

**‘ART FOR THE SAKE OF LIFE’:  
THE CRITICAL AESTHETICS OF VERNON LEE**

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## ABSTRACT

### **‘Art for the sake of life’: the Critical Aesthetics of Vernon Lee**

This thesis explores the critical aesthetics of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget 1856-1935) and the ways in which her theory of aesthetic harmony informed these studies. Arguing for a more inclusive view of her interest in aesthetics, this thesis takes as its focus the ways in which Lee applied her aesthetic methodologies to the questions of aesthetics with which she was concerned – What is the relationship between the artist and his or her art, and between the artist and the aesthetic critic? How do the various art forms differ and how do these differences impact on the aesthetic experience? How does the mind, the body, and the emotions work together in the aesthetic experience? And ultimately, what is the relationship between art and life, and between beauty and the ideal? This study argues that these questions are evident in essays that are not usually associated with aesthetics. Whilst studies on Lee tend to divide her varied interests into phases in her career, such as her fiction, literary criticism, historical writings, travel writings, and psychological aesthetics, the current study argues that an investigation into the ways in which these studies can be seen to interact leads to a more thorough and fulfilling engagement with her impressive body of work. This thesis fills a critical gap in Lee studies by approaching her writings through the lens of her interest in aesthetics and by suggesting a way of reading her work that takes into consideration the ways in which her aesthetic theories influenced the writing style through which she experimented with, expressed, and in some cases, performed her aesthetic theories.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

I have used several abbreviations throughout this thesis. These are: ‘Anthropomorphic’ for ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’; *Fancies* for *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*; ‘F&H’ for ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’; *Gospels* for *Gospels of Anarchy*; ‘Gozzi’ for ‘Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy’; *Handling* for *The Handling of Words*; *Letters* for *Vernon Lee’s Letters*; *MB* for *Miss Brown*; *Renaissance* for *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*; *Poet* for *The Poet’s Eye*; *Studies* for *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*; ‘Venice’ for ‘Out of Venice at Last’; and ‘Zola’ for ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’.



Author and date unknown. Special Collections, Miller Library. Colby College, Maine.

## INTRODUCTION

### ‘Art for the sake of life’: the Critical Aesthetics of Vernon Lee<sup>1</sup>

Vernon Lee’s essay, ‘Orpheus and Eurydice: The Lesson of a Bas-Relief’, recounts the story of what Lee refers to as ‘a curious little incident in our aesthetic life which is worth narrating’.<sup>2</sup> This essay is interesting partly for what it reveals about the ways in which Lee conceived of and approached the questions of aesthetics with which she would engage throughout her career. This early essay shows her negotiating questions regarding the nature of the aesthetic experience, the differences between the creation and enjoyment of the various art forms, and the relationship between the subject-of-art and the artwork itself – all questions which Lee would devote her life’s work to exploring. In it, she recalls a visit to the Villa Albani in Rome with Mary Robinson (1857-1944), the dedicatee of *Belcaro*, in which they encounter a bas-relief which they believe depicts the tragic love story of Orpheus and Eurydice. They find the piece evocative of Virgil’s verse and their concentration shifts quickly from the merits of the bas-relief itself to its success as a representation of the myth’s final parting scene. After indulging in ‘the process of association’, they discover that the piece had been catalogued as a depiction of the revenge story of Antiope and her two sons, Amphion and Zethus (*Belcaro*, 64). The pair consult Winckelmann’s ‘great work’, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764) and discover that Winckelmann, who had served as librarian and private secretary to

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Valedictory’, in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1895), pp. 255-60 (p. 259).

<sup>2</sup> First published in *Cornhill Magazine* (August 1878), 207-17. Re-published in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), pp. 49-69 (p. 52).



Cardinal Alessandro Albani from 1758 until his death ten years later, had described the same bas-relief in detail and had decided that it depicted Antiope asking her sons to punish Dirce for her cruelty.<sup>3</sup> This discovery was a disconcerting one and it is at this point that Lee began her investigation into the nature of the various art forms and the corresponding ways in which each can be appreciated.

The discovery that the artwork's subject, of which they had been so sure, could be identified by Winckelmann as an entirely different myth led Lee to conclude that in visual art 'the comprehension of the subject of a work of art would therefore seem to require certain previous information; the work of art would seem unable to tell its story itself, unless we have the key to that story' (*Belcaro*, 59). This experience, she adds, differs between visual and literary art where, for example, 'Virgil's lines pre-suppose no knowledge of the story of Orpheus, they themselves give the knowledge of it' (*Belcaro*, 60). This distinction, in turn, leads Lee to conclude that

the difference, then, between the poem and the bas-relief is that the story is absolutely contained in the former, and not absolutely contained in the

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<sup>3</sup> *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* was translated into French as *Histoire de L'art Chez Les Anciens* in 1766 and English as *History of the Art of Antiquity* in four volumes in 1849. I use the 2006 translation from the German original, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006). In 'Orpheus and Eurydice', Lee states that consideration of the clothing worn by the figures in the relief assures that 'Winckelmann has quite as good grounds for his assertion as we have for ours' (58). However, while Winckelmann first refers to the same bas-relief on page 292 (2006), a few pages later he does offer strong evidence for his assertion which Lee does not refer to in her essay. He explains that 'at the Palace at the Villa Borghese, there is a rare and still seldom-noticed relief depicting Amphion and Zethus flanking their mother, Antiope, as *the names inscribed above the figures indicate* [my emphasis]' and adds that 'A work showing the same scene, entirely similar but without the names, is to be found at the Villa Albani' [my emphasis] (316). It is possible that Lee did not see this second reference or omitted it for rhetorical effect.

latter. The story of Orpheus is part of the organic whole, of the existence of the poem; the two are inseparable, since the one is formed out of the other; whereas, the story of Orpheus is separate from the organic existence of the bas-relief, it is arbitrarily connected with it, and they need not co-exist.

*(Belcaro, 60)*

This conclusion, however, makes Lee aware of another important question. She asks, 'what then is the bas-relief?' *(Belcaro, 60)*.

A conversation with a painter brings her closer to understanding another way of appreciating visual art. For the painter, Lee explains, the bas-relief 'has spoken for him, the clear, unmistakable language of lines and curves, of light and shade, a language needing no interpreters, no dictionaries', in other words, the form of the artwork *(Belcaro, 61)*. She adds that 'it has told him the fact, the fact depending on no previous knowledge, irrefutable and eternal, that it is beautiful' *(Belcaro, 61)*. Thus, Lee asserts that there is a distinction to be made between the appreciation of the form of the artwork and the appreciation of the subject that the artwork evokes or represents. The subtle ways in which the two can get confused complicates the extent to which either form or subject can be enjoyed. She writes that 'a person who cared for Virgil's lines because they suggested the bas-relief or for the bas-relief because they suggested Virgil's lines, would equally be appreciating neither, since his pleasure depended on something separate from the work of art itself' *(Belcaro, 62)*. In practice, however, she admits that this confusion is inevitable, particularly for those who have 'another set of faculties', different from those possessed by the visual artist, 'those dealing with

thoughts and images' (*Belcaro*, 63). Here Lee is referring to writers like herself. While she accepts that a painter, sculptor, or musician could, with his or her trained eye or ear, distinguish between his or her appreciation of the artwork and an appreciation of anything that is external to it, the writer is less equipped for such a clean separation. What, then, she asks, is an aesthetic critic, who happens also to be a writer, to do?

The writer, according to Lee, is always liable to overemphasise the associations suggested by an artwork. Such an imbalance is at the expense of a proper consideration of the artwork itself. This, she explains, seems inevitable to a certain extent. Yet she asks,

Where, at such times, is our artistic appreciation, and what is it worth?

Should we then, if such a thing were possible, forbid such comparisons, such associations? Should we voluntarily deprive ourselves of all such pleasure as is not given by the work of art itself? (*Belcaro*, 65)

She admits that the difficulty for certain people of enjoying the pure form of an artwork means that 'we have thus caught ourselves almost regretting that pictures should have any subjects' (*Belcaro*, 66). Thus, one of Lee's earliest treatises on aesthetics rejects the possibility that some people might ever be able truly to appreciate art for its own sake. At the same time, however, she admits to a longing for the ability to indulge in the pleasures of the artistic form for its own sake.

Lee experiments with the idea of a clean break between the two ways of appreciating art – associative on the one hand and form-based on the other. 'If the

artist's work be excellent', she posits, 'it will swallow up every other interest, throw into shade every other utility' (*Belcaro*, 67). 'This is the inevitable course of art', she continues, 'we call in beauty as servant, and see, like some strange dæmon, it becomes the master; it may answer our call, but we have to do its bidding' (*Belcaro*, 68). While the suggestive and haunting language used here predates similar language used in her essay outlining her theories on the supernatural in *Faustus and Helena* (1880), and in the stories collected in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), Lee does not seem wholly satisfied by such a conclusion. Ultimately, in this essay she expresses the view that renouncing the pleasures of an associative appreciation of an artwork is too great a sacrifice. She therefore asks whether it is possible to strike a balance between an associative appreciation of art and one that looks only at the beauty of the pure art form. She writes, 'but if only each could get its due, each its power unimpaired, there could be nothing more delightful than thus to enjoy the joint effect of several works of art', including the one which we create out of our own impressions and associations (*Belcaro*, 68). In this essay, Lee reveals her intention to seek a balanced and practical aesthetic philosophy that will enable the aesthetic critic fully to enjoy what art has to offer. This is possible, she suggests, through an informed and balanced understanding of the steps involved in the process of aesthetic experience. She writes,

it would thus be the highest reward for self-scrutinising aesthetic humility, for honest appreciation of each art for itself, for brave sacrifice of our own artistic whimsies and vanities, to enable us to bring up simultaneously the recollection of Virgil's nobly pathetic lines, of the exquisitely simple and

supple forms of the bas-relief, of the grand and tender music of Gluck, and to unite them in one noble pageant of the imagination, worked by the spell of these two names: Orpheus and Eurydice. (*Belcaro*, 69)

Aesthetic pleasures, as Lee describes them in this early essay, are distinctly interdisciplinary and can be attained through understanding and careful training.

### **Methodology**

This thesis takes as its focus the development and dissemination of Lee's critical aesthetics. By considering the ways in which she constructs her methodology for the study of aesthetics, and the ways in which she applies these methods to studies that may not at first seem to deal with aesthetic issues, this thesis argues that her critical aesthetics were more wide-ranging and inclusive than has previously been thought. Rather than accepting, as other studies on Lee have done, that her varied interests should be divided into phases in her career, this thesis suggests that her varied studies can most helpfully be seen as contributing to a balanced and practical philosophy of aesthetics. Thus, this thesis examines the ways in which Lee's theory of aesthetic harmony and the questions of aesthetics with which she was concerned are evident in her fiction, her travel writing, her studies on psychological aesthetics, literary criticism, as well as in her engagement with the pressing social questions of her time, and that these studies all contribute to her overall critical aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> Key questions addressed by Lee include: what is the relationship between the artist and his or her art, and

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<sup>4</sup> I shall discuss Lee's engagement with social questions only briefly as my main focus is on the ways in which she conceptualises a socially responsible and aesthetic life.

between the artist and the aesthetic critic? How do the various art forms differ and how do these differences impact on the aesthetic experience? How do the mind, the body, and the emotions work together in the aesthetic experience? Ultimately, what is the relationship between art and life, and between beauty and the ideal? This thesis shows that by exploring the questions that Lee associated with the study of aesthetics alongside the methodologies she used when approaching them, we can appreciate more fully the significance of the writing style she adopted to express (and in some ways enact) these ideas. Understanding Lee's aesthetic process suggests a rewarding way of reading Lee that is based on an application of her own aesthetic theories.

