

**‘The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside’: Vernon Lee’s  
Psychological Aesthetics**

**Carolyn Burdett**

Reviewing Vernon Lee’s *Beauty and Ugliness*, which appeared in 1912, the *New York Times* concluded that it ‘is simply a “terrible” book: Long, involved sentences, long scientific terms, queerly inverted thoughts, French words and Latin and German, all hammer at one’s cerebral properties with unquenchable vehemence’. The review, entitled ‘What is Beauty?’, quotes for illustration of its assessment a paragraph, taken ‘almost at random from the middle of the work’.<sup>1</sup> It makes the point well enough: its technical, reference-laden sentences are bafflingly opaque to a reader unfamiliar with the largely German-authored debate about aesthetics with which Lee is engaging. Wittingly or not, however, the *New York Times*’s disgruntled reviewer has selected a key passage. It takes us to the heart of the debate about psychology and about aesthetics, and about the relationship between the two, which was taking place at the end of the nineteenth century.

At its simplest, Lee’s objectionable paragraph concerns the question of whether aesthetic responsiveness is primarily bodily or mental, and what it means to try to make a distinction between the two. By the time she compiled *Beauty and Ugliness*, a collection which included work dating back to the 1890s, Lee was making use of a newly translated word, ‘empathy’. For Lee, empathy was the mechanism which explained aesthetic experience and thus a good deal about emotion as such. She saw it as analogous to the way in which Darwin’s natural selection supplied the mechanism which could at last fully explain the ‘developmental hypothesis’ or evolution – and equally as important.<sup>2</sup> The word empathy had been coined in 1909 by the experimental psychologist Edward Titchener to translate a German term, *Einfühlung*, which means ‘feeling oneself into the place’ of someone or something.<sup>3</sup> Tracing Lee’s intellectual, emotional, and literal translations of this term means following an often contentious debate about where aesthetic (and other) emotion happens. It is striking that empathy has recently again become central to questions about minds and bodies, and to how they

determine human experience. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, scientists seek to prove that empathy is a product of evolved neural hard-wiring, or of hormonal effects on the brain, or of early environment and upbringing.<sup>4</sup> Educationalists wonder whether empathy can be taught. As we will see, Lee's unquenchable, even vehement, effort to understand 'what is beauty?' is more relevant to and suggestive for these twenty-first-century questions than the *New York Times*'s reviewer could have imagined possible.

Vernon Lee's was a key voice in the debate about the relationship between psychology and aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century. In her valedictory to Walter Pater in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), Lee rewrote aestheticism's most famous tag, claiming: 'art, not for art's sake, but art for the sake of life'.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, empathy is the term through which she sought to rescue art from the trivialization and moral vacuity she feared characterized aestheticism. But she had also to find 'a reconciliation between art and life different from [...] [the] ascetic conclusions' propounded by Tolstoy in his 1898 essay, 'What is Art?'.<sup>6</sup> Empathy, now widely accepted as central to our contemporary emotional and moral lexicon, was a means of restoring a modern, scientifically validated moral role for art which had nothing to do with Victorian puritanism. In doing so, Lee helped configure for the twentieth century the way in which we ask questions about the relationship between our minds, our bodies, and the world.

This paper examines the vicissitudes of Lee's theorizing about aesthetic feeling. Lee initially believed that the way bodies react when we contemplate form was the key to understanding why we find some things beautiful and others ugly. In part her theory was intended to counter what she thought misleading about contemporary ideas of 'physiological aesthetics' which were associated with Herbert Spencer's evolutionary psychology and Darwinian sexual selection. It was also, as we shall see, intimately connected to a love relationship. By the turn of the century, however, she had become dissatisfied with her original account and began to characterize aesthetic feeling as primarily mental. In this she was influenced by end-of-century German theories about

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psychology and art – and again, more personally, by love, albeit this time by its waning. But the possibility that science might eventually discover some hitherto obscure corporeal proof of how beauty affects us was something that Lee could never quite relinquish. It is that hope, perhaps, that links her early use of empathy to our own fascination with the prospect that neuroscience today may definitively prove us hardwired for empathy.

## I

### Experimenting in the galleries: bodies, desires, theories

In 1887 Vernon Lee began one of the major love relationships of her life, with the Scottish artist Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson.<sup>7</sup> Her subsequent collaborative work with Anstruther-Thomson resulted, after almost a decade of looking at art together, in a long essay called ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ which was published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1897.<sup>8</sup> Lee saw it as an empirically-based account of aesthetic experience. Such a task was newly possible, Lee believed, as a consequence of recent psychological theory. Moreover, aesthetics, she announced at the article’s start, ‘if treated by the method of recent psychology, will be recognised as one of the most important and most suggestive parts of the great science of perception and emotion’ (*BU* 157). Lee had discovered that Anstruther-Thomson was aware of physical changes as she looked at art and architecture: when attentively viewing an object, her body responded – her muscles tensed and relaxed, her balance shifted, and even her respiration changed. As Lee encouraged her to scrutinize and record these sensations and feelings, Anstruther-Thomson became increasingly able to distinguish changes in breath, balance, and muscular tension as reactions to the observed form, seemingly amounting to a type of unconscious mimicry of it. These bodily changes in turn caused emotional feelings – pleasant and harmonious ones, or constrained and uncomfortable ones, for example. Lee concluded that these emotional feelings were actually the source of what is experienced as ‘beauty’: they are projected back into the object and

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experienced as if they belong there. It is these feelings, located now ‘in’ the object, which make it seem beautiful or not.

This might have seemed to many a whimsical or downright peculiar idea. But Lee was taking a cue from recent influential psycho-physiological theories of emotion. In particular, she had in mind what came to be known as the ‘James-Lange hypothesis’, named after William James and the physiologist Carl Lange. Both men sought to overturn the common sequence in which the bodily changes associated with emotional states (hair rising on the back of the neck, limbs trembling, heart racing and so on) are seen as reactions to those states (of fear, for instance). On the contrary, James insisted, the sequence works the other way: the body responds to environmental stimuli and the *feeling* which results is a consequence of such changes, not their cause (we fear because we tremble, not tremble because we fear).<sup>9</sup> Lee later commented: ‘By an obvious analogy, the feeling of the various muscular strains, changes of equilibrium and respiratory and circulatory changes, might be considered as constituting the special aesthetic emotion.’<sup>10</sup> She was also influenced by reading the Italian, Giuseppe Sergi, who argued that aesthetic pleasure is not the product of cerebral activity but rather ‘of the organic life of the big viscera’: in aesthetic responsiveness the heart and lungs especially are affected and their alterations are perceived as pleasurable or painful insofar as they assist or impede corporeal functions (*BU* 171). The viscera respond to beautiful shapes (Anstruther-Thomson’s lungs, filling with air in ways she associated with the objects she was viewing), and this internal transformation results in enhanced bodily functions and thus creates correspondent feelings and emotions. These are projected back into the object being viewed and experienced as if they belong to it. The ‘subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside’ in a process that Lee would later call ‘empathy’ (*BU* 239).

