corpse. For Hilary, the corpse is 'an important subject matter' for art lovers who contemplate a sculpture, and especially for those who have 'recently been touched by death' (p. 40). In such instances, she argues, 'Herder's foundational theorization of our embodied, tactile,

[6] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, ed. and trans. by Jason Gaiger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 36.

imaginative, *feeling* experience of sculpture suggests ways of thinking about sculpture as a medium of mourning and a vehicle for feeling "in the dark"' (p. 40, emphasis in original).

Using Herder's framework, Hilary launches into what she describes as an 'experiment in synaesthesia', one that is in dialogue with *fin-de-siècle* writings about art and sculpture 'to frame and comprehend a modern encounter', her methodology based on the 'emotional and subjective style of criticism' employed by Walter Pater and Vernon Lee (pp. 40, 41). Focusing on two key artworks — Auguste Rodin's *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, modelled 1884–95 (*Fig. 1*) and Edward Onslow Ford's *Shelley Memorial* (1892) (*Fig. 2*) — Hilary explores 'how public monuments can bring forth a highly personal response, how they can take us from the historical to the representative, and from there to the individuality of our own loss' (pp. 41–42).

*Fig. 1*: Auguste Rodin, *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (The Burghers of Calais), modelled 1884–95, cast 1985, Metropolitan Museum of Art.


*Fig. 2*: Edward Onslow Ford, Shelley Memorial, 1892, marble with bronze base, University College, Oxford. Andrew Shiva, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

It is one of the figures in Rodin's *Les Bourgeois de Calais* known as 'Le Passant' that triggers an overwhelming response, one born from 'a physical feeling of the shared corporeality of the sculptural object' in the gallery space (p. 41). She reads the 'sense of the imprint of the sculptor's touch' and the 'tactile knowledge inscribed in the sculptural surface' as 'a palpable point of mediation between physical presence, absence, and mourning' (p. 41). Similarly, in her deliberation on the impact of the Shelley Memorial, Hilary notes that people's responses to it, whether expressed in nineteenth-century or contemporary contexts, seemingly break down 'traditional distinctions between public and private commemoration of the dead' (p. 46). For Hilary, the sculpture 'provokes a highly personal response in the viewer', one that prompts us to think about the 'affective experience' of encounters with such public moments to which we bring 'our own private experiences of loss' (p. 46).

As we have all seen, in recent years the relationship between public statuary and personal experience has been at the core of heated arguments in the UK and the US, especially in the contexts of race and misogyny. Notable examples include the bronze statue of the Bristol merchant and slave trader, Edward Colston (1636–1721), completed by the sculptor John Cassidy in 1895, and toppled by anti-racism protestors in 2020 (*Fig. 3*); Maggi Hambling's sculpture, commissioned to commemorate Mary Wollstonecraft, and unveiled on 10 November 2020 on Newington Green in London (*Fig. 4*); and Luciano Garbati's sculpture, *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, installed across from the New York courthouse where, barely a month later, several men (including Harvey Weinstein) were prosecuted following revelations emerging from the #MeToo movement. Reactions to all these sculptures unleashed a Twitterstorm and a plethora of articles.


*Fig. 3*: John Cassidy, Statue of Edward Colston, 1895, bronze, Bristol. William Avery, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

*Fig. 4*: Maggi Hambling, A Statue for Mary Wollstonecraft, 2020, bronze and granite, London. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

However, the relationship between public statuary and private grief remains notably underexplored in academic writing, perhaps because, as scholars, we often shy away from personal revelation or expression, choosing to hide instead behind the perceived 'objectivity' of critical analysis. Hilary's essay is an arresting example of how subjective responses can enhance and deepen critical analysis; at no point are the historical and contextual backgrounds or theoretical concepts necessary to her argument compromised. Instead, they are skilfully intertwined with personal reflection and feeling; the physical and spiritual dimensions of 'feeling' intermingle in a critical journey that takes us through emotions that are elicited by a fusion of sculpture, poetry, and music, asking that we reassess the affective nature of art and its power to confound and astonish us.

When I heard Hilary deliver part of this essay at the Memorial Lecture she gave for Sally Ledger at Birkbeck, I was myself grieving after a series of personal experiences that had resulted in sorrowful losses if not physical deaths. Hilary's words, and her reactions to Rodin's sculpture, resonated with me. At that time, I would often find myself blindsided by unexpected encounters with artworks: statues of Antinous that seemed to me reminiscent of a once familiar form and face (*Fig. 5*); movies that seemed to speak to what was happening in my own life; music that reminded me of painful moments. All dredged to the surface emotions I was trying very hard to suppress.

*Fig. 5*: Bust of Antinous, found at Hadrian's Villa in 1790, Vatican Museums. Carole Raddato, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA-2.0.

By the time I read the published version, I was in a happier place, and in the process of completing my own book on sculpture in literature, begun years beforehand, in which the tensions between animation and stasis were threaded into critical readings. As in Hilary's 'Grief Encounter', which wove itself into my last chapter on libidinal entombments, sculptural touch and its traces were central to my own readings of works by, among others, Arthur O'Shaughnessy, Edmund Gosse, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde. In retrospect it was no accident that, of all people, I suggested Hilary to

the publisher as someone who might endorse the book for, in a way, it is in dialogue with work by her that inspired me and made me think about tactility and the affective ways in which we engage with art.

Similarly, I do not think it is by chance that Hilary's research has also focused on the works and networks of nineteenth-century women artists, sculptors, writers, historians, and critics. Her interest in recovering their writings and their rightful position in late nineteenth-century culture is reflected in the support she gives and has given cohorts of twentieth and twenty-first century women scholars. I have known Hilary for many years, but began to know her better when she became president of the British Association for Victorian Studies in 2015. As BAVS secretary, I developed a close professional relationship with her that morphed into a delightful friendship. I am sure it is a trajectory that her colleagues at Birkbeck and elsewhere will recognize. Her research is invariably impressive and her career undoubtedly inspirational, but it is the warmth she brings to the academic profession — known for its competitiveness and its challenges — that makes her a memorable scholar and friend.