In this thesis I explore the ways in which Vernon Lee's interest in aesthetics influenced the style and the content of her writings. I also consider the extent to which her aesthetic theories can helpfully be applied to her writings. My methodology is two-fold. Firstly, the focus of my study is on the quality of Lee's ideas and writings. Rather than analysing Lee in relation to other key figures of the time, or, as is often the case, through the stated opinions of other figures such as Henry James, William James, Walter Pater, and John Addington Symonds, I look at the ways in which her writings can be seen to contribute to a whole philosophy of aesthetics. In other words, my focus in this thesis is on the ways in which her ideas and her writings can be seen to interact with each other, and what this interaction reveals. This is not to say that I place Lee in a vacuum. My thesis is concerned with the ways in which she approached and engaged with some of the probing questions of her time. However, I try to strike a balance between an awareness of the social, cultural, and intellectual contexts from which these writings emerged and the in-depth examination into the *process* by which Lee engages

with and responds to these contexts in her own work. An investigation into Lee's methodology and the ways in which she applies it to the questions of aesthetics has, I feel, been overlooked, and is the guiding aim of this thesis.

While Lee engaged with the ideas of leading intellectuals such as Walter Pater, John Ruskin, William Morris, William James, and John Addington Symonds, in explicit and implicit ways in her writings, the current study considers these writers through Lee's work. My main focus is on the development of her ideas on aesthetics and the ways in which she incorporates her opinions concerning the ideas of others into her own thinking. Therefore I do not comment on the accuracy of Lee's interpretations of these writers, but focus instead on how she formulated these interpretations and what she did with them. So while I refer to Lee's engagement with these men, I aim always to keep the focus on Lee, in particular on the process by which she engaged with the ideas and the spirit of her time and place, as well as the process by which she selected from and altered contemporary ideas, incorporating them into her developing theories in deeply personal ways.

Secondly, in order to do this I conduct close readings of individual essays, dialogues, stories, novels, unpublished manuscripts, and letters, paying careful attention to the relationship between the subject-matter (content) of these pieces and the form (genre and style) in which it is conveyed. My hope is that, by paying such attention to these relationships and to the ways in which Lee conceived of them, we might come closer to a more fulfilling way of reading her work. My readings of Lee's writings are conducted on two levels. The first explores the subject-matter of the piece. I look for evidence of her developing conceptualisation of the ideal intellectual process, and I also

look at the ways in which this process is acted out or performed in the piece. In addition to this I pay close attention to the aesthetic theories as they are experimented with and developed in her writing. My second layer of enquiry interrogates the form (writing style and genre) in which her aesthetic process and her ideas are conveyed. I wish to suggest that Lee engaged in this type of analysis herself, and that she saw the fusion between subject-matter and form in literary art as contributing to a textual atmosphere. It is my contention that the creation of a literary atmosphere was extremely important to Lee and that an awareness of its significance in her writings can result in a more sympathetic and rewarding way of reading her work – taking into account the nature of literary art and incorporating some of the techniques of reading poetry.

My study of Lee's writings is not exhaustive. While, for example, I make mention of her work on musicology and listener-response theories, most notably in *Music and its Lovers* (1932), an in-depth discussion of her theories on music is not within the scope of this thesis. This omission is not to suggest that Lee's interest in music was not a significant part of her critical aesthetics. Although I explore the methodology by which she approaches questions on the nature of audible, visual, and literary art, I focus mainly on the latter two.<sup>5</sup> Lee's pacifism is also not within the scope of this thesis, though I think that there is a direct correlation between her theory of aesthetic harmony and her pacifism during the First World War.<sup>6</sup> Such a study would

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham have recently drawn attention to this gap in Lee studies and conclude that *Music and its Lovers* 'is only likely to receive full criticism when the fields of literary criticism and musicology are in closer dialogue'. Introduction to *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent study of Lee's pacifism, see Grace Brockington's essay 'Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in *The Ballet of Nations*', in *Decadence*,



necessitate a deeper evaluation of historical contexts than would be germane to this particular study. Finally, it will be apparent that there is a stronger representation of Lee's pre-1910 work in this thesis. This is because I am particularly interested in the early development of her aesthetic theories. When I discuss her post-1910 texts, I do so mainly to consider the ways in which she revisits and revises earlier ideas, and to demonstrate how her belief in intellectual openness and transparency of process enables this continuous exploration and shifting of ideas. My interest in these later writings is also related to the ways in which she 'plays' with new applications of old ideas and theories.

### **Key Terms**

Before outlining the scope of this thesis I would like to discuss some of the key terms that are used. As critics such as Elizabeth Prettejohn, Angela Leighton, and Nicholas Shrimpton have recently shown, the terms used to describe art and the artistic experience have been so loosely and confusedly defined that they run the risk of becoming meaningless.<sup>7</sup> Prettejohn has asserted that, 'all labels for periods and movements are constructs deployed to suit the purpose of those who use them' (Prettejohn 1999, 2) Thus, since the nineteenth century, terms such as Aestheticism, Decadence, aesthetics, form, artistic subject, and artwork have been subject to such

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*Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 143-59 and Brockington's chapter on Lee in "'Above the Battlefield": Art for Art's Sake and Pacifism in the First World War' D.Phil., University of Oxford, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, introduction to *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 2. Angela Leighton, *On Form On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Nicholas Shrimpton, 'The Old Aestheticism and the New', *Literature Compass* 2 (2005), 1-16.

levels of repeated definition that a clear consensus on their use remains elusive. As Shrimpton has explained, ‘the term “Aesthetic” has been stretched so thin it is [sic] danger of collapsing’, while Leighton, writing on the slipperiness of the term ‘form’ explains that ‘the evidence of its long and resilient history, among both critics and artists, is that while there may be nothing in this word, this nothing matters’ (Shrimpton 2005, 3; Leighton 2007, 3). In the end, Prettejohn, like many critics, tries to overcome this problem by offering a definition of aestheticism that suits the particular needs of the collection she introduces.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the problem stems from the fact that the terms modern critics use to differentiate between what are typically seen as two movements – Aestheticism and Decadence – were not clearly defined in the nineteenth-century to begin with. Kirsten Macleod has explained that ‘while pro-Decadent critics such as Symons and Ellis had tried to bring precision to the term in their discussions of the movement, this precision was lost when taken up in popular discourse. Decadence was used loosely by critics to describe everything from Naturalism and Impressionism to Realism and New Woman fiction’.<sup>9</sup> Conscious that the two terms cannot simply be used interchangeably, critics such as Macleod have described the difference as being temporal and popular. The major difference between Aestheticism and Decadence for Macleod, then, is that the former paved the way for the latter. Thus, she writes that,

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<sup>8</sup> Prettejohn writes that the volume, which takes as its focus ‘the relatively neglected areas of painting and sculpture’, defines “aestheticism with a small initial letter [...] to denote the general art theory, while the capitalised “Aestheticism” will be used to denote the developments in Victorian art’ (3-4).

<sup>9</sup> Kirsten Macleod, *Fictions in British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 6.

Even if Aestheticism shared many of the same tenets as Decadence – a commitment to art for art’s sake, a rejection of bourgeois industrialism and utilitarianism, and a desire for intensity of experience – its force as a resistant aesthetic for the literary elite was, by the 1880s, on the wane. In part, Aestheticism’s declining power was a result of its popularity with the middle class, a group against which proponents of the movement sought to define themselves. (2)

Mcleod’s attempt at differentiating between Aestheticism and Decadence then settles on a view that, by attempting to reject the status quo, the increasingly popular and middle-class version of Aestheticism gave way to a subversive and ‘darker Aestheticism of Decadence’ (3). Later she adds that ‘Naturalism and Aestheticism were coalescing in the period, resulting in the darker brand of Aestheticism that would become Decadence’ (60-61). Thus, writing on Lee’s 1884 novel *Miss Brown*, Mcleod explains that Walter Hamlin’s Decadent poetry ‘signifies his rebellion against middle-class values’ and that ‘Hamlin’s deliberately provocative poetry and his bohemian and aristocratic Decadent lifestyle serve for him as markers of distinction that legitimate his cultural authority as an artist in ways that anticipate similar modes of legitimisation adopted by 1890s Decadents’ (62). Thus, *Miss Brown* is rightly seen as a novel which is critical of Aestheticism and Decadence, but which also seems to perform aspects of Decadence.

Mcleod’s loose definition of Decadence as a more subversive form of Aestheticism is characteristic of the difficulty of defining terms that have always been vague and elusive. Yet such a loose definition is perhaps as close as we can get both to

its nineteenth-century use and to a definition that can be useful today. Dennis Denisoff explains that ‘in Lee’s time, the term “Decadent” generally referred to either a society’s fall into a state of ruin marked by the debauchery and excess of the wealthy elite, or to an individual who supported such a condition’.<sup>10</sup> Decadence is again loosely defined as a rebellious descendent of a popular and consumerist, but ultimately less ethically objectionable Aestheticism. According to these rather definitions, to be Decadent, then, is to reject popular fashions and consumerism in favour of a subversive, sensationalist elitism.

Attempting to classify Lee’s critique in her novel *Miss Brown* of the 1880s Aesthetic set with which she was involved in London as an anti-Aestheticist or anti-Decadent novel highlights the complications that arise when attempting to mould these fashions into neatly distinct categories. While Denisoff and McLeod associate Decadence with excess and a subversive elitism, Vineta Colby asserts that *Miss Brown* shows that ‘what Lee most deplored was the perversion of aestheticism that, in her mind, turned the lofty Platonic aestheticism of Walter Pater into sexuality and hedonism’ (Colby, 102). Here we have a split between ‘Platonic’ and ‘hedonism’ within aestheticism (with a lower case ‘a’) that does not branch out into Decadence. Christa Zorn also associates *Miss Brown* with a critique of aestheticism, writing that ‘Lee obviously conceived *Miss Brown* as a satire on aestheticism’ (Zorn, 115). Dennis Denisoff, on the other hand, focuses instead on Lee’s relationship with Decadence and does not mention Aestheticism at all. For him, it is Decadence that encompasses the conflicting drives and tastes with which Lee was concerned:

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<sup>10</sup> Dennis Denisoff, ‘Vernon Lee, Decadent Contamination and the Productivist Ethos’, in *Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 75-90 (75).

If Decadence is so thorough in its influence, if it can be readily conjoined to both lethargy and industry, illness and vigour, economy and sloth, then one should be able to locate it not only in those usual suspects such as the authors who self-defined as Decadent and the social groups commonly characterized as marginal and dissident, but also in the ethics and economic motivations of the dominant order. With regard to Lee's works, this in fact proves to be the case. Indeed, I would argue that it proves to be the point. (Denisoff, 76)

I agree that Lee's interest in conflicting drives and desires is a major thread that weaves together her work spanning several decades. Acknowledging the different ways in which modern critics use the terms Aestheticism and Decadence, and taking into consideration their broad usage in the nineteenth century, makes any attempt narrowly to define the terms today in order to fix Lee's critique of artistic culture to one term or the another seem like a rather fruitless exercise.

The late Charles Bernheimer, in his posthumously published *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* recognised the futility of the desire clearly to define Decadence.<sup>11</sup> Writing on Richard Gillman's *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, Bernheimer explains that, while he himself tries to come to terms with the impossibility of defining Decadence, Gilman 'deplores this condition, whereas I find that it helps to give the term

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

its valuable subversive agency. He wants a clear demarcation between what he calls the “proper sphere” of aesthetic creation [...] and the proper sphere of science and history, which is the illumination of that facticity’ (5). This desire to clarify the ways in which these terms should be used must be tempered by an awareness of and appreciation for their fluidity. As Talia Schaffer explains, ‘to begin with, we need to understand that “aestheticism” itself is a loose category, and that to introduce women writers into the aesthetic cannon requires us to respect, not resolve, this indeterminacy’.<sup>12</sup> She goes on to suggest that ‘one way of reading aestheticism’s unsavoury descriptions is to see them as “decadent”’ (45).

Exploring some of the ways in which modern critics have negotiated this issue highlights the slipperiness of these terms. As this thesis will show, Lee believed that categories and classifications could help one to gain an understanding of an issue or idea. Yet she found that the fluidity of the terms associated with the study and appreciation of art would not allow for neat definitions and categorisations. This would become a struggle throughout her entire career – how best to explore and communicate that which cannot be defined in any satisfactory way. For as soon as one thinks a term like Aestheticism, form, or subject has been defined, it slips away.