For a decade the women ‘experimented’ together in galleries, studios, and churches across the continent. Anstruther-Thomson made meticulous notes of her physical reactions to objects; the women hummed to themselves in front of art in order to see whether tunes affected their sense of physical form; they detailed mood and

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weather and setting, and how these affected what they saw. It has proved tempting to mock or dismiss this work, or to turn it into something else. Ethel Smyth, sporadically part of Lee's circle, was searing about Lee's elevation of Anstruther-Thomson's responses to art to the high seriousness of aesthetic theory. In her autobiography, which appeared after Lee's death, Smyth sharply concluded that all the gallery-visiting was clearly a substitution for a longed-for sexual relationship which Lee was unable to have in actuality. Some recent feminist scholarship has similarly seen the women's work on psychological aesthetics as a form of displaced lesbian desire. Other commentators, even sympathetic ones such as Lee's recent biographer, Vineta Colby, find the way the women behaved faintly risible. Colby refers to the recording of Anstruther-Thomson's physical responses to objects in a detail 'so minute that at times it borders on the ludicrous'; while Angela Leighton concludes of Lee's explanatory theories that: 'As psychology, this is probably laughable.'<sup>11</sup>

Humming in front of paintings in a gallery may sound kooky, but in fact this small-scale experimentation was no more strange – indeed, it was very similar – to experiments being busily undertaken by physiologists and psychologists in France, Germany, and the United States. In the Preface to *Beauty and Ugliness*, Lee acknowledges that her work cannot hope to be rigorously scientific: 'My aesthetics will always be those of the gallery and studio, not of the laboratory' (*BU* viii). Nevertheless, writing in 1924, after Anstruther-Thomson's death, Lee was equally certain, and rightly so, that the two women had been neither 'cranks nor amateurs'. Instead, they were part of a 'mutually, perhaps unconsciously, collaborating band of enquirers'.<sup>12</sup> The historian of science, Susan Lanzoni, has convincingly documented and described the extent of Lee's contacts with philosophers and psychologists on the continent.<sup>13</sup> Though some of them may have wished for more compressed and tidy prose from her, none failed to take Lee seriously.<sup>14</sup> She corresponded with, met and befriended leading figures, occasionally writing for journals with which they were associated. They included the French psychologist, Théodule Ribot (to whom she dedicated *Beauty and Ugliness*); the University of Munich-based psychologist, Theodor Lipps (who reviewed the original

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‘Beauty and Ugliness’ in 1900, and whose *Raumästhetik* [*Spatial Aesthetics*] of 1897 introduced Lee to the term *Einfühlung* or empathy); the psychologist Karl Groos, whose theory of *Innere Nachahmung* or inner mimicry was important for Lee; the philosopher and psychologist Max Dessoir, who encouraged her to visit the University of Bonn in 1911; and the psychologist Oswald Külpe. She corresponded with the neurologist and polymath, Henry Head, and championed the work of the evolutionary biologist Richard Semon, writing an introduction to the 1923 translation of his *Mnemonic Psychology*.<sup>15</sup>

The course of Lee’s aesthetic theorizing was surely shaped by her attachments, erotic and affective, to Anstruther-Thomson. But psychology and aesthetics were not inert displacements for eroticism. Desire and love fuel thought of all kinds but do not exhaust or nullify the meaning of such thought. Lee’s reading, corresponding, and arguing with key figures and ideas show a writer intensely, actively, and persistently engaged with an extraordinarily wide range of psychological writing in English, French, German, and Italian. Reviewing in 1904 a range of new works on aesthetics, and discussing how aesthetic experience will be understood in the future, Lee writes:

And the methods to be employed, the analogies to be followed, nay, the underlying reasons of the phenomena under consideration, will be learned mainly from biologists, psychologists, students of bodily and mental evolution, who, for the most part, misunderstand or disdain the very existence of aesthetics.<sup>16</sup>

What she misses here is the importance of her own work – and aesthetics more widely – in shaping the newly professionalizing discipline of psychology. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, psychologists and physiologists sought to understand human motive and action in ways which signalled distance from Christian discourses of the soul or even from hitherto accepted concepts of consciousness, volition, and will. As Darwinian evolution closed the distance between humans and the rest of creaturely life, humans were posited as predictable configurations of mechanical function. Physiology dominated psychological debate, bringing the body and its sensory functions to centre stage. It was, as we shall see, a body in the process of transformation and the task of understanding the experience of beauty was a formative part of this process.

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Lee's theories, seemingly fixated on Anstruther-Thomson's performing body, were, as we shall see, also in detailed dialogue and dispute with a newly influential 'physiological aesthetics'. Physiological aesthetics aggressively claimed to ground the understanding of aesthetic pleasure in blunt evolutionary facts of natural and sexual selection. Its normativity in relation to sexuality and the sometimes uncomfortable attempts of its proponents to graft into the account an element of ethical value were cause enough for Lee's dismissal.

## II

### Physiological aesthetics

In 1877, a reviewer for the London *Examiner* wrote of 'the invasion of the region of aesthetics by natural science'.<sup>17</sup> The review had as its topic a recent work by a then relatively unknown writer called Grant Allen. Allen was soon to gain a reputation and a living as a scientific popularizer, best-selling novelist, and prolific journalist. At this stage of his career, however, Allen paid to have the book printed: it was called *Physiological Aesthetics* and dedicated to Herbert Spencer. In the book's 'Preface' Allen admits being uncertain about the title: it 'might with equal propriety be called either *physiological* or *psychological*'.<sup>18</sup> Like many writers of this period, Allen understood modern psychology as based on a newly accurate physiology. His objective was thus 'to exhibit the purely physical origin of the sense of beauty, and its relation to our nervous organisation'. Mental and emotional phenomena derive from the functions of the nervous system and in consequence are 'as rigorously limited by natural laws as the physical processes whose correlatives they are' (*PA* 2).

Allen had instinct and good timing. In the newly physicalized accounts of mind, human motivations and actions were referred to mechanistic reflex functions of the central nervous system and to localized areas of the brain. Aesthetic feeling, categorized as amongst the most complex of emotions, was seen by detractors as one of the

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experiences resistant to the explanatory force of this materialistic science. Unsurprisingly perhaps, John Ruskin is Allen's initial target in the preface to *Physiological Aesthetics*. In the first volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin insisted that:

Why we receive pleasure from some forms and colours, and not from others, is no more to be asked or answered than why we like sugar and dislike wormwood. The utmost subtlety of investigation will only lead us to ultimate instincts and principles of human nature, for which no farther reason can be given than the simple will of the Deity that we should be so created.<sup>19</sup>

Allen's detailed investigation into the evolutionary origins of the attractiveness of particular colours, tones, or tastes contends that we indeed should and must ask why we like sugar and dislike wormwood. In a gesture dismissing Ruskin to an unscientific past, Allen announces that these will be precisely the questions his book poses and attempts to answer (*PA* vii).

To do so, he turned to Herbert Spencer's evolutionary philosophy. *Physiological Aesthetics* tries to fill out the schematic description of aesthetic sentiment added by Spencer to the second edition of *The Principles of Psychology* (1870). There, taking his hint from a 'German author' he could no longer specifically recall (almost certainly Schiller), Spencer influentially argued that aesthetics must be understood as originating from the impulse to play.<sup>20</sup> In Spencer's evolutionary model of energy and equilibrium, the nervous system is unstable; filled with forces which it must discharge and renew, play simulates activity in an organ too-long dormant. Separate from the 'life-preserving processes' it is a form of outlet and energy renewal.<sup>21</sup> Spencerian evolutionary biology sees humans as (imperfectly) self-regulating machines. Allen notes that humans differ from machines insofar as their 'cerebro-spinal nervous system' gives rise to consciousness. But consciousness is a defiantly physical quality: it registers sense impressions that in turn have pain and pleasure as their outcome. Pleasures and pains are concomitants of healthy or injurious actions affecting the organism's efficiency. Thus Allen concludes, in a Spencerian formula aggressively at odds with Ruskin's: 'The aesthetically beautiful is that which affords the Maximum of Stimulation with the

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Minimum of Fatigue or Waste, in processes not directly connected with vital functions' (PA 39).