Lee’s appreciation for the fluidity of language and her conflicting desire to define and to classify in order to increase her understanding of art are reflected in her interest in the ghostly. Like the characters in the stories collected in *Hauntings* who become obsessed with the quest to understand and possess their ghosts, one can also become lost in trying to define the elusive terms associated with the study and

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<sup>12</sup> Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p. 2.

appreciation of art. Therefore I shall not attempt narrowly to define these terms but will focus instead on the ways in which Lee uses them, and on the ways in which she tries to categorise and to define them. For practical purposes I accept the standard current usage of the term Decadence to refer to a more subversive form of Aestheticism that celebrates excess and sensationalism. I do not wish, however, to limit my discussions by adhering to any strict definition of such historically vague terms. I choose instead to focus on the ways in which Lee would use her understanding of the slipperiness of language in order to create a literary atmosphere in her writing that could convey the essence of what she hoped to express whilst celebrating its refusal to be harnessed.

### **Critical Influences**

While I discuss the ways in which I engage with recent studies on Lee in each chapter, in this section I would like briefly to explain why my thesis moves away from two dominant trends in studies of Lee's aesthetics. The first prevailing trend has considered the ways in which Lee's sexuality and personal relationships with women influenced her psychological aesthetics in her essay 'Beauty and Ugliness' (1897) and in her collections *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912), and *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (1924). Such studies, as Jo Briggs and Joseph Bristow have recently noted, can get in the way of a deep understanding of the intellectual quality of her work. The second trend, I argue, stems partly from the first and separates her interests by referring to separate phases in her career.

Investigations into the ways in which Lee's sexuality or repressed sexuality is played out in her writings – by critics such Burdett Gardner, Diana Maltz, Phyllis

Mannocchi, and Kathy Alexis Psomiades – tend to focus on her fiction, in particular her novel *Miss Brown* (1884) and her supernatural short fiction, as well as her essay ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, co-written with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson (1857-1921). As Jo Briggs has noted, such a focus ‘often fail[s] to evaluate the real intellectual achievement of her work on aesthetics, work which is all the more noteworthy when we consider the period in which she was writing’.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that these studies have had another effect, and that is to limit the perception of the scope of Lee’s work on aesthetics to her collaborative work with Anstruther-Thomson.<sup>14</sup> As Psomiades has explained, her focus ‘in these texts is on how aesthetic experience is linked to desire between women, a desire specifically defined through and against a purity polemic that condemns and reimagines sexual activity’ (Psomiades 1999, 31). Central to these studies is the image of Lee watching Kit as she undergoes aesthetic experiences in order to argue, as Psomiades does, that ‘all aesthetic experience for a moment becomes a bodily exchange between women’ (Psomiades 1999, 35). By searching for evidence of eroticism in the relationship between Lee and Anstruther-Thomson in their

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<sup>13</sup> Jo Briggs, ‘Plural Anomalies: Gender and Sexuality in Bio-Critical Readings of Vernon Lee’, in *Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 160-173 (p. 164). All subsequent references will appear in text as Briggs 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of ‘Vernon Lee’* (New York and London: Garland, 1987); 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; Phyllis Mannocchi, ‘Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson: A Study of Love and Collaboration between Romantic Friends’, *Women’s Studies* 12 (1986), 129-48; Kathy Alexis Psomiades, “‘Still Burning from this Strangling Embrace’: Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics”, in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 21-41.



collaborative essays, these critics have put forward the view that Lee's work on aesthetics is limited to psychological aesthetics.

Lee's psychological aesthetics, therefore, have come to be seen as a reflection of her same sex-desires and her ill-fated interest in a scientific approach to the experience of art. This has led to a confusing separation between psychological aesthetics and her engagement with the philosophical ideas on aesthetics put forward by Walter Pater. Thus, Stefano Evangelista, writing on her essay 'Valedictory' in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), asserts that 'in 1895 Lee sees no future for aesthetic writing' and that 'her "Valedictory" carries the full force of definitive closure: it represents the conclusion of Lee's personal engagement with aestheticism but also, more generally, it argues that aesthetic culture has reached the end of its course'. He adds that "Valedictory makes it clear that for her, in 1895, the aesthetic critic has nothing left to write".<sup>15</sup> Christa Zorn expresses a similar view, writing that 'Vernon Lee, for instance, separated herself from suffragist rhetoric, feminist activism, and, later, aestheticism'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Lee's interests are divided into phases. Yet this also seems to have contributed to an idea of Lee as an undisciplined intellectual and writer who dabbled in history, fiction, travel writing, psychological aesthetics, literary criticism, and listener-response theory, without any unifying link, and whose lack of discipline is evident in her writing style.

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<sup>15</sup> Stefano Evangelista, 'Vernon Lee and the gender of Aestheticism', in *Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 91-111 (pp. 109-10).

<sup>16</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. xiii. All subsequent references will appear in text as Zorn 2003.

Catherine Anne Wiley has recently put forward this view of Lee's writing.<sup>17</sup> Wiley offers a reading of Lee's essay 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists' that highlights the 'excesses in Lee's prose' and suggests that it is an example of Lee's 'unbridled' writing style (Wiley 2006, 67). I disagree with this assessment of Lee's writing and in Chapter Four I offer an alternative reading of this essay, one which incorporates an awareness of the importance Lee attached to literary atmosphere as well as her aesthetic theories. Here, I simply wish to explain that I see these readings of Lee as being linked. By focusing on assumptions about the influence of Lee's intimate relationship with Anstruther-Thomson in her psychological aesthetics, the scope of Lee's interest in aesthetics has been limited to their collaborative work, in particular the essay 'Beauty and Ugliness'. This has led to a confusing separation between Lee's philosophical aesthetics and her more scientific aesthetics, which in turn has advanced the notion that Lee was an undisciplined thinker and writer who herself caused this confusion.

I agree with Jo Briggs's assertion that 'bio-critical' readings of Lee can happen at the expense of an understanding of the intellectual quality of her work, and Joseph Bristow's argument that 'by focusing on the unconsummated longing' these studies 'steer attention away' from Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's 'sedulous inquiries into the art of feeling'.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, I agree with Maxwell and Pulham's assertion that it is important to acknowledge that 'interest in Lee's sexual inclinations forms only part of a

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine Anne Wiley, 'The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee's Aesthetics', in *Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 58-74. All subsequent references will appear in text as Wiley 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Bristow, 'Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling', *Tulsa Studies in English Literature*, 25 (2006), 1-23 (125). All subsequent references will appear in text as Bristow 2006.

larger discourse on her extraordinary body of work'.<sup>19</sup> While I by no means wish to discredit studies that approach Lee's work on aesthetics through her potentially erotic relationships with Anstruther-Thomson or Mary Robinson, I think that it is important to be wary of the ways in which such studies can limit our understanding of Lee's work and of what she has to offer as an intellectual. I hope that approaching Lee's writings through the lens of her critical aesthetics will clarify some of the confusion regarding what has come to be seen as disjointed phases in her career. It is my contention that Lee's interest in aesthetics is a common thread that ties her writings together. As such, the main drive of this thesis is to show that approaching Lee's work through the lens of her engagement with critical aesthetics enables a more comprehensive and fulfilling way of reading and engaging with her body of work.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis takes as its focus the aesthetic theories of Vernon Lee, in particular the ways in which she developed, disseminated, and applied them in her writing. While studies on Lee tend to isolate a particular aspect her writings – such as her literary criticism, travel writing, fiction, and psychological aesthetics – my aim in this thesis is to consider the ways in which these studies interact, and to argue that they are part of the wider whole of Lee's critical aesthetics. Vineta Colby has asserted that 'in a sense almost everything that Vernon Lee wrote bore the stamp of fiction'.<sup>20</sup> This thesis presents a central argument that everything Lee wrote bore the stamp of aesthetics. Her

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<sup>19</sup> Introduction to *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Vineta Colby, 'The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee', in *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (London: University of London Press, 1970), pp. 235-303 (pp. 235-6).

interest in aesthetics is evident in the methodologies by which she develops and organises her ideas, the examples she uses, the questions she asks, and the ways in which she conveys this process through her writing. It is my belief that a consideration of the ways in which her interests and writings work together as a contiguous whole, can lead to a clearer understanding of the quality of her ideas and of her writing style. Ultimately, I hope to suggest a way of reading Lee's writings that is sympathetic to her methodologies, her belief in the value of ongoing empirical studies, the importance she attached to testing practical applications of her theories, and the role she saw literary art playing in the development and expression of these theories.

Chapter One offers some background on the artistic movements to which Lee was responding through the creation of her own aesthetic philosophy. By considering essays in which she is critical of the ways in which John Ruskin and the early writings of Walter Pater seemed to represent two opposite extremes in the aesthetic spectrum, I argue that Lee's aesthetic philosophy would aim to establish itself in a more balanced position between the two. This chapter takes as its focus the ways in which Lee plays out her preference for striking a harmonious balance between the two philosophies in her fiction, mainly her novel *Miss Brown* (1884), and her collection of short fiction *Hauntings: Supernatural Stories* (1890). My aim is to show the maturation of her own aesthetic awareness as it is played out in these texts. While in *Miss Brown*, she rejects her own sensual impulse – a desire to privilege artistic impression and sensations over a sense of social responsibility and responsibility to the subject-of-art [the source of artistic inspiration or what the artwork can be said to represent] – in the stories collected in *Hauntings* she acknowledges this internal aesthetic struggle and performs it

through her characters. It is this awareness and acceptance of this struggle, I argue, that results in a more sympathetic and tactful critique of Decadents in *Hauntings* than in *Miss Brown*. While in *Miss Brown*, her one-sidedness resulted in a critique that seemed too dogmatic to be taken seriously, in *Hauntings* she evinces an attraction to these Decadent desires while simultaneously presenting them as a cause for punishment. Within this discussion I also consider the ways in which Lee uses the supernatural and the ghostly to enact this struggle, which she depicts as a struggle between the artist and the subject-of-art.

Taking Lee's desire for balance as a starting point, the next chapter explores the methodologies through which she sets up the boundaries of the discipline of aesthetics. By exploring a series of essays in which Lee reveals the process by which she develops, tests, and puts her ideas into practice, I show that Lee's methodologies – which include an emphasis on the importance of informed comparisons, intellectual transparency, flexibility, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and the harmonious interaction between the mind, the body, and the emotions – informed her critical aesthetics. The aim of this chapter is to show how Lee applied these methods to the questions of aesthetics with which she was concerned. These questions focused on the nature of the relationship between the artist and his or her artwork, the artwork and the critic, between the artist and the critic, and ultimately, between art and life. By exploring this process at work in her writings, I then show how Lee applied methods of aesthetic enquiry to topics which do not at first appear to be related strictly to aesthetics. She does this primarily through her theory of aesthetic harmony. This theory, I argue, is the mainstay of her critical aesthetics, both in its construction and in

its expression. It is through this theory that Lee attempts to attain a balanced philosophy of aesthetics that takes into consideration the dual and often conflicting desires of the socially responsible aesthetic critic in a practical way. By showing the ways in which her theory of aesthetic harmony informs her work on psychological aesthetics, I suggest that Lee's critical aesthetics are more inclusive than has previously been thought.

In Chapter Three I consider the ways in which Lee broadens the scope of aesthetics to include literary art. Arguing against the idea that Lee's interest in psychological aesthetics and in the workings of literary art should be seen as phases in her career that are separate from each other and from her aesthetics, I aim to situate her literary theories within her critical aesthetics. In order to do this, I show how her theory of aesthetic harmony is at work in her explorations into the nature of literary art. By exploring essays on literary criticism in *The Handling of Words* (1923) alongside dialogues and essays on music and psychological aesthetics, this chapter argues that Lee expanded her definition of art to include the special moment at which the subject-of-art and the means of expressing or representing the subject are fused in literary art. In this way, Lee also expands the boundaries of the discipline of aesthetics.

In the final chapter I show how Lee's inclusion of literary art within the study of aesthetics informed her own writing style. By considering essays such as 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists' (1882) that have received much critical attention, alongside other lesser-read essays that also take the excess of Italy as their theme, I suggest that Lee, in dialogue with Pater's essay 'Style' (1888), strove to achieve a literary atmosphere in her writings. This atmosphere is achieved through the fusion of

the literary subject (or content) and the form. This chapter shows the ways in which Lee's theory of aesthetic harmony informs her belief in the importance of literary atmosphere. My discussion of literary atmosphere in Lee's writings will conclude with an alternative reading of 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists' – one that takes into consideration the effects of literary atmosphere as conceived of by Lee. Literary atmosphere is an important aspect of her non-fiction, and this becomes more apparent when considering the ways in which her ideas on the aesthetics of literary art can be applied to her own writing. However, I shall now discuss the significance of Lee's fiction in the development of her thinking on aesthetics.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### ***Hauntings and the Emergence of Lee's Critical Aesthetics***

This chapter considers some of the popular ideologies to which Lee responded through the development of her own critical aesthetics. It will focus particularly on the ways in which she engaged with and critiqued aspects of popular Aestheticism and emerging Decadence in her early fiction, mainly *Miss Brown* (1884) and her collection of supernatural short fiction, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890). In order to do this I shall outline briefly some of the popular aesthetic ideas of the time, focusing mainly on Walter Pater, before moving on to a discussion of the ways in which Lee performs her critical engagement with extreme ideologies and her striving for aesthetic harmony in *Hauntings*. By showing how Lee creates a literary atmosphere in these stories that evokes a sense of the ghostly, I argue that she is working towards a theory of aesthetic harmony that would facilitate a healthier and more socially responsible way of creating and appreciating art. This chapter will provide some context for the following chapters which focus primarily on the ideas which make up Lee's aesthetic philosophy as well as the writings through which this philosophy was developed, disseminated, and in some cases, performed.

Walter Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) challenged John Ruskin's call for a utilitarian appreciation of art that claimed that artistic worth was linked directly to the artwork's potential as a civilising and moralising force. Pater's response to this aesthetic philosophy in *The Renaissance* was to argue for a return to artistic appreciation for its own sake; in other words, he argued that art and beauty should be assessed on the quality or intensity of the impressions they evoke in the individual. Pater asserted that to understand the nature of the impressions, rather than the nature of the art itself, should be the goal of the aesthetic critic. According to this



theory, everything apart from the experience and the understanding of these emotions and sensations should be deemed superfluous. This concept, embodied in the phrase ‘love of art for its own sake’ came to be interpreted as a call for a complete separation between artistic effect and responsibility to the source of artistic inspiration.<sup>21</sup> The subject-of-art came to lose its importance because it was understood that the most intense sensations and emotions were to be found in art rather than life. This brought into question the importance of authenticity in art and in life.

Oscar Wilde portrayed the way in which Aestheticism answered this question in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). After the suicide of the actress Sibyl Vane, Lord Henry instructs Dorian to ‘Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Barabantio died. But don’t waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are’.<sup>22</sup> Here, Sibyl’s actual personality is considered ‘less real’ because it lacked the intensity of the characters she portrayed on the stage. As a live and ever-changing artistic medium – an actress who would, each night, embody a different tragic fictional character – she was interesting, but not in her own right as a person. After her unsatisfactory performance in *Romeo and Juliet*, Dorian tells her that ‘you used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity. You produce no effect’ (102). Writing on the scene with Lord Henry, Lynn Voskuil draws attention to the significance of Lord Henry’s advice, claiming that he represents the view that authenticity and sincerity are naïve and boring, while theatricalization is to be encouraged. In this scene,

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 190. All subsequent references will be to this text.

<sup>22</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 120.

Lord Henry's advice to Dorian is that fiction is a more intense, and therefore worthy or authentic, source of sensation. Voskuil explains that Lord Henry 'does not theatricalize real life in order to decompose its authenticity; he does so instead to render real life more shapely, pleasing, and *seemingly natural* – to render it, that is, more authentic – even as he acknowledges the capacity of most experience to defy theatricalization altogether' [my emphasis].<sup>23</sup> Voskuil argues that since it was understood that the realities of daily living could not be sidestepped entirely, the theatricalization of the quotidian was intended to increase the potential in daily life for experiencing that much sought-after goal – intense sensation.

In *Dorian Gray*, the manipulation, or theatricalization, of reality has fatal consequences as Dorian mourns for the fictional characters that Sybil will never again embody with such intensity. Dorian shuns the real person, thus driving her to commit suicide. What, then, is reality? To what extent can a person fabricate his or her own reality? Would one necessarily be aware of a shift from reality to theatricalization? These questions all resonate with the supernatural and the fantastic. In the late nineteenth century in particular, the possibility that the self could unwittingly twist reality was depicted in novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). The subtle line between authenticity and artifice can be disconcerting. As Dorothea Von Mücke has observed,

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<sup>23</sup> Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 19.

On the one hand, the fantastic deploys explanations that invoke a model of reality shared by the reader, of commonly held assumptions about the nature of the material and spiritual world and of what can be perceived and known. On the other hand, the fantastic tale's explanations undermine this same model of reality by invoking mystery, occult knowledge, or laws that encompass the supernatural in a way that contradicts assumptions about the natural world and human knowledge thereof.<sup>24</sup>

The supernatural and the fantastic rely on a manipulation of reality which results in a disconcerting sense of simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity, of authenticity and artifice, which touches the imagination.

In this chapter I shall consider the ways in which Vernon Lee's collection of supernatural fiction, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), can be seen as a response to this Aesthetic interpretation of the relationship between the subject-of-art and the artwork, and authenticity and artifice. Lee was wary of the influence that a commercially-minded and populist Aestheticism would have on art and its study. It is this concern which seems also to align her with the artistic elitism of the Decadents. In her novel *Miss Brown* she both critiqued and indulged in the manipulation of the subject-of-art for the sake of sensationalist artistic effect. She hurt and antagonised many with her thinly veiled caricatures of well-known figures belonging to the cultured set. This disregard for the subject of her art in a novel that was also critical of such

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<sup>24</sup> Dorothea E. Von Mücke, *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 2003), p. 2.

action made her commentary seem too confused and extreme to take seriously.<sup>25</sup> As Laurel Brake has recently shown, the sense of betrayal felt by the group which had welcomed her in the early 1880s was acute and their – at the time anonymous – reviews of the novel were often scathing.<sup>26</sup> Lee continued to publish essays outlining her aesthetic theories throughout her lifetime but I wish to suggest that her collection of short stories, *Hauntings*, can be seen as another attempt to make a case for the importance of harmony in one's life and in one's relationship to art and its creation. Whilst often seen as a popular collection and therefore less intellectually rigorous than her theoretical essays, I shall argue that the collection has a strong didactic purpose, as evidenced by Lee's inclusion of a Preface in which she outlines the theory behind the collection and recalls a previous essay 'Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural', published in her collection of essays *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1881).

This chapter will focus on the ways in which Lee used the supernatural and the ghostly in *Hauntings* to advance her critique of the notion that the subject-of-art can always legitimately be sacrificed for artistic effect and that worthwhile authenticity requires artistic manipulation. Unlike her previous attempt to highlight the dangerous allure of contemporary Aesthetic culture in *Miss Brown*, in *Hauntings* she approaches these themes with greater sensitivity and tact. In addition, the creation of a literary

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<sup>25</sup> Lee in turn was caricatured for what was considered too critical and argumentative a style, a reputation which did not seem to dissipate with time. Notably, Max Beerbohm's addition to the title page of his copy of *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908) was a unflattering sketch of a curmudgeonly lady along with the words, 'Oh dear! Poor dear little dreadful lady! Always having a crow to pick'. quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 3; and Zorn 2003, xxi.

<sup>26</sup> Laurel Brake, 'Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 40-57.

atmosphere in these stories that evokes the ghostly successfully advocates the need for a harmonious approach to art, its creation, and its effects. Through the creation of a ghostly, haunting atmosphere in these stories she is able to remain at once critical and sympathetic towards the conflicting desires associated with the pursuit of art and beauty. Thus, she is able to engage with these conflicts, but on her own terms.

I shall begin this chapter by discussing the aspects of contemporary Aesthetic culture to which Lee responds in *Miss Brown* and in *Hauntings*. In order to do this, I shall consider her essay ‘Valedictory’, published in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), to see what it reveals about her reaction to Pater’s early aesthetic writings, in particular the Preface and Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. I shall then move on to a discussion of the relationship Lee saw between Aesthetic culture and ideas and the supernatural – or the ghostly as she called it – in her essay ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural’ and the Preface to *Hauntings*. I shall draw parallels between Lee’s use of the theme of the ‘gods in exile’ to represent the revenge of pagan deities for the diminution of their power through artistic representation, and her critique of the privileging of artistic form over artistic subject [by which I mean the subject-of-art]. While, according to Lee, visual art sacrificed the pagan gods through artistic representation, contemporary Aesthetic fashions sacrificed the artistic subject by reducing its importance and wrongly linking its manipulation to authenticity, a worthier version of reality. In *Hauntings*, the subject-of-art often takes its revenge and refuses to be sacrificed, sometimes sacrificing the Decadent artist instead. Ultimately, I shall argue that Lee’s solution to the problems that she highlights in *Miss Brown* and in *Hauntings* is her theory of aesthetic harmony, which she partly attributes to Pater in her essay

‘Valedictory’. This theory, which calls for the balanced interaction between the individual, his or her surroundings, and mankind more generally, was in direct response and opposition to the Aesthetic cult of the individual. While I shall introduce Lee’s theory of aesthetic harmony in this chapter, I shall discuss it in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Lee published five collections of short fiction during her lifetime. Three collections – *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (1906) and *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927) – were devoted primarily to supernatural fiction.<sup>27</sup> Another collection that includes traces of the supernatural is *Tuscan Fairy Tales, Taken from the Mouths of the People*, published in 1880, though these fables are not Lee’s creations but are instead local myths collected and recorded by Lee and accompanied with illustrations by J. Stanley. Her other fiction collection – *Vanitas: Polite Stories* (1892) – was not devoted to supernatural fiction, though her story ‘The Legend of Madame Krasinka’ does contain elements of the supernatural.<sup>28</sup> Superficially, *Hauntings* differs from her other collections of supernatural fiction in that it contains a Preface in which she outlines the theory behind the collection. The other collection published early in her career – *Pope Jacynth* – has no introduction but is also

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<sup>27</sup> Vernon Lee, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: W. Heinemann, 1890). I use throughout the annotated edition by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham. Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006). Vernon Lee, *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (London: Grant Richards, 1904); *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, 1927).

<sup>28</sup> Vernon Lee, *Vanitas: Polite Stories* (London: W. Heinemann, 1892). Interestingly, the introduction to this collection explains that the stories are linked by their critique of what she called a ‘vainglorious’ attitude, which supports the idea that her fiction often carried a didactic purpose. ‘The Legend of Madame Krasinska’ was published first in *Fortnightly Review* (March 1890), 377-96.

labelled '*Fantastic*', which may suggest that the collection is a continuation of *Hauntings*. *For Maurice*, a work that appears much later, does include an introduction in which Lee describes the circumstances under which she wrote some of the '*Unlikely Stories*'.<sup>29</sup> The introduction to *For Maurice* does not outline a particular theory, though it is interesting for what it reveals about Lee's creative process and the act of writing supernatural fiction. The publication of *Hauntings* is important because it signals a more confident engagement with the conflicting desires and priorities of contemporary Aestheticism. This is done partly, I suggest, through her Preface to the collection in which she outlines her theories on the supernatural and its relationship to contemporary Aesthetic thought.