Aesthetics concentrated attention on the human sensorium at a moment when the latter was the focus of intense scientific interest. Some psychologists and physiologists were already dismantling the traditional order of the senses, reimagining the human sensorium, and in the process remaking the body. Other accounts, including those Allen drew upon in *Physiological Aesthetics*, retained traditional ideas of sensory hierarchy. The 'lower' senses, such as smell, were associated almost exclusively with 'life-giving functions', whereas the 'higher and specially aesthetic senses, sight and hearing', afford 'thousands' of sights and sounds which have nothing to do with survival (PA 34-35). To account for more complex aesthetic feeling, Allen refers to a Spencerian scale of progress where 'good taste' is a 'progressive product' of evolution associated with precisely those 'cultivated classes' which he elsewhere castigates Ruskin for paying so much attention (PA 51). In turn, good taste is associated with the 'higher' senses of sight and hearing. But in claiming this, Allen was stuck with its contradictions. In a journalistic piece for the *Magazine of Art* in 1881, 'Aesthetics in the Seven Dials', he asks his readers to compare 'any savage village of Polynesia or Central Africa' with the poorer parts of Britain's urban centres, concluding: 'we cannot fail to be struck with the difference in aesthetic interest between the two, the advantage in this respect being all on the side of the savages'. 'Civilization' does not guarantee an ever-expanding 'good taste': indeed, 'artistic retrogression' accompanies civilization, he concludes. Allen's answer is slum housing reform and a celebration of handicraft which brings him surprisingly close to William Morris and to Ruskin: 'wherever art has been a really living thing among the people, it has been because the masses were engaged in artistic handicrafts'.<sup>22</sup>

Hedonics could reshape but not entirely expel other moral languages. Though insisting that the primary definition of aesthetic experience must be the 'non-life-preserving' quality of play described by Spencer, Allen uneasily allows that it is also in part distinguishable by its disinterestedness. In this, he is following the influential mid-

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century psychologist Alexander Bain. In *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), Bain argued that much of sensory life is ‘monopolistic’: dictated by the cravings of life the senses answer to the ‘life-serving’ functions of the organism.<sup>23</sup> But the objects of art and beauty fall outside this category and as a consequence are potentially open to all: ‘They are exempt from the fatal taint of rivalry and contest attaching to other agreeables; they draw men together in mutual sympathy; and are thus eminently social and humanising’ (*PA* 41). This ‘shareable’ and sympathetic quality of aesthetic feeling is its key feature for Bain. Reviewing *Physiological Aesthetics for Mind*, the psychologist James Sully concludes that Allen’s more reluctant admission of its importance seriously weakens his argument. Sully, like Bain, aimed to ground aesthetic pleasure in an evolutionarily robust but nevertheless socially-oriented notion of shareable pleasure. Productive of sympathy and thus functional as a type of social glue, this is a physio-psychological aesthetics fitted for ethical purpose.<sup>24</sup>

In her influential argument about aesthetics and market society, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, Regenia Gagnier sees Allen’s hedonic aesthetics as exemplifying the shift to pleasure and consumption which took place in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Physiological aesthetics in this account ousts both the German-inflected post-Kantian tradition of aesthetics which had ethics and reason at its heart, and the emphasis on the productive artist which characterized the Victorianism of Ruskin and William Morris.<sup>25</sup> Sully’s response to Allen is an important reminder, however, of how contested this physiological or psychological aesthetics remained. Allen is castigated by Sully for downplaying the way in which ‘social sentiments’ are fundamental to ‘the more complex aesthetic pleasures’, the latter for Sully being largely ‘effected through sympathy’.<sup>26</sup> The yoking of sympathy, social unity, and aesthetic pleasure for which Sully commends Alexander Bain is also a feature of, for example, the psychologist Henry Rutgers Marshall’s essays on aesthetics for the journal *Mind* in the 1890s. Arguing that the ‘Hedonic theory’ of pleasure and pain was the only scientifically valid account of aesthetic feeling, Marshall at the same time insists that the work of art is social: knowledge of others’ enjoyment of it is an intrinsic part of its

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pleasure.<sup>27</sup> Sympathy acts as a way of ballasting the individualized psycho-physiological self – with its sensorium tuned for pleasure – reconnecting it into a social fabric.

In later work, Allen sought to resolve these tensions by undergirding the entire argument about aesthetics with sex. In ‘Aesthetic Evolution in Man’ (1880), for instance, he insisted that the ‘central standard’ for beauty ‘is now and must always remain’ the beauty of ‘woman and of the human form’.<sup>28</sup> Sexual selection in Darwin’s *Descent of Man* (1871) proved a highly contentious thesis because it presumed the shaping influence of female aesthetic choice: Alfred Russel Wallace, among others, objected strongly to the implication that female taste exerted selective influence.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, in Allen’s later argument (and with selective power as far as humans are concerned transferred to men), it becomes the natural and normative source of all subsequent experience of beauty. Universal standards of beauty are thus understood as resulting from the ‘appreciation of the pure and healthy typical specific form’.<sup>30</sup> Reproductive heterosexuality – carrying hints of eugenic health and ‘soundness’ – is the original driving motive and model for aesthetic preference.<sup>31</sup>

Lee was reading widely amongst the major psychological theorists and was familiar with debate about aesthetics. She copiously annotated Allen’s *Physiological Aesthetics*.<sup>32</sup> Like Allen, she too believed that aesthetic feeling could only be understood through new psychological (which meant physiological) science. She had publically registered her distance from Ruskin’s depiction of the moral ends of art in an essay of 1881. There, she took Ruskin to task for his moralism and ‘ascetic conclusions’, mourning that he had ‘made morality sterile and art base in his desire to sanctify the one by the other’.<sup>33</sup> But her conclusion that ‘art is happiness’ was not a comfortable end-point for her thinking. She had grown dissatisfied with aestheticism, but was critical too of the problems accompanying existing ‘scientific’ accounts exemplified in Allen’s physiological aesthetics. She was suspicious of both the exceptionalism of the account of aesthetic sympathy, which distinguished ‘play’ from ‘life-serving functions’, and the normative implications of arguments from sexual

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selection. The original ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ essay of 1897 begins with a peremptory dismissal of such ideas. While she and Anstruther-Thomson will have no truck with metaphysics and supernaturalism, they also intend, Lee writes, to present ‘facts and theories’ which would allow them to ‘discard [...] the doubtful assumptions concerning association of ideas and the play instinct’. Similarly dismissed are ideas of utility, of sexual selection, and of aesthetic preference as a consequence of ‘survivals’ of earlier ‘primeval’ activity (*BU* 156). In short, Lee announces that theirs will be a completely original, but also scientifically valid, account of aesthetic experience.

As I indicated in section I above, what Lee puts in the place of these rejected accounts is the evidence of Anstruther-Thomson’s body as it responds to form. A contemplated object provokes a type of imitated physical response in the muscles and deep inside the viscera. Emotional effects result from these corporeal changes which are then projected back into the object and experienced as if they belong to it. The experience of beauty is thus the consequence of a receptive and communicative body. But soon after the original essay’s publication in 1897, Lee began to rethink her conclusions. Again, personal feeling played a part in this change: the relationship between the two women became more distant after the essay appeared. Lee began to acknowledge that, despite all her efforts, she could never herself detect the physical effects described so minutely by Anstruther-Thomson. She began to speculate that these latter might not be universal experiences, after all, but rather a consequence of Anstruther-Thomson’s distinctive physio-psychological ‘type’.