Unlike Lee's other collections of the period which dealt with aesthetics, most notably her collections *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Æsthetical Questions* (1881), *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* (1884), and *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Æsthetical Questions* (1886), *Hauntings*, like *Miss Brown*, can be said to be a collection aimed at a popular, more commercial audience. That the collection was geared towards a popular audience was noted by Henry James who commended her for what he called her 'ingenious tales, full of imagination and of Italy', in a letter to Lee after the publication of *Hauntings*. He added that the stories 'diffused through my intellectual being'. However, his letter does include a slight on the supernatural as a popular genre, despite his own eventual engagement with it, declaring that 'the supernatural story, the subject wrought in

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<sup>29</sup> As in *Hauntings*, some of the stories collected in *For Maurice* appeared in periodicals in the 1880s and 90s.

fantasy, is not the class of fiction I myself most cherish'.<sup>30</sup> Lee herself signalled her awareness that supernatural fiction is considered more accessible than theoretical non-fiction writings in her introduction to *For Maurice*. Here she tells a story about Maurice Baring (1874–1945), the eponymous dedicatee of her book, and his childhood disappointment after purchasing another title by the author of his favourite book, Lee's *The Prince of the Hundred Soups: A Puppet Show in Narrative* (1883). To his dismay, he discovered that, rather than another collection of entertaining fiction, he had purchased a book of aesthetic philosophy. Lee explains that 'we are not told what he did with the Essays on Æsthetical Subjects in that moment of disappointment. And perhaps better not ask' (x). More recently, Mary Patricia Kane has written that Lee's 'fantastic tales were for her an amusing and occasionally lucrative side line'.<sup>31</sup> I think, however,

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<sup>30</sup>Henry James, Letters, 4 vols., ed. Leon Edel (London: Macmillan, 1974-84), iii, p. 276. James's novel *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) conceptualises the fear evoked by a haunting in a similar way to some of the stories in *Hauntings*. As T. J. Lustig notes, 'James's letter to Lee apparently lacks prescience'. *Henry James and the Ghostly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 86.

<sup>31</sup>Mary Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Rome: Carocci, 2004), p. 19. In referring to Kane's assertion I do not wish to suggest that Lee did not have commercial intentions for her stories or that she was unconcerned with their marketability. She was a professional author and her letters to her mother from the period are peppered with references to deals with publishers and periodicals, as well as financial concerns. In 1888 she wrote to her mother that 'I have vainly attempted to get some money for my four stories: no one, not even Unwin will have them' (Letter to Matilda Paget, 28 October, 1888. Colby College, Catalogue no. 417). During a period of illness she writes to her mother that 'If I could finish another story I might have a volume ready by Easter, and get £100 for that, but at present I can't write. Unfortunately, during my illness, I have sold all the ready work I had, + I must therefore write if I want money' (Letter to Matilda Paget, 14 August, 1890. Colby College, Catalogue no. 502). However, these financial concerns were not restricted to her fiction, which suggests that financial incentive should not be used to differentiate between her fiction and non-fiction. In another letter to her mother dated 14 November, 1890 she writes 'I have not heard from Bunting, but I have been asked for an article by the New Review, which pays so well, so that if really I can get to work at Florence, I shall be in no want of money' (Colby College, Catalogue no. 541). Lee published 'Sketches in



that it is erroneous to see Lee's supernatural fiction as a 'side line'. Similarly, Christa Zorn has asserted that 'although Vernon Lee's fantastic stories are less central to her work, they are better known today than her more serious critical essays' (Zorn 2003, 140). It is true that Lee's collections of short fiction are better known today, but I do not agree with the hierarchy implied by these statements. Although Kane and Zorn offer interesting discussions of some of the important themes found in Lee's supernatural fiction, I would argue that these stories are central rather than peripheral to Lee's work because they can be seen as experiments with her developing theories. They can also be seen as attempts to advertise the failings of contemporary aesthetic philosophy to a popular audience. In so doing, the collection draws attention to the need for a revised aesthetic philosophy. In her fiction, she performs the aesthetic theories which she was developing at the time.

### **'Aesthetic Factory'**<sup>32</sup>

In her essay 'Valedictory', Lee acknowledges a division between Pater's earlier and later writings and considers the ways in which his earlier theories lent themselves to interpretations that were at odds with his later, less popular ideas. She explains that he began as 'an æsthete of the school of Mr. Swinburne's *Essays*, and the type still common on the Continent' (*Fancies*, 256). 'Mr. Pater's first and famous book', she

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Tangier' in *New Review* in March 1890, pp. 221-28 and 'Of Writers and Readers' in December 1891, pp. 528-36. In another, rather melancholy letter she compares the sales of her collections – fiction and non-fiction – with Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1891). To her mother she writes, '1. On examination I don't find Unwin's statement so satisfactory. 2. None of my books has sold as much as 1200 America included. 3. What this means is shown by Pater's Marius being in the 6<sup>th</sup> thousand. I am decidedly an unsuccessful author, well known but not read' (Colby College, Catalogue no. 564).

<sup>32</sup> *Miss Brown*, Vol. I, p. 8.

writes, left itself open to interpretations which assumed that ‘the yielding to, nay, the seeking for, variety and poignancy of experience’ could occur only at the expense of or ‘crumbling away of all such possible unity and efficiency of living’ (*Fancies*, 257). Part of what Lee takes to task in Pater’s Preface and Conclusion is the extreme position he seems to adopt. Her call for ‘unity and efficiency of living’ is a call for balance, which Pater’s emphasis on ‘poignancy of experience’ and the sacrifice of all else seems to lack. She accepts that the motives of this school of thought were not ill-intentioned, writing that ‘the cultivation of sensations, vivid sensations, no matter whether healthful or unhealthful, which that school commended, was, after all, but a theoretic and probably unconscious disguise for the cultivation of something to be said in a new way’ (*Fancies*, 256). Indeed, Lee believed that the argument that all art does not and should not have to be useful is an important one, because it countered the artistic censorship advocated by moralists. For Lee, this theory was also based on an extreme view which held, as she explains in her essay ‘On Ruskinism’ (1883) that

the basis of art is moral; that art cannot be merely pleasant or unpleasant, but must be lawful or unlawful, that *every* legitimate artistic enjoyment is due to the perception of *moral* propriety, that *every* artistic excellence is a *moral* virtue, *every* artistic fault is a *moral* vice; that noble art can only spring from noble feeling, that the whole system of the beautiful is a system of *moral* emotions, *moral* selection, and *moral* appreciation; and that the aim and end of art is the expression of man’s obedience to God’s will and of his recognition of God’s goodness. [my emphasis] (*Belcaro*, 204)

The very language Lee uses to describe this philosophy signifies her belief that Ruskin held an extreme position. Her use of repetition here seems to drive the point that Ruskin's was not a balanced aesthetic philosophy. This, in part, led her to declare that 'his system is false' (*Belcaro*, 226).

Yet the balance which Pater would come to advocate in his later writings was, for Lee, simply not present in *The Renaissance*, his most popular work. She writes in 'Valedictory' that 'Pater's inborn affinity for refined wholesomeness', made explicit in his later work 'made Mr. Pater the natural exponent of the highest aesthetic doctrine – the search for harmony throughout all orders of existence' (*Fancies*, 258). She adds that 'By faithful and self-restraining cultivation of the sense of harmony he appears to have risen from the perception of visible beauty to the knowledge of beauty of the spiritual kind, both being expressions of the same perfect fittingness to an ever more congruous life' (*Fancies*, 256). What this implies is a shift from an extreme separation between art and ethics to an awareness of the necessary interconnectedness between all aspects of one's life in the appreciation of art. She explains that Pater's mature 'conception of art, being the outcome of his whole personal mode of existence, was inevitably one of art, not for art's sake, but art for the sake of life – art as one of the harmonious functions of existence' (*Fancies*, 259).

In Pater's *The Renaissance*, he outlines the tenets by which the aesthetic critic should live. In the Preface he writes, 'what is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects'

(*Renaissance*, 180). Developing this ‘temperament’ involves a process by which one aims not only to seek a variety of aesthetic impressions but also to understand the nature of these impressions. The special aesthetic temperament to which Pater refers is acutely sensitive to beauty and prioritises the sensations evoked by beauty over all other concerns. In his controversial Conclusion he asserts that,

the theory or idea or system which requires us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. (*Renaissance*, 155)<sup>33</sup>

This seems to be a direct response to philosophies, like Ruskin’s, which strove to bring together a sense of social responsibility and a love of beauty. For Lee, the problem with both philosophies was the way in which their priorities proved to be exclusive. For Ruskin, his sense of social justice came before beauty, and he decided that beauty would be made to fit within this priority. In Pater’s early theory, on the other hand, beauty came first and anything else was considered a distraction. Although, as Lee explains, Pater’s mature aesthetic theory would embrace a balanced interaction

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<sup>33</sup> In the 1893 edition of *The Renaissance* Pater acknowledges that the Conclusion, as originally conceived, ‘might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall’, and so he omitted the Conclusion from the second edition of the work (186). As Donald Hill has explained, Pater revised each of the four editions published in his lifetime (1873, 1877, 1888, and 1893) and so in this way, *The Renaissance* was always a work in progress, suggesting that (though some of the revisions were quite minor) the book represents the development of his ideas until, in the 1893 edition, he directs the reader specifically to *Marius the Epicurean*.

between the practicalities of daily life and aesthetic appreciation, here he does seem to advocate a complete split between the two.

In *The Renaissance*, Pater separates the experience of beauty from its lasting effect and seems to privilege impression over meaning. He privileges the moment – ‘all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is’ – and he privileges the individual – ‘every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world’ (*Renaissance*, 187- 8). Pater suggests a separation of sensation and emotion from the object which evokes it:

not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? (*Renaissance*, 188)

The Preface and Conclusion to *The Renaissance* separate aesthetic experience from social responsibility and the practical sides of life, a separation which is as extreme and exclusive as the fusion of the two for which Ruskin’s aesthetic philosophy called. In his Preface Pater explains that,

The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers and forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements. To him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book, *La Gioconda*, the hills of Carrara, Pico of Mirandola, are valuable for their virtues, as we say, in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, unique, impression of pleasure'. (*Renaissance*, xx)

Pater here defines the special concerns of the aesthetic critic, writing that the 'all objects with which [the aesthetic critic] has to do' are 'works of art and the fairer forms of nature and human life', rather than the quotidian. Yet attaching value to objects or people based solely on the extent to which they offer pleasure is, according to Lee, irresponsible, nor does such exclusivity make one better suited to appreciating beauty. Moreover, when Pater explains that the questions which the aesthetic critic should train himself to ask are 'what is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure?' he privileges the individual and the aesthetic effect over the actual subject-of-art.

In her novel *Miss Brown*, Lee is critical of the ways in which the Aesthetic set put these misleading theories into practice.<sup>34</sup> Walter Hamlin, an aesthete poet and

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<sup>34</sup> Lee believed that Pater's later theories show a maturity of expression which was lacking in *The Renaissance* where it seemed that he was of a group who privileged 'feeling in order that they may write, instead of writing because they feel'. Thus, whilst

painter, travels to Italy in an effort to escape London's 'aesthetic factory'. Whilst visiting an old friend whom he met as an undergraduate at Oxford he encounters the servant girl Anne Brown, whose unconventional beauty he finds compelling. Hamlin offers to act as her patron and enrolls her in a liberal school for young women where he is able to set her a curriculum of canonical Aesthetic texts. Once educated, he houses her in comfortable style in London, provides her with clothing 'half-antique, half-medieval' to enhance her Pre-Raphaelite appearance, and introduces her to some of the city's most notorious Aesthetes (*MB*, IV. 307).

At one point in the novel, Anne discovers that a place she had once visited with Hamlin – Cold Fremley – and which she thought was a picturesque rural idyll is in fact a poverty-stricken hamlet in which the cramped living conditions contribute to the rampant vice. Anne discovers that Hamlin owns the inadequate accommodation and she appeals to his sense of social responsibility. She quickly learns, however, that he has no intention of improving the living conditions in the hamlet partly because he sees in the situation artistic potential. As he had explained to Anne earlier in the novel, his belief and the belief of his Aesthetic school was that 'everything is legitimate for the sake of an artistic effect', a belief which bears a strong similarity to Pater's assertion that 'the aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers and forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind' (*MB*, II. 94). This idea seems to celebrate the artist's power to select and manipulate a subject-of-art. In the case of Hamlin, part of the process of manipulation in this instance is inaction.