Anstruther-Thomson’s body – which Lee so admired for its athletic strength and grace – was also a body configured and interpreted by successive waves of physio-psychological theory (most notably Lee’s own). A little after the turn of the century, Lee had come to believe that Anstruther-Thomson’s singular responses to beautiful objects were a consequence of her being a ‘motor type’. This categorization drew from neurological work taking place in France (associated with, amongst others, Jean-Martin Charcot and Alfred Binet), which resulted in distinctions being drawn between individuals’ capacity to process sense data. Different responses suggested distinct

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‘visual’, ‘auditory’, or ‘motor’ types.<sup>34</sup> These ideas were in part facilitated by experiments which were beginning to take place in physiological laboratories. Psychologists and physiologists were busy experimenting with scientific instruments which replicated or altered sense experience such as lenses and resonators – and they were reimagining the body as a result. Recording instruments such as the phonograph or graphic devices could act as new senses, or overturn and complicate how the ‘five senses’ functioned.<sup>35</sup> Aesthetics was central to this endeavour.<sup>36</sup> ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ kick-started Lee’s engagement with such research, and it was to German psychological aesthetics that she turned for answers. She found in its writings a term which both validated and re-worked her initial theory of beauty and ugliness. It also took her to the heart of contention about where, and how, aesthetic experience happens and aesthetic emotion is felt. The term, already the focus of much lively debate in Germany, was *Einfühlung* or empathy. It allowed Lee both to rethink the primacy of the body, and to avoid the connotations of exceptionalism she objected to in theories of aesthetics as ‘play’. For Lee, art *was* ‘life-preserving’ and aesthetic theory must be able to account for its necessity to human well-being.

### III

#### German psychological aesthetics and *Einfühlung*

In 1900, ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ was reviewed in *Archiv für Systematische Philosophie* by the University of Munich-based psychologist, Theodor Lipps (1851-1914). Lee later wrote of his having ‘picked out with pitiless clearness all that was confused, fantastic, illogical, presumptuous, and untenable’ in the essay (*BU* 65). Lipps was one amongst a group of German philosophers and psychologists seeking to bring new psychological and physiological theories to bear on an understanding of art. In relation first to aesthetics, and then to a wider psychological debate, he argued for the central importance of *Einfühlung* as a psychological category.

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The word had first been used as a noun in an 1873 work by the aesthetician Robert Vischer (1847-1933), *Ueber das optische Formgefühl: ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik* ['On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics']. Vischer was working within a German tradition which had been strongly affected in the mid-century by the aesthetic theory of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841). Herbart proposed a simplified theory of form in which the essential aesthetic quality of objects was a product of relations between lines, tones, planes, colours, and so on. Ethical, emotional, sentimental, and intellectual feelings were secondary, he insisted, and associated with a 'content' which should not be confused with the essence of an art work: its *form*. Aesthetic judgments involve a cognitive process of assessing these relations between lines and planes. Herbart's theories were important in promoting formalism against the declining importance of a once-dominant idealism. Those he influenced included Hermann Helmholtz (1821-94), Gustav Fechner (1801-87), and Hermann Lotze (1817-81), all of whom were seeking scientific and psychological accounts of aesthetic experience. In turn their work shaped Wilhelm Wundt's thinking (1832-1920), as he opened the first experimental laboratory for the study of psychology in 1879.<sup>37</sup> Quantifiable psychology was mirrored and accompanied by an account of aesthetics which focused exclusively on form.

Robert Vischer's essay begins with a reference to his father, Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807-87), who was amongst the most famous of Germany's mid-century aesthetic philosophers. His father, Vischer explains, pitted himself against the formalist Herbartian trend of mid-century German aesthetics, insisting that content cannot be expunged from form, and that forms are indeed replete with emotions. It is 'we – the observers – [who] unwittingly transfer' to them their emotional quality.<sup>38</sup> Aiming to fuse modern trends in aesthetic theory with idealism, Friedrich Theodor reworked romantic ideas of a merging of spirit with the sensuous world. Human relation to the world is in part made by a symbolic injection of emotion into external forms.<sup>39</sup> It was on this concept of emotional projection that his son focused in his work 'On the Optical Sense of Form'.

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Vischer coined a new term, *Einfühlung*, to describe the process.<sup>40</sup> Earlier uses of the verb form, *empfinden*, go back to romantic thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Novalis. Herder writes of the individual's ability 'to feel into everything, to feel everything out of himself', a capacity to recognize things in nature in analogy to humankind's feeling or spiritual self.<sup>41</sup> This romanticism was joined with newer physiological and psychological trends by Vischer. The idea of *Einfühlung* was triggered, however, by one of the more striking examples of psycho-physiological theorizing. Vischer explains that the process of emotional transferral into an external form which he called *Einfühlung* was suggested to him by a book on dream interpretation. This was Karl Albert Scherner's 1861 *Das Leben des Traums* [*The Life of the Dream*], a work to which Sigmund Freud made reference when reviewing the scientific literature on dreams in his own 1900 work on dream interpretation. Freud explains that Scherner believed that in dreams the faculties of cognition, feeling, will, and ideation are largely disabled. In so being, they release into unrestrained activity the full force of imagination. But because of the disabled cognitive faculties this dream-imagination lacks conceptual language and thus translates ideas into visual symbols.<sup>42</sup> Dreaming is symbol-making with one's body. Vischer writes:

Here it was shown how the body, in responding to certain stimuli in dreams, objectifies itself in spatial forms. Thus it unconsciously projects its own bodily form – and with this also the soul – into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call 'empathy' [*Einfühlung*].<sup>43</sup>

Defending aesthetics from a content-evacuated formalism on the one hand, and attacking the limitations of idealism on the other, Vischer instead focused on the subjective content, the 'in-feeling' or 'feeling-into' process that occurs when contemplating forms, which he called *Einfühlung*.<sup>44</sup>

Like physiological psychologists such as Wundt, Vischer emphasized how the body functions as a natural organic norm when viewing the world. Physical correspondences exist between external objects and the structure of sense organs, and particular aesthetic attributes such as symmetry or regularity please us because they

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mimic the regular forms of the human body. Vischer was also fascinated by the way that one sensory response can trigger others. Our senses are volatile and unruly; they jump ship from one to another: thus, Vischer writes, ‘we speak of “loud colors” because their shrillness does indeed induce an offensive sensation in our auditory nerves’.<sup>45</sup> The physiological body of the late nineteenth century was on the one hand an intricately defined and delineated nervous system with brain and central spinal cord mapped out by increasingly specified ‘localizations’. But it was also, for Vischer, made gloriously – sensorily and nervously – whole in the encounter of unruly sensory body and stimulating object. One sensory nerve stimuli produces another, felt and actioned elsewhere:

The whole body is involved; the entire physical being is moved. For in the body there is, strictly speaking, no such process as localization. Thus each emphatic sensation ultimately leads to a strengthening or weakening of the general *vital sensation*.<sup>46</sup>

But Scherner’s dream-imagination also helped Vischer to theorize a further stage of the perceptual process, a stage that includes ideas and imagination. For Scherner, as Freud’s comments testify, the body cannot be just a body in dreams but must translate the idea of itself into an external visual symbol (most commonly into the form of a house, Scherner argued). Vischer takes from Scherner the idea of an imagining dream-self which translates the body-ego into objects: ‘Thus an overly filled stomach, for example, may be portrayed as an inflated bagpipe or as a round box crammed with cookies’. The external object becomes ‘an analogy for my own structure. I wrap myself within its contours as in a garment’.<sup>47</sup>

The radical strangeness of Vischer’s physiological psychology at this point becomes clearer: the body-self is an appropriative, yet fragile thing. Our body merges with the external objects of the world as imagination experiences it *in* the object’s form. We have the ‘wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form’, Vischer writes, ‘in much the same way as wild fowls gain access to their quarry by concealing themselves in a blind’. The object world is our empire, it seems, open to our imaginative projections – but as a result identity pays a sort of price.