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technically 'exquisite', for Lee *The Renaissance* nevertheless left a 'sense of caducity and barenness' (*Fancies*, 256).

That he thinks only of the artistic potential of the situation adheres literally to Pater's call not to sacrifice the art for 'some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves'. In this case the 'abstract theory' seems to be social justice. Anne challenges his motives: 'you think the sinfulness of the people of Cold Fremley fits very well into the landscape? You think it, as you said, very picturesque and grand?' (*MB*, II. 212). Hamlin's response is striking:

Well, yes [. . .] of course it *is* very shocking, and if anything could be done, why, I should be glad. But I *know* nothing can be done; and although it is very much to be regretted, yet I don't think you can deny that there is something very grand and tragic in this sin flowering like evil grasses in that marsh. (*MB*, II. 212-13)

Anne is sickened by the selfishness exhibited by Hamlin and his set. Hamlin's response allows for the separation of the impression from the subject-of-art which elicits the response. In fact, he is happy to sacrifice the subject-of-art for the potential artistic effect. Lee's critical aesthetics would counter this selfishness by arguing that a lack of harmony in the interaction between the individual and his surroundings makes the individual less, rather than more, able to appreciate beauty.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, she argued that appreciating beauty in a manner which does not sacrifice one's sense of social

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<sup>35</sup> In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this idea is reversed. Lord Henry explains that 'to be good is to be in harmony with one's self' and adds that 'Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life – that is the important thing. As for the lives of one's neighbours, if one wishes to be a prig or a Puritan, one can flaunt one's moral views about them, but they are not one's concern. Besides, Individualism has really the higher aim' (92).



responsibility enables beauty to play a more satisfactory role in everyday life. In ‘Valedictory’ she explains that this idea – of ‘art for the sake of life’ – was Pater’s greatest, but least popular, contribution to the philosophy of beauty. As Lee explains in this essay, Pater’s idea of aesthetic harmony, expressed in *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1885), and *Plato and Platonism* (1893), would have the greatest impact on Lee’s own critical aesthetics.

In *Hauntings*, Lee used the supernatural to advance her critique of extreme and exclusive philosophies. That the supernatural can be said to be the result of extreme conditions – reality stretched to breaking point – makes it an appropriate genre for such a critique. I shall now look at the ways in which Lee’s theories on the supernatural are linked to her quest for aesthetic harmony.

### **Phantoms and Fancies**

In this section I shall explore the ways in which Lee’s theories on the supernatural in her essay ‘Faustus and Helena’ and the Preface to *Hauntings* enabled her critique of artistic mistreatment of the subject-of-art. She conceptualises the relationship between the subject-of-art and the artwork as a power struggle. In her essay ‘Orpheus and Eurydice: the Lesson of a Bas-Relief’ (1878) she asserts that ‘this is the inevitable course of art; we call in beauty as servant, and see, like some strange dæmon, it becomes the master; it may answer our call, but we have to do its bidding’.<sup>36</sup> In ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’ the power struggle between beauty and art is described in terms which evoke the supernatural. Pater also draws attention to this struggle in *The Renaissance* where he

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<sup>36</sup> First published in *Cornhill Magazine* (August 1878), 207-17. Re-published in *Belcaro*, pp. 49-69 (p. 68).

explains that the aesthetic critic possesses ‘the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects’ (xxi). Pater implies here that the ‘power’ rests with the viewer who looks upon his surroundings as ‘objects’ which could, if he chooses, provide him with pleasurable sensations. Yet earlier in the Preface he states that these objects with which the aesthetic critic surrounds himself should be seen as ‘powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations’ (xxi). This represents a significant ambiguity. Where does the power lie – with the critic/artist or with the subject-of-art? I hope to show in this section that Lee’s theories on the supernatural, which she outlines in ‘Faustus and Helena’ and in the Preface to *Hauntings*, pave the way towards an enactment of this power struggle in the stories.

There are two major themes discussed in ‘Faustus and Helena’. The first is to do with the relationship between the supernatural and visual art and the second is to do with the ways in which the supernatural – or what she will refer to as the ghostly – functions in literary art. The Preface to *Hauntings* draws attention to the second theme of ‘Faustus and Helena’. The first half of this essay, I suggest, runs parallel to Lee’s thinking on the power struggle between the subject-of-art, the artwork, the viewer (or aesthetic critic), and in particular the ways in which contemporary Aesthetic thought would conceive of this struggle. This second half of ‘Faustus and Helena’ is particularly important for understanding the ways in which Lee is able to construct stories on the supernatural without destroying the supernatural in the ways she describes in the first section of the essay.

The first half of this essay considers the distinction between the supernaturalism of ancient times – when enigmatic pagan gods had the power to haunt – and the

contemporary supernatural, which relies on the modern craving for the past. Lee explains that before sculptors began turning gods into muses, the pagan gods were terrifying because they were non-specific and indefinable:

Thus it is with the supernatural: the gods, moulded out of cloud and light and darkness, are for ever changing, fluctuating between a human or animal shape, god or goddess, cow, ape or horse, and the mere phenomenon which impresses the fancy. ('F&H', 297)

It was the uncertainty associated with the gods – the appearance and disappearance of the divine in unknown incarnations at any given time – that inspired awe in one's fancy and therefore made the gods inherently terrible. When sculptors transformed the gods into artistic muses, the result, according to Lee, was that 'in proportion as the gods were subjected to artistic manipulation, whether by sculptor or poet, they lost their supernatural powers' ('F&H', 302). In this way, for example, Venus ceased to represent obscure otherworldly manifestations of pleasurable pain, sacrifice and beauty. Instead, depiction through sculpture transformed her into an accessible image. Through artistic representation these gods became textbook gods, liable to be labelled and catalogued. Because humans were able to learn too much about them, they ceased to be unknown and their greatness diminished. As Lee explains, 'The gods ceased to be gods not merely because they became too like men, but because they became too like anything definite' ('F&H', 300). As artistic manipulation became more advanced, the subject-of-art or idea

– in this case, the pagan deity – lost the power which was transferred onto the art form.

Lee asserts that

If the ibis on the amulet, or the owl on the terra-cotta, represents a more vital belief in the gods than does the Venus of Milo or the Giustiniani Minerva, it is not because the idea of divinity is more compatible with an ugly bird than with a beautiful woman, but because whereas the beautiful woman, exquisitely wrought by a consummate sculptor, occupied the mind of the artist and of the beholder with the idea of her beauty, to the exclusion of all else, the rudely-engraved ibis, or the badly-modelled owlet, on the other hand, served merely as a symbol, as the recaller of an idea; the mind did not pause in contemplation of the bird, but wandered off in search of the god: the goggle eyes of the owl and the beak of the ibis were soon forgotten in the contemplation of the vague, ever transmuted visions of phenomena of sky and light, of semi-human and semi-bestial shapes, of confused half-embodied forces; in short, of the supernatural. ('F&H', 300)

According to Lee, in this specific case of representing the supernatural, the artistically mature representation (the artwork) draws attention to itself at the expense of the god (the subject-of-art).<sup>37</sup> Immature art, on the other hand, allowed the supernatural to exist because it suggests something greater than itself. Suggestion, not beauty, was the aim of immature art – 'the rudely-engraved ibis, or the badly-modelled owlet'.

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<sup>37</sup> In this discussion, the subject-of-art is specifically not quotidian but the intangible pagan deity.

Lee continues her argument by explaining that with the demise of the pagan supernatural, people were left with a void in place of the awe that fear inspired. This awe was replaced with a craving: ‘a passion intensely imaginative and poetic, born of deep appreciation of antiquity, the essentially modern, passionate, nostalgic craving for the past’ (‘F&H’, 315). This passionate desire to reclaim the past made ghosts the only acceptable substitutes for the pagan gods. Yet in this essay Lee is careful to clarify what she means by ghost. She differentiates between her ghosts and those made famous by clichéd stereotypes. She explains that the ghosts which have the power truly to haunt are not white sheets haunting dark passages in ancestral homes; rather, they are yearnings for the past that haunt the mind. To be haunted by a ghost is to experience ‘a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness, and which, confusedly embodied, we half dread to see behind us, we know not in what shape, when we look around’ (‘F&H’, 309-10). The transformation that for Lee shifted from pagan deities to the supernatural suggests a craving for the past that is represented by ghosts. Thus, it is not strictly the vessel for the supernatural – whether it is a pagan deity or a modern phantom – that is important, but rather, the *quality* or *idea* of the supernatural.

This quality, as Lee explains in the second half of ‘Faustus and Helena’, is the ghostly, and it is particularly well suited to literary art. Here she separates the lasting legend – the lengths Faustus was willing to cross in order to satisfy his longing for Antiquity, as embodied by the beautiful Helena of Sparta – from the artistic creations of Goethe and Marlowe. She explains,

But the group of Faustus and Helena is different; it belongs neither to Marlowe nor to Goethe, it belongs to the legend. It does not give the complete and limited satisfactions of a work of art; it has the charm of the fantastic and fitful shapes formed by the flickering firelight or the wreathing mists; it haunts like some vague strain of music, drowsily heard in half sleep. It fills the fancy, it oscillates and transforms itself; the artists may see it, and attempt to seize it and embody it for ever more in a definite or enduring shape, but it vanishes out of his grasp, and the forms which should have enclosed it are mere empty sepulchres, haunted and charmed merely by the evoking power of our own imagination. ('F&H', 292)

The legend, or the idea, is what impresses itself upon the reader or listener. The legend outlasts the narrative (the artwork) through which it is conveyed because 'our thoughts wander off from them and evoke a Faustus and Helena of our own, different from the creations of Marlowe and Goethe; it is because in these definite and imperfect artistic forms, there yet remains the *suggestion of the subject* with all its power over the imagination' [my emphasis]. She adds that 'We forget Marlowe and forget Goethe, to follow up the infinite suggestion of the legend' ('F&H', 293). In this way, the artistic potential inherent in the legend, 'if left to insinuate [itself] into the imagination' never expires because the legend always suggests, never succumbing entirely to art ('F&H', 307). Artistic attempts to represent the legend only add to the power of the legend and further undermine the power of art.

Lee explains that the reader of the story appropriates the legend, adds it to the chaos of impressions internalised – external surroundings, other stories read or artworks seen, etc. – and the mixture becomes fodder for the creation of one’s personal ghosts. Lee describes this process, writing that

Gazing thus into the fantastic intellectual mist which has risen up between us and the book we were reading, be it Marlowe or Goethe, we cease, after a while, to see Faustus or Helena; we perceive only a chaotic fluctuation of incongruous shapes; all melting into each other, indistinct, confused, like the images in a dream; vague crowds, phantoms following in the wake of the spectre woman of Antiquity, beautiful, unimpassioned, ever young, luring to Hell the wizard of the Middle Ages. (‘F&H’, 294)

For Lee, this internal process is imaginative and distinguishable from the creative (artistic) impulse with its limitations of form.<sup>38</sup> She explains that ‘why neither Marlowe nor Goethe have succeeded in giving a satisfactory artistic shape to this tale is explained by the necessary relations between art and the supernatural, between our creative powers and our imaginative faculty’ (‘F&H’, 294). She adds that for the

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<sup>38</sup> This may seem like an agreement with the separation between the subject-of-art, the artwork, and impressions. However, the focus of ‘Faustus and Helena’ is on the pagan deities as subjects-of-art in the first half of the essay, and the myth of Faustus as a subject-of-art in the second half. Both of these subjects-of-art are vague and fluctuating. Lee was not writing here on all artworks, nor was she writing on all possible subjects-of-art. I think that part of her disagreement with this view is that it did not seem to distinguish between different subjects-of-art. In other words, all possible subjects-of-art were deemed to be equally available for artistic manipulation, whether the subject-of-art is a person, a thing, or an abstract idea. Lee disagrees with the selfishness and the emphasis on the individual and on production which this view of artistic creation allows.

supernatural, ‘the synthetical definiteness of art is as sceptical as the analytical definiteness of logic’ (‘F&H’, 295). The limits of the power of artistic creation reside in the artistic process itself. ‘Every artistic embodiment of impressions or fancies’, she explains, ‘implies isolation of those impressions or fancies, selection, combination and balancing of them; that is to say, diminution – nay, destruction of their inherent power’ (‘F&H’, 304).