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In Vischer's metaphor, it has to flatten itself on the floor and hide: 'Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct'.<sup>48</sup> We seem more separate and autonomous than we really are because in part we are 'in' external objects. Identity is a vertiginous business as representational feeling constantly responds to the external world, contracting when the object is small, expanding when it is large.<sup>49</sup> Darwin's natural selection had confronted Victorians with the idea that their human selves were not securely distinguishable from other creatures; *Einfühlung* seemed to suggest another type of boundary dissolving: this time between individual self and external world.

Vischer's thesis, while never propelling him to the forefront of debate, nevertheless found fertile ground amongst the German physiologists, psychologists, and critics looking to create a new science of art. Amongst them was Theodor Lipps, who developed the concept of *Einfühlung* or empathy into one of the most central and contested terms of turn-of-the-century German aesthetic debate, claiming for it an increasingly wide application and importance: 'The concept of empathy has now become a fundamental concept especially of aesthetics. But it must also become a fundamental concept of psychology, and it must furthermore become the fundamental concept of sociology'.<sup>50</sup> Eventually, Lipps came to see *Einfühlung* as the primary process which allows us realize that we have selves and that other selves exist.<sup>51</sup>

What attracted Lee, however, was Lipps's earliest work on aesthetics, space, and geometric form. She discovered in it ideas similar to those she and Anstruther-Thomson had propounded in their original 'Beauty and Ugliness' essay, but – more importantly – also a way to reconfigure and resolve the problem of that essay: namely the problem of bodies. Believing at first that sufficient introspective attention would eventually yield consciousness of her own bodily reverberations as she viewed beautiful things, Lee began to doubt this, and the women increasingly disagreed.<sup>52</sup> Anstruther-Thomson remained staunchly certain that Lee (and any attentive viewer) experienced bodily changes but remained unconscious of them; while Lee became convinced that such bodily changes were confined to 'motor type' personalities (as she now conceived Anstruther-Thomson's).<sup>53</sup> In Lipps she found an account of *Einfühlung* – and thus what

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determines aesthetic pleasure – as a mental rather than a physiological process. For Lipps, *Einfühlung* is the mechanism which explains ideational life, and thus how the external world becomes meaningful for us.

Lipps's influential 1897 work on spatial aesthetics investigated optical illusions. He wanted to understand the way in which estimates of lines and the span of angles when viewing forms are especially erroneous when associated by the viewer with notions of pace, impact, effort, and intention. The illusion results, he contended, because these notions of dynamic movement are in fact our own. They are energies felt in our own actions and strivings which are attributed to the object. This process is nothing at all to do with the object's representational associations, or with any form of 'association' at all. What is being responded to, in Lipps's view, is simply *form* or 'shapes': lines and surfaces and their relations. 'When the Doric column lifts itself', Lipps writes in *Spatial Aesthetics and Optical Illusions* (1897), 'what precisely is it does the lifting? [...]. It is not the column, but the spatial image presented us by the column, which does this lifting'. Lipps thus draws a firm distinction between the material mass of the Doric column and its shape. It is the latter which carries aesthetic significance: 'only this combination of aesthetic relations for our imagination constitutes a work of art'.<sup>54</sup> In turn the 'lifting' of the spatial image of the Doric column only becomes comprehensible (and not an 'illusion') when understood as the attribution of 'our own dynamic modes' to the inert object (*BU* 20). The Doric column is experienced and described as widening out, spreading, pulling itself together. But, as Lipps – and Lee after him – insist, stone neither thrusts nor resists. 'Form *exists*; it does *not act*', as Lee puts it (*BU* 50). Our experience of movement causes us to ascribe activities of 'force' and 'tendency' to geometric forms which we have projected into them. Lipps refers to the 'inner expansion and contraction which I accomplish [...] when I follow the [architectural] forms'; and more strikingly writes of 'the throb of life felt in penetrating by contemplation into a work of art, the throb which, for this very reason seems to belong to the work of art and to be the throb of its own inner life'.<sup>55</sup>

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Thus, in viewing objects, Lipps asserts: ‘I necessarily permeate them with [...] striving, activity, and power. Grasped by reason, they bear within them, insofar as they are “my” objects, this piece of myself.’ The idea of a ‘sensuously given object’ has no meaning as an object existing independently of ‘me’.<sup>56</sup> Lee glosses this abstract formula with the phrase: ‘we “give away our motion” to objects’.<sup>57</sup> A later commentator, attempting to disentangle some of the many meanings of *Einfühlung* in Lipps’s work refers to the latter’s emphasis on an inner movement and action ‘which is subjective, but is not experienced as such. It does not happen spontaneously, but is conditioned through the object and bound to it’.<sup>58</sup> Qualities of movement appear as necessarily belonging to the object.

Thus we attribute to the Doric column a condition of our own: that of keeping erect and upright. The object world is inert until animated by us; language is the record of this animation in metaphors of movement which become the world. In language, shapes and forms move: metaphor makes them extend, contract, flow, twist, reach, rise, wind, drop, grasp, soar, or climb. Indeed, ‘*Empathy* is what explains why we employ figures of speech at all’, Lee insists.<sup>59</sup> Indeed language gives the game away, ascribing temporality to objects existing only in space. Objects do nothing in time: we may experience ourselves ‘following’ their lines and shapes but when we describe them we are really describing ‘the inner data of our consciousness: *succession, movement, activity* and their different modalities’ (BU 51).

Lee discriminates between ‘recognizing’ a shape or form and *realizing* it. The former is a perfunctory, short-handed process, albeit necessary to making sense of external things as we move around in the world. It is our business-like way of getting by. ‘Realizing’, by contrast, is the activity she associates with aesthetic effect: when we really dwell on an object’s shape something more is taking place than processes of perception. We ‘realize’ the relations of the shape’s constituent elements because our own dynamic experience is projected into it: ‘the activity we speak of is *ours*’ (BU 51). We attribute balance, direction, velocity, pace, rhythm, and energy to a contemplated form, Lee writes, ‘but also *thrust, resistance, strain, feeling, intention, and character*’

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(BU 53). It is a revival of dynamical and emotional experience from the past – as well as that imagined in the future. This is the key insight of Lipps’s work. *Einfühlung* or empathy is a process involving *ideas* of movement, ideas made out of the accumulated and synthesized, ‘abstracted’ memory store of our experiences of motor activity, out of imagined similar movements, and out of an unconscious knowledge of primordial dynamism as such – which, for Lee, is tantamount to life. We are not physiological machines, set to go. The external world and its forms and shapes are how we keep feeling that we are alive. For Lee, the crux of what empathy teaches is that beauty helps us not because it makes us good, but because it is how we realize that we are properly alive. Bereft of beauty, we only seem alive.