The supernatural relies on a vague and ambiguous suggestiveness that is associated with the ghostly. The supernatural does not strictly rely on a belief in ghosts. Catherine Maxwell has recently explained that ‘in spite of seeing most artistic forms as too finished and defined to convey supernatural effects, [Lee] believes that there are representational ruses by which the supernatural can come into play’.<sup>39</sup> Lee’s use of narrative details in the stories, such as artistic incompleteness and depictions of ambiguous femininity, to which Maxwell draws attention, maintain the supernatural. It seems to me that in addition to these ‘representational ruses’, the supernatural is supported and developed in these stories through the quality which Lee calls the ghostly. She takes it for granted that most of her readers do not believe in ghosts. She explains that

we have a form of the supernatural in which, from logic and habit, we disbelieve, but which is vital; and this form of the supernatural is the ghostly. We none of us believe in ghosts as logical possibilities, but we

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<sup>39</sup> Catherine Maxwell, ‘Of Venus, Vagueness, and Vision: Vernon Lee, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, and ‘the spell of the fragment’ in *Second Sight: the Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 142.



most of us conceive them as *imaginative probabilities*; we can still feel the ghostly. [my emphasis] ('F&H', 309)

Lee's ghosts do not have to be believable in order to be powerful and create an impression on the reader. The ghosts are merely the vessels for the ghostly, with that power totally dependent on the idea or the legend they suggest. Medea, in 'Amour Dure', for example, could be a ghost or she could be a hallucination. The question really is beside the point because the ghostly resides in the *idea* of a passionate scholar conjuring the past. Medea conveys the ghostly in the story, as does Dionea in Lee's story 'Dionea', whether or not the reader believes that she is an exiled goddess. The ghosts do not have to be believable as ghosts in order to do their work; they only need to be 'imaginative probabilities'. Likewise, it does not matter whether Christopher Lovelock's ghost actually appears to the nineteenth-century Alice in 'Oke of Okehurst' or if we believe that she is the reincarnation of her seventeenth-century namesake. The ghostly is not diminished if we do not believe that Zaffirino has exchanged his soul for his talent and has returned to haunt Magnus in 'A Wicked Voice'. The suggestion of the Faustian legend remains unscathed whether we believe in the supernatural details of the stories or not.

Some contemporary reviews of the collection missed this point. The reviewer for *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote that the stories 'are not true, or at any rate typical ghost stories, but rather studies in morbid psychology. They might be amplified extracts from a medical case-book, recording three curious phases of monomania'.<sup>40</sup> And so, in a

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<sup>40</sup> Review, 'Vernon Lee's Hauntings', *Pall Mall Gazette*, (April 23, 1890), 3.

way, they are. On one level they are didactic stories that depict the dangers of undergoing powerful aesthetic experiences without an understanding of the process which can lead to obsession and possibly to madness. But on another level, they are stories which convey a sense of the ghostly, an aesthetic experience in itself. A ghost can be banished but the ghostly, once there, remains. It is atmospheric; it is a 'fantastic intellectual mist' projected by the reader ('F&H', 294). Because the ghostly relies on the reader's acceptance of the 'imaginative possibility' of the existence of the ghosts, rather than on an actual belief in their existence, Lee is then free to do other, more rational, things in the stories.<sup>41</sup> In 'Faustus and Helena' she argues that the two are not incompatible – the rational warning and the supernatural – because one does not have to believe in ghosts in order to feel the ghostly. I suggest that, in addition to maintaining the vague quality called the ghostly, in these stories Lee puts forward a critique of the mistreatment of the subject-of-art whilst indulging in the act herself.

Assuming that all objects with which one is surrounded can be potential subjects-of-art ready for the artist's manipulation was, for Lee, dangerous and irresponsible. In *Miss Brown* she criticises the view, put forward by the Aesthetic set, that 'everything is legitimate for the sake of artistic effect' (*MB*, II. 94). This included sacrificing the

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<sup>41</sup> In the Introduction to *To Maurice*, she explains how she was surrounded by the ghostly when she was writing the first version of 'A Wicked Voice', even though she was fully aware that she was inventing the story herself. She described how she wrote 'into the small hours, sitting quite alone in an Italian country house with all the servants long gone to bed, the lamps guttering and owls hooting. So that night over the first version of 'Winthrop's Adventure' was a *bona fide*, indeed my only, ghostly experience complete with cold hands, dank hair, a thumping heart and eyes one didn't dare to raise from the writing table for fear of dark corners; and, as regards the final wrench, the opening of doors, echoing along corridors, the (at last!) refuge in bed, all that was so terrible as to have left no more memory behind than if I had fainted before my manuscript till the next morning!' (xxxv).

subject-of-art, irrespective of what that might be and of the potential non-artistic consequences such a sacrifice may have. Yet by writing *Miss Brown*, a novel in which the characters mocked and criticised are easily identifiable, she hurt and offended many of her acquaintances and could thus reasonably be accused of the very same crime. In her commonplace book she questioned her own motives for writing the novel and admitted that she might be guilty of desires similar to those she criticised in *Miss Brown*. 'May there not', she asks,

at the bottom of this seemingly scientific, philanthropic, idealising, decidedly noble-looking nature of mine, lie something base, dangerous, disgraceful that is cozening me? Benn says that I am *obsessed* by the sense of the impurity of the world . . . May this be true? May I be indulging a more depraved appetite for the loathsome, while I *fancy* that I am studying disease and probing wounds for the sake of diminishing both? Perhaps . . .

(quoted in Gunn, 106)

Earlier in the chapter I suggested that Lee addressed her critique of Aestheticism in *Hauntings* with greater sensitivity and tact than she did in *Miss Brown*. I now wish to suggest that a possible reason for this is that in *Hauntings* Lee implicated herself in the crimes she describes. Rather than admonishing her characters, as she did in *Miss Brown*, in *Hauntings* she seems more sympathetic and more clearly identifies with some of their desires. The puritanical tone that worked against *Miss Brown* is not evident in the stories collected in *Hauntings*. The characters who mistreat the subjects-

of-art are punished in these stories, however, and I see this as a balance between Lee's own aesthetic impulse and her ethical imperatives. The stories express a sympathetic understanding of those desires associated with Aestheticism but ultimately remain critical of them.

Thus, the stories in *Hauntings* can be read as performances which show what happens when ghosts take their revenge against the artist for trying to banish them through art. Lee asserts in 'Faustus and Helena' that the mature artist is aware of the limitations of his or her art form and so

the artist, conscious of his powers, instinctively recognising the futility of aiming at the embodiment of the supernatural, dragged on by an irresistible longing to the display of his skill, to the imitation of the existing and to the creation of beauty, ceases to strain after the impossible and refuses to attempt anything beyond the possible. ('F&H', 305)

Even when the artist is aware that he cannot capture the ghost artistically, the attempt to embody the ghost through art, as was done to the pagan gods, undermines it. 'The art, which was before a mere insufficient means', she adds, 'is now an all-engrossing aim; unconsciously perhaps, to himself, the artist regards the subject merely as a pretext for the treatment; and where the subject is opposed to such treatment as he desires, he sacrifices it' ('F&H', 305). When the artist seeks to overcome the limitations of his or her art form, the artist's attention shifts from the subject-of-art to his or her own artistic ability. At this point, the emphasis no longer is on accurate representation of the subject

but rather on the art. In so doing, the subject is overlooked. The stories in *Hauntings*, to various degrees, display a reversal of this. The subjects-of-art refuse to be sacrificed and some even take revenge on the artist for his or her attempt to capture it through art. The ghosts and the ghostly in these stories sacrifice the art and even, at times, the artist. Lee uses this reversal to maintain the supernatural in literary art and in doing so performs the separation and consequent power struggle between the subject-of-art and the artwork so that the dangerous potential of this separation can be seen. The story is merely the vessel for the ghostly, a ghost in its own way, perhaps, and the details of the story are interchangeable, as evidenced by the four different ways in which she plays with the same Faustian legend of obsession with beauty and the past.<sup>42</sup>

In 'Faustus and Helena' Lee defines a haunting as an emotional, psychological, and sensuous experience which 'invades our whole consciousness'. But although frequently stimulated by an external suggestion, the haunting comes from within.<sup>43</sup> In the Preface to *Hauntings* she reiterates this idea by explaining that ghosts

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<sup>42</sup> This legend had played a significant role in Lee's writings and in particular her writings on the past. She discusses the legend also in her introduction to her collection *Euphorion*. Faustian themes were popular in the late nineteenth century, with the most obvious literary examples being Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In a letter to her mother dated 22 August, 1886 Lee writes that "Dr. Jekyll is a story by R.L. Stevenson; personally I consider mine [*A Phantom Lover*] very much better, but that is perhaps because I have no sympathy with the prosaic, unpicturesque kind of supernatural' (*Letters*, 234-5). In a letter to her mother when she was finalising the proofs for *A Phantom Lover* in 1886, Lee records attending a dramatic adaptation of *Faust* with her publisher Stanley Unwin, which she considered 'miserable' and 'ridiculous' (*Vernon Lee's Letters*, 222-3).

<sup>43</sup> Writing on contemporary nostalgia, Malcolm Chase explains that 'the home we miss is no longer a geographically defined place but rather a state of mind'. The idea of nostalgia as a state of mind is, I think, interesting in light of Lee's assertion that nostalgic craving evokes psychological ghosts. Introduction to *The Past is a Foreign Country*, ed. by Malcolm Chase, Christopher Shaw and David Lowenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 1.

are things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters, and faded herbs and flowers, whence arises that odour (we all know it), musty and damp, but penetratingly sweet and intoxicatingly heady, which hangs in the air when the ghost has swept through the unopened door, and the flickering flames of candle and fire start up once more after waning. (*Hauntings*, 39)

Lee explains that the ghostly is all around us because ‘we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past’ and the past ‘is the place to get our ghosts from’ (*Hauntings*, 39).

In the Preface to the collection Lee asserts that ‘the supernatural, in order to call forth those sensations, terrible to our ancestors and terrible but delicious to ourselves, sceptical posterity, must necessarily, and with but few exceptions, remain enwrapped in mystery’ (*Hauntings*, 37).<sup>44</sup> Contemporary reviews of the collection took Lee to task for revealing the theory behind the collection in her Preface. The reviewer for the *Academy* complained that reading the Preface

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<sup>44</sup> This is reminiscent of Walter Scott’s assertion in ‘On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition’ (1827) that ‘the marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought too much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified’. Quoted in Srdjan Smajic, ‘The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story’, *ELH* 70:4 (2003), 1107-1135 (p. 1111). Smajic writes on Scott’s essay as a precursor to Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975).

is as though a spiritualist were to invite you to a séance, and just as you were getting your nerve ready to thrill he were to dissipate all mysterious expectations by the announcement that apparitions, and raps, and all the rest of it were mere claptrap.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile the reviewer for *Pall Mall Gazette* explained that though the stories are ‘well imagined, cleverly constructed, powerfully executed’, ultimately they fail to thrill. The reviewer explains that ‘the expected, the courted, the longed-for shiver never came. This effect, or lack of effect, is partly due, we believe, to the disenchanting preface which Vernon Lee has been misguided enough to write, and we to read’ (3). These reviewers, seeming to agree with Lee’s assertion that the supernatural ‘must necessarily, and with but few exceptions, remain enwrapped in mystery’, resented that Lee defined her ghosts.