#### IV

##### Body or mind: main melody or cymbals and kettledrums?

This is ‘life’ very different from Lee’s original conception of how beauty benefits the organism. Initially the muscular and respiratory-cardiac changes Anstruther-Thomson experienced when viewing something lovely were seen by Lee as a beneficial reordering of the body’s motor and visceral functions which literally enhance organic being. Lipps’s thesis turns empathy into a process of imagination and of memory at work with perception. Lee began to speculate that such memory might be cultural – or ‘racial’ as she described it – as well as individual (BU 353).

But she still found it hard to abandon the lure of the body. In part this was because while Lee wanted to wrest psychological aesthetics from associations with Spencerian ‘play’ or sexual selection she yet believed she must demonstrate that the experience of beauty brought unimpeachable evolutionary benefit. Lee was a social reformer and wanted to be able indisputably to prove the social (as well as individual) value of art. Ditching the body made the route back to evolution more problematic. Her original thesis enabled her to posit physical benefit – literally the benefits of health – from the contemplation of form. The effects of beautiful form were associated with a

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resonant vocabulary: beauty is ‘harmonising’, ‘unifying’, ‘vitalising’, and ‘bracing’. There are complex reasons for these loaded terms. Lee believed that a scientifically validated psychological aesthetics must provide a new and stable ground for an ethics of art. In her fictional dialogues *Baldwin* (1886) and *Althea* (1894), as well as in essays and lectures, she restlessly struggled to counter what she saw as the morally toxic associations of aestheticism and decadence with degeneracy, with solipsism, and with the reification of pleasure-as-consumption.<sup>60</sup> Key terms such as harmony and congruity must be re-configured and revalued: they must not stick to (and thus be wasted on) the parodically self-absorbed aesthete, anguished by the wrong-coloured button-hole. Instead, ‘congruity’ must be thought expansively, it must ‘develop into such love of harmony between ourselves and the ways of the universe as shall make us wince at other folks’ loss united to our gain’.<sup>61</sup> The body allowed Lee to link these key terms to notions of physical health and evolutionary advantage.

No wonder she was intermittently attracted by an alternative theory of *Einfühlung* proposed by the philosopher and psychologist, Karl Groos, whose influential books, *The Play of Animals* and *The Play of Man*, published in 1898 and 1901 respectively, had made him far better known than Lipps. Groos was convinced that the pleasures derived from looking at lovely things were indeed linked to bodily states and more specifically were a consequence of a process of motor ‘inner mimicry’ (*innere nachahmung*) which takes place in aesthetic contemplation. He argues: ‘In complete aesthetic enjoyment there are present motor phenomena of an imitative character, and that these show the sympathy in question (*Miterleben*) to be a bodily participation’.<sup>62</sup> Groos admits that such ‘organic perturbations’ may be confined to ‘motor type’ individuals. But he also thinks it probable that such types are capable of more intense aesthetic feeling. Others have paler, cognitively supplemented, experiences (*BU 72*). Groos’s thesis is thus closer to the ‘James-Lange hypothesis’ used by Lee in her 1897 paper, and she was constantly pulled back to its attractions, imagining for instance a future ‘graphic apparatus’ that could register not what an individual might *feel* to be happening in her or his body, but what ‘actually *was* going

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on in that body at moments when the very existence of his body was forgotten in the intensity of aesthetic attention'. More and more aware that 'we can know our bodily states only in, or through, or by, what we call our mental ones', she nevertheless remained ambivalently attached to the hope that the two might at some future point be disentangled and the former's functions in response to art objectively ratified (*BU* 138).

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Lee had *just about* settled on the view that the body's responses were secondary and supplementary to a primary, Lippsian empathy. She concludes her long essay on 'The Central Problem of Aesthetics', the first version of which was published in German in 1910, by quoting with approbation Oswald Külpe's summary of recent US-based experiments in which she sees corroboration of her own stance.<sup>63</sup> The aesthetic object is a 'psychic creation', Külpe insists, dependent on 'attention and fancy, active comprehension and sympathy' rather than on bodily sensations. We may mimic, internally or actually, contemplated shapes but the sensations we experience when we do so are 'only subsidiary means of making the impression more personal and more lively. They may be compared to the drums and cymbals of an orchestra', reinforcing the effect of the music but not producing it (quoted in *BU* 143n).

## V

### Inside and outside, love and theory

Let us then return to the *New York Times* review of *Beauty and Ugliness* with which I began, and see what sense might be made of the passage the reviewer quotes, 'taken almost at random from the middle of the work' as illustrative of the opacity of Lee's 'terrible' book. In fact it comes not from the book's middle, but from the conclusion:

Why, since I now consider formal-dynamic empathy as due, not to actually present movements and muscular-organic sensations, but to the extremely abstract ideas of movement and its modes residual from countless individual and possibly racial experiences, why should I still give importance to

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present movement sensations, and connected organic sensations also present, which I am scarcely ever aware of in my own case, and which are not necessary to explain the purely ‘mental’ phenomenon of interpretation of visible form in terms of movement and energy that I constantly find taking place as an essential part of my own formal-aesthetic perception? My reason for taking in consideration these imitative movements and mimetic-organic sensations is not merely because I find a considerable number of observers, headed by Professor Groos and my collaborator, clinging to the belief in their importance. For they can be explained away as resulting from the mental process of dynamic-empathy, reinforcing its effects according to Professor Külpe’s simile (which I willingly accept) as with the cymbals and kettledrums reinforcing the effect of music without producing it. (*BU* 354)

The body never quite goes away; instead it is demoted to play a subordinate supporting role as reinforcement to the primary ‘mental’ process of aesthetic empathy.

Most of Lee’s work on aesthetic empathy that I have been discussing here was gathered together and published in the 1912 book so reviled by the *New York Times*. Its middle is occupied not with the passage quoted above, however, but rather by the original 1897 essay which also lends the book its title and which Lee co-authored with Anstruther-Thomson. The earlier ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ essay sits at the heart of Lee’s collected writing on psychological aesthetics and is the focal point around which all her other essays cluster and make reference. But the essay is slightly changed from its original appearance in 1897 in the *Contemporary Review*. In its ‘Prefatory Note’ Lee explains that it now carries distinguishing marks indicating the women’s separated-out contributions. Anstruther-Thomson’s are enclosed within brackets, marked ‘C.A.-T.’. The visual marking on the page records a poignant if ordinary human experience of separation. The women’s emotional history – in the relationship’s decline and end as much as in its flourishing phase – is inextricable from Lee’s struggle to theorize boundaries and distinctions between mind and body in the experience of beauty. The text is further amended, Lee notes, by her own footnote additions which mark the modification of her views. They occur, she emphasizes, exclusively in relation to a ‘different valuation of organic and mimetic sensations’ as determining aesthetic preferences (*BU* 153-54).

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Lee was bothered by her body. Like other Victorians who did prodigious intellectual work she suffered from periods of ill-health. Her family relations, especially with her ailing half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton, were powerfully shaped around the needs and demands of frail bodies. Anstruther-Thomson's strong athletic frame was the focus of erotic desire and admiration, but also of envy; and it also quite literally answered Lee's need to be cared for and nursed when she was unwell.<sup>64</sup> When, after Anstruther-Thomson's death, Lee made a final mourning gesture for her lost love, she did so by way of a long introduction to a collection of Anstruther-Thomson's writing about art, published in 1924 as *Art and Man*. Aesthetic empathy is, again, the focus of Lee's concern as she reiterates – with a degree of ruthlessness – how her own understanding changed, and in the process challenged Kit's:

the alleged 'mimicry' of a work of art's movement of lines and balance is a great deal more INNER than we at first imagined, being primarily *inside our mind or imagination*, and only secondarily in any part of our body except the organs of whatever our *mind or imagination* may prove to be.<sup>65</sup>

It is these primordial ideas of dynamic movement that are the stuff of beauty, and one of the ways that we can know that we are properly live.

But Lee also sadly acknowledges that Anstruther-Thomson's 'more and more minute self-observation' – an introspection so rigorous it would have challenged even one trained 'as an *experimental subject* in a latter-day psychological laboratory' – was in the end a life-denying experience. The splendidly healthy Kit, who nursed Lee and Lee's half-brother, Eugene, back to health, herself suffered a breakdown as she struggled to complete the work for 'Beauty and Ugliness'. Lee refers to Anstruther-Thomson's copious notes, minutely detailing her bodily responses to forms and shapes, 'solidly built into my blocks of scientific matter'; and her subsequent fear that Anstruther-Thomson's 'very personal and living impressions were being deadened under what perhaps struck her as philosophical padding'.<sup>66</sup> Her lover's body and Lee's mind, solidity and fragility, life and death: Lee knew that love, work, and beauty are absolutely necessary to life but, alas, are also no guarantee.

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Lee eventually characterized the ‘central problem’ of aesthetics in the following formula: ‘the problem of the preference and antipathy inspired by visual shapes entirely apart from any object or action which they may [...] suggest’ (*BU* 115). Empathy was the mechanism through which she sought to ground the experience of beauty in processes fundamentally distinct from effects of representation. In so doing, she aimed to bypass the moral impasse she saw as so damaging an aspect of fin-de-siècle politics and culture. For the avant garde of the 1880s and 90s neither Dickensian sentiment nor Eliotean sympathy seemed to have worked. Realist fictions and narrative paintings either could not evoke the right kind of feeling, or else such feeling could not and did not translate into social reform. But by the end of the century, the choices seemed little better. Endorsing a hedonistic, self-pleasuring individualism or else a creed of self-denying altruism was equally repugnant to Lee.<sup>67</sup> Instead, she posited the strange process of empathy, and with it argued that beauty was essential to life. The fact that in so doing, she espoused *form*, is one of the things which makes Vernon Lee such an intriguing figure in thinking about a Modernist aesthetic to come.<sup>68</sup>

But the formalism she celebrated was no coldly cognitive Herbartian phenomenon, but the stuff of conscious and unconscious selfhood, replete with feeling, woven into and from the fabric of language:

‘Feelings’ (as distinguished from ‘sensations’) of dynamic conditions and attractions are among the *immediate*, the primary data of our psychic life; feelings of direction, of velocity, of effort, of facility, all the notions expressed by verbs, adverbs, and prepositions constitute as large a part of our consciousness as those verbs, adverbs, and prepositions do of our speech. They are always present in our ‘thought’; they are two-thirds of our knowledge of our own existence. (*BU* 83-84)

Beauty is not a quality of objects or of forms – it is a process. It is ‘us’ that make beauty, in Lee’s account; as Laura Marcus comments, in a reading of yet another German-born psychologist and theorist admired by Lee, Hugo Münsterberg, ‘we give more than we receive’.<sup>69</sup>

Lee was writing from the cusp of a Victorian world falling forwards into the twentieth century. The ideas with which she grappled in trying to translate *Einfühlung*

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for an English audience found their way into new types of thinking about selves associated with phenomenology, with Freudian psychoanalysis, and with Modernism. Eventually, the specifically aesthetic connotations of empathy faded away to be replaced with our current sense of empathy as denoting a relation between self and (human) other rather than self and object. As I hinted at the beginning of this essay, however, even though empathy today carries different meanings we still can learn something from Vernon Lee's lingering hope that 'future neurologists' might at last discover the organic secrets of the brain, and thereby provide indisputable scientific certainty about what we feel and why we feel it.<sup>70</sup> As those 'future neurologists' today present their functional MRI scans as evidence that we are hardwired for empathy, we might, like Lee, be attracted or feel hopeful about the certainties and proofs they offer. But like Lee we should, in the end, know that it is really more complicated than that.

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<sup>1</sup> 'What is Beauty?', *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 April 1912. Accessed via *The New York Times* archive at <<http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=nyt&&srcht=a&srchr=n>> [accessed 5 April 2011].

<sup>2</sup> Lee dubbed the most important German proponent of 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*), Theodor Lipps, 'a new Darwin', describing *Einfühlung* as comparable to natural selection 'in its originality and its far-reaching importance'. See 'Aesthetic Empathy and its Organic Accompaniments', in Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), pp. 45-76 (p. 45).

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Aesthetic Empathy', in Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, p. 46. Further references to *Beauty and Ugliness* will be given in the text, abbreviated as *BU*.

<sup>4</sup> The current literature on empathy is vast: see, for example, Vittorio Gallese, "'Being Like Me": Self-Other Identity, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy', in *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science, vol. 1: Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals*, ed. by Susan Hurley and Nick

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Chater (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 101-18; Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Recent Aesthetics', *Quarterly Review*, 199 (April 1904), 420-43 (p. 420). This review essay was later reprinted, with added material, as 'Anthropomorphic Aesthetics', in *Beauty and Ugliness*, pp. 1-44.

<sup>7</sup> I write in detail about Lee, Anstruther-Thomson, and the concept of empathy in 'Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16.2 (2011), forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and Ugliness', *Contemporary Review* 72 (October 1897), 544-69; 72 (November 1897), 669-88; repr., with annotations, in *Beauty and Ugliness*, pp. 153-239, where parts written by Thomson were marked '[C.A.-T.]'.

<sup>9</sup> William James, 'What Is an Emotion?', *Mind*, 9.34 (1884), 188-205; for a full discussion, see Burdett, 'Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?'.

<sup>10</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Recent Aesthetics', p. 438.

<sup>11</sup> For feminist accounts focusing on sexual desire, see Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "'Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace": Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), pp. 21-41; and Diana Maltz, 'Engaging "Delicate Brains": From Working-Class Enculturation to Upper-Class Lesbian Liberation in Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson's Psychological Aesthetics', in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. by Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), pp. 211-29; Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 157; Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 104. Recent work more sympathetic to Lee's aesthetics include Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Susan Lanzoni, 'Practising Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics of Empathy', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 45.4 (2009), 330-54.

<sup>12</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Introduction' to C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (London: Bodley Head, 1924), pp. 3-112 (pp. 57-8). Lee was probably still thinking here of the plagiarism charge levelled at the women by the art historian Bernard Berenson after the appearance of 'Beauty and Ugliness'. For accounts of the plagiarism episode, see René Wellek, 'Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson and Aesthetics', in *Friendship's Garland: Essays Presented to Mario Praz on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Vittorio Gabrieli, 2 vols (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1966), II, 233-51; Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 152-72.

<sup>13</sup> Lanzoni, 'Practising Psychology', pp. 344-51.

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<sup>14</sup> This is a justifiable claim, I believe, in relation to Lee's varied and extensive correspondence. She did issue a questionnaire about 'motor' responses to the Fourth Congress of Psychology, held in Paris in 1900 which was ignored – but admitted herself this was likely a result of her inexperience and the amateurishness of the questionnaire.

<sup>15</sup> Lee's relative isolation as a woman in a field of enquiry dominated by men is certainly relevant here. Jo Briggs, 'Plural Anomalies: Gender and Sexuality in Bio-Critical Readings of Vernon Lee', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 160-73, assesses the different critical treatment of Lee and the art historian and critic, Bernard Berenson, concluding that gender has much to do with the way in which Lee's contribution to art history has been assessed.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, 'Recent Aesthetics', p. 421.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *Popular Science Monthly* (October 1877), p. 760.

<sup>18</sup> Grant Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (London: King, 1877), p. viii. Further references to this work will be given in the text, abbreviated *PA*. Allen had to pay £120 to H. S. King for the book: it sold modestly but nevertheless helped to gain Allen a reputation as a scientific popularizer. See Peter Morton, 'The Busiest Man in England': *Grant Allen and the Writing Trade 1873-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, vol. I: Of General Principles, and of Truth* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> This 'play' thesis, sometimes combined with revised forms of associationism (which remained a significant element of late-century psychology) had wide acceptance. See, for instance, L. T. Hobhouse, *Mind in Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1901).

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1870-72), II, 627.

<sup>22</sup> Grant Allen, 'Aesthetics in the Seven Dials', *Magazine of Art*, 4 (1881), 145-48 (pp. 146, 148).

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: Parker, 1859).

<sup>24</sup> James Sully, 'Review of *Physiological Aesthetics*', *Mind*, 7 (1877), 387-92 (pp. 390-91).

<sup>25</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 135-40 (p. 136).

<sup>26</sup> Sully, 'Review of *Physiological Aesthetics*', p. 392.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Rutgers Marshall, 'The Field of Aesthetics Psychologically Considered: I', *Mind*, n.s. 1.3 (1892), 358-78 (p. 363). See also Susan Lanzoni, 'Sympathy in *Mind*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70.2 (2009), 265-87 (esp. pp. 281-84).

<sup>28</sup> Grant Allen, 'Aesthetic Evolution in Man', *Mind*, 20 (1880), 445-64 (p. 449).

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<sup>29</sup> For a full discussion, see Helen Cronin, *The Ant and the Peacock: Altruism and Sexual Selection from Darwin to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Allen, 'Aesthetic Evolution in Man', p. 449.

<sup>31</sup> For the eugenic implications of Allen's argument, see Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 80-1. See also Gagnier, *Insatiability of Human Wants*, p. 139, for comments on the 'cultural dialectic' between this heterosexual aesthetic and other perverse and sexually dissident aesthetics.

<sup>32</sup> The Reading Experience Database notes '[c]onsiderable marginalia' in Lee's copy of *Physiological Aesthetics* <<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/recorddetails2.php?id=16605>> [accessed 11 April 2011].

<sup>33</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Ruskinism', in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell, 1881), pp. 197-229 (p. 225).

<sup>34</sup> For further discussion, see Sonu Shamdasani, *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology: The Dream of a Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> An influential recent discussion is Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> For discussion in relation to modernism, see Robert Michael Brain, 'The Pulse of Modernism: Experimental Physiology and Aesthetic Avant-Gardes circa 1900', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 39 (2008), 393-417.

<sup>37</sup> My discussion of these German thinkers draws from the excellent account by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou in the 'Introduction' to their translation of six essays on German aesthetics, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), pp. 1-85 (esp. pp. 1-29).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Vischer, 'On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics', in *Empathy, Form, and Space*, ed. by Mallgrave and Ikonomou, pp. 89-123 (p. 89).

<sup>39</sup> Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 'Introduction', p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Einfühlung* was one amongst a whole web of terms which Vischer deployed to try to explain how vision externalized functions. See Vischer, 'On the Optical Sense of Form'.

<sup>41</sup> See Karsten R. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 6, who provides this translation.

<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 96-97.

<sup>43</sup> Vischer, 'On the Optical Sense of Form', p. 92. Discussing this passage in a recent essay, Gustav Jahoda reminds English readers that the German *Seele* does not necessarily carry the spiritual or theological connotations of the English 'soul' and was widely used in psychological discussion. 'Theodor

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Lipps and the Shift from “Sympathy” to “Empathy”, *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences*, 41.2 (2005), 151-63 (p. 154).

<sup>44</sup> Mallgrave and Ikonomou, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Vischer, ‘On the Optical Sense of Form’, p. 98; Mallgrave and Ikonomou, ‘Introduction’, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Vischer, ‘On the Optical Sense of Form’, p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> Vischer, ‘On the Optical Sense of Form’, pp. 100, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Vischer, ‘On the Optical Sense of Form’, p. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Vischer, ‘On the Optical Sense of Form’, pp. 104-5; Mallgrave and Ikonomou, ‘Introduction’, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in George W. Pigman, ‘Freud and the History of Empathy’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 76 (1995), 237-56 (p. 242) (Pigman’s translation). Lipps influenced Edmund Husserl, and was significant in the rise of phenomenology. Empathy was the topic of Husserl’s student, Edith Stein’s doctoral dissertation, ‘On the Problem of Empathy’ (1917).

<sup>51</sup> Pigman, ‘Freud and the History of Empathy’, p. 242.

<sup>52</sup> See Vernon Lee, ‘Introduction’ to C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (London: Bodley Head, 1924), pp. 3-112.

<sup>53</sup> Reviewing the original ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ essay in 1897, the *Saturday Review*’s contributor tartly takes the women to task for misunderstanding James’s thesis on emotion: it is physical actions that for James elicit emotion. If the former are suppressed in any way, the emotion disappears. ‘D.S.M’, ‘A Pneumatic Theory of Art’, *Saturday Review*, 30 October 1897, pp. 458-60 (p. 459).

<sup>54</sup> This is Lee’s translation, *BU*, pp. 19-20. Lipps’s work is *Raumästhetik und geometrisch-optische Täuschungen* (1897).

<sup>55</sup> Quoted by Lee, her translations, *BU*, p. 58.

<sup>56</sup> Theodor Lipps, ‘Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure’ [‘*Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*’] (1906), quoted in Juliet Koss, ‘On the Limits of Empathy’, *The Art Bulletin*, 88.1 (2006), 139-57 (pp. 143-44). (Koss’s translation).

<sup>57</sup> Lee, *Art and Man*, p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> Jørgen B. Hunsdahl, ‘Concerning Einfühlung (Empathy): A Concept Analysis of its Origins and Early Development’, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 3 (1967), 180-91 (p. 183).

<sup>59</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), p. 62.

<sup>60</sup> For a helpful discussion, see Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (Tavistock: Northcote British Council, 2010), esp. chapter 1.

<sup>61</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Art and Life’, *Contemporary Review*, 70 (July 1896), 59-72 (p. 69); repr. as ‘Higher Harmonies’, in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909).

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *BU*, p. 23 (Lee's translation).

<sup>63</sup> Külpe (1862-1915), was a student of Wundt's, and later associated with the University of Würzburg.

<sup>64</sup> Anstruther-Thomson nursed both Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton. See Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*; Catherine Maxwell, 'Vernon Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton', in Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 21-39.

<sup>65</sup> Lee, *Art and Man*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>66</sup> Lee, *Art and Man*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>67</sup> See my 'Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?' for further discussion and, on altruism, Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham comment that Lee's works 'transcend the calcified categories of "Victorian" and "Modernist" periodization', 'Introduction', in Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 1-20 (p. 19).

<sup>69</sup> Laura Marcus, "'A New Form of True Beauty": Aesthetics and Early Film Criticism', *Modernism/modernity*, 13.2 (2006), 267-89 (p. 284).

<sup>70</sup> Lee expresses this wish in *Art and Man*, p. 80.

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