Angela Leighton has recently expressed her belief that Lee’s ‘ghost stories don’t quite work’. She writes that a ghost is ‘the still fluid memory of something else’, and adds that

Far from being a frivolous or conventional figure, then, the ghost is crucial to Lee’s aesthetic theory. Her fictional ghosts are abstracted forms, semi-inventions of their beholders, go-betweens, uncertain, ancestral presences, dependent in part on the desires of the ghost-seers. This may also be why

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Vernon Lee’s *Hauntings*’, *Academy*, 37 (May 24, 1890), 352.

her ghost stories don't quite work. They are as much about aesthetics, about beauty and desire, as they are about human revenge or terror. These 'culture ghosts', as she called them, are part of a ghostly aesthetics of interaction and interplay which she was working out throughout her life. They are about the psychological effects of obsession or desire, but they are also about interpretation and artistic meaning.<sup>46</sup>

Leighton is right to identify the aesthetics at work in these stories and the collection's emphasis on the 'psychological effects of obsession and desire'.<sup>47</sup> Yet although Leighton uses the word ghostly here, her use does not seem fully to encapsulate the meaning that Lee attaches to the word. Lee makes a distinction between a ghost and the ghostly in the second part of 'Faustus and Helena', and her understanding of this distinction is one of the major reasons why these stories *do* work. Read alongside the Preface to *Hauntings*, 'Faustus and Helena' reveals itself to be a theoretical blueprint for the stories in the collection. This blueprint is striking because it places the power of the supernatural also within the legend itself – the subject of the story. The implication of 'Faustus and Helena' for Lee's stories is that they are not ghost stories, they are

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<sup>46</sup> Angela Leighton, *On Form On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 109

<sup>47</sup> In a previous version of this essay on 'A Wicked Voice', Leighton does explain that 'the fun of the whole story is that Vernon Lee can give us "spurious ghosts" in whom, like fiction, we do not need to believe, but whose beauty is cravingly desired and pursued'. Leighton focuses on the 'repetitions and puns' in the stories as a means through which Lee maintains the supernatural. She addresses the ways in which the structure (or form) of the story enables the supernatural. To this I would add that the quality in the stories called the ghostly, also works to enable the supernatural. 'Ghosts, Aestheticism and "Vernon Lee"', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28 (2000), 1-14 (p. 10).



ghostly, and within this distinction lies an acknowledgement of the difference between imagination and artistic creation, with ‘the ghostly – no longer believed, but still felt’ residing between the two (‘F&H’, 312).

And so in the Preface to *Hauntings* she explains that her stories are ‘of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense; they tell of no hauntings such as could be contributed by the Society for Psychical Research’ (*Hauntings*, 40). Lee’s ‘spurious ghosts’ come to exist through a process whereby outside impressions are altered in one’s mind, and are then reflected back on to the outside world. She asserts that they are ‘according to me the only genuine ones’ (*Hauntings*, 40-1). For Lee, a haunting is powerful and terrible because it is generated from within. ‘The genuine ghost?’, she asks, ‘and is not this he, or she, this one born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard’ (*Hauntings*, 39).

### ***Hauntings***

As I have shown, Lee was critical of the subjugation of the artistic subject for artistic manipulation and the dangerous sensations such manipulation could elicit. Pater’s conceptualisation of the ideal aesthetic temperament placed this temperament in a privileged position of power over the subject-of-art. The problem with this philosophy with which Lee was most concerned was that the idea that ‘everything is legitimate for the sake of an artistic effect’ could be used to condone the sacrificing of people and nature. In addition to this, Lee saw the ways in which this unbalanced philosophy

unknowingly separated itself from the beauty which it was Aestheticism's original aim to experience and understand. Confusing poignancy of experience with beauty led the way towards an appreciation of affectation or artifice. Lee took these ideas to task in her novel *Miss Brown* and again in the stories collected in *Hauntings*. In this section I shall explore the ways in which Lee advances her critique of Aestheticism through her use of the ghostly in these stories. By using the ghostly Lee not only was able to produce stories that could touch a popular audience, but she could also highlight the dangers of such an extreme philosophy. The artists and Decadents in these stories believe that their aesthetic sensitivity puts them in a position of power over their chosen subjects-of-art. The Decadent excess in these stories – whether read as psychological disturbances or genuine hauntings – advocates the need for a more balanced aesthetic philosophy which does not aim to pit the artwork against the subject-of-art but instead strives for a harmonious interaction between the two.

There are four stories in *Hauntings*. All are narrated by men and all, with the exception of the third, 'Oke of Okehurst', which takes place in a manor house in Kent, are set in Italy. A 'craving for the past' permeates through these tales and this desire literally haunts Lee's characters, from the academic Spiridion Trepka in the story 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka' who is fascinated by the portrait of Medea da Carpi, a woman executed in the sixteenth century, to Magnus, a Norwegian composer who is haunted by the voice of an eighteenth-century castrato called Zaffirino in the final story 'A Wicked Voice'. The Decadent crimes committed against art are made more explicit with each story in the collection until the ultimate

artistic revenge – the loss of control over one’s own artistic inspiration and creative impulse – is achieved in the final story, ‘A Wicked Voice’.

The first story, ‘Amour Dure’, addresses most explicitly the Faustian theme explained in ‘Faustus and Helena’ and Lee’s explanation of the function of her ghosts in the Preface. The story is narrated by a Polish historian who is staying in Urbania to write a history of the city. Spiridion Trepka is the archetypal zealous historian, offended by the supposedly genteel modern-day inhabitants of Urbania who, by evolving into would-be fashionable cosmopolitan aesthetes, refuse to honour the history of their people. Trepka quickly becomes obsessed with Medea and sets out to avenge her murder. The surprise ending, in which the reader discovers that Trepka has died mysteriously whilst writing his narrative, adds an extra ghostliness to the tale. It is unclear how the narrative becomes accessible to the reader, and though Trepka was certainly alive while he recorded his final days, the fact that he is dead by the time the reader encounters the tale gives the sudden impression that his voice comes from the grave.

Trepka admits to having had a very clear image of the Italy he wished to see prior to his visit. He explains that he ‘had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past’ (*Hauntings*, 41). His idea of Italy’s past is selective and fully formed, however, and as he is driven to Urbania in the night, the darkness which obscures his surroundings enables him to focus on his preferred version of the past. ‘Each single village name, as the driver pointed out’, he writes, ‘brought to my mind the recollection of some battle or some great act of treachery of former days’ (*Hauntings*, 42). This is the history which interests Trepka – battles and acts of

treachery – and he looks for evidence of this particular side of the past in his surroundings. He explains that ‘I almost expected, at every turning of the road, that a troop of horsemen, with beaked helmets and clawed shoes, would emerge, with armour glittering and pennons waving in the sunset’ (*Hauntings*, 42). This dangerous and dramatic past, for Trepka, is the only one that matters and he exclaims sadly, ‘ah, that was Italy, it was the Past!’ (*Hauntings*, 42). Trepka’s unwillingness to accept the realities of the present is not helped by his landlord’s occupation as a ‘dealer of antiquities’ (*Hauntings*, 44). Trepka is, in effect, living in a museum:

a queer up-and-down black place, whitewashed rooms, hung with the Raphaels and Francias and Peruginos [ . . . ] and surrounded by old carved chairs, sofas of the Empire, embossed and gilded wedding-chests, and the cupboards which contain bits of old damask and embroidered altar-cloths scenting the place with the smell of old incense and mustiness. (*Hauntings*, 44)

Trepka has created for himself a version of Italy’s history that appeals to him personally. Like an artist, he has selected from historical accounts the version of history that appeals to him. ‘Is not what we think of as the Past – what we discuss, describe, and so often passionately love – a mere creation of our own?’, Lee asks in her essay ‘Puzzles from the Past’ in *Hortus Vitæ*.<sup>48</sup> Trepka’s error, however, is that he loses sight of the balance

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<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to notice that both Lee and Trepka capitalise the word past. As Patricia Pulham has pointed out, these stories reveal Lee’s ‘processes of identification’ with her characters. Pulham explains that in ‘Amour Dure’, ‘Trepka, as writer/scholar, becomes

which keeps the past and the present separate. By looking only for the past in his present surroundings, he sacrifices the present and leaves himself emotionally vulnerable. Lee calls this lack of balance ‘wastefulness’ in her essay ‘The Portrait Art’. It is ‘wastefulness’, she writes, ‘in this great period of confusion, of the most precious things that we possess: time, thought, and feeling refused to the realities of the world, and lavished on the figments of the imagination’ (*Euphorion*, 447). Yet Trepka dismisses and refuses to accept the quotidian realities of present-day Urbania because they are not, for him, charged with the intensity of emotion which he recognises in the past. Indeed, he makes clear his distaste of the ‘Urbanian *beau monde*’, with whom he is expected to interact (*Hauntings*, 54). These would-be cosmopolitan aesthetes, according to Trepka, sit in

huge half-furnished rooms, with bare brick floors, petroleum lamps, and horribly bad pictures [. . .] vociferating at each other the same news a year old; the younger ladies in bright yellows and greens fanning themselves while my teeth chatter, and having sweet things whispered behind their fans by officers with hair brushed up like a hedgehog. (*Hauntings*, 54)

Trepka recoils from Urbania’s fashionable set as he would from an unsatisfactory work of art. He feels that the modern-day inhabitants of Urbania have nothing beautiful or interesting to offer. His Decadent view of what is worthwhile places

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the figure of [Lee] as “artist” (126). It is possible that by allowing Trepka to indulge in a selective and obsessive view of history and of his historical surroundings, Lee is able to indulge safely in these acts vicariously through him. Perhaps, in addition to her desire to create a good story, Lee uses Trepka for this purpose.

him in danger as he decides instead to indulge his passion for the heightened and supposedly pure emotions of the past.

In the preface to *Hauntings*, Lee describes the power of this craving for antiquity as experienced by Faustus. Trepka succumbs to a similar craving in this story by allowing his version of the past to take on a physical embodiment in the form of Medea da Carpi, his very own re-incarnated Helen of Troy. He admits that ‘even before coming here I felt attracted by the strange figure of a woman, which appeared from out of the dry pages of Gualterio’s and Padre de Sanctis’ histories of the place. This woman is Medea’ (*Hauntings*, 45). His use of tense is interesting. She moves from past tense to present tense. She ‘appeared’ to him and then ‘is’.<sup>49</sup> Before his arrival at Urbana, Trepka’s preferred history is already linked with Medea. For Trepka, history is female. He writes that ‘I steer clear of Italian womankind, its shrill voice and gaudy toilettes. I am wedded to history, to the Past’ (*Hauntings*, 54). Interestingly, the line between his description of Medea and his description of Italy’s history is blurred. He asks, ‘where discover nowadays (I confess she haunts me) another Medea da Carpi? Were it only possible to meet a woman of that extreme distinction of beauty, of that terribleness of nature, even if only potential, I do believe I could love her’ (*Hauntings*, 55). Medea embodies those qualities of the past to which he is attracted, and his attraction to the beautiful and terrible history of Italy becomes a sexual attraction for Medea. He later admits that ‘I hid my love to myself in the garb of historical interest’

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<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, Medea enters Trepka’s present through art. She appears to him through her life-size portrait which is placed in front of a mirror. Trepka explains that, upon looking into the mirror, he saw that ‘behind my own image stood another, a figure close to my shoulder, a face close to mine; and that figure, that face, hers! Medea da Carpi’s!’ (*Hauntings*, 61). The image of Trepka and Medea in the same mirror represents a disconcerting mixture of past and present.

(*Hauntings*, 72). His passionate craving for the past is transferred to a passionate craving for Medea who embodies the past. For him, Medea is ‘a woman whose one passion is conquest and empire’ and is the product of ‘a century of violence and treachery’ during which ‘right and wrong [. . .] does not exist’ (*Hauntings*, 56). The futility of applying modern moral standards to the Renaissance is transferred to Medea, who is both of her time and, for Trepka, the embodiment of this historical epoch. ‘To suppose Medea a cruel woman’, he explains, ‘is as grotesque as to call her immoral’ (*Hauntings*, 57).

Likewise his desire to possess the past is transferred into a desire to possess Medea. The decomposed rose she gives him represents her dead physicality, which he desperately covets, in part as a sign of his devotion to her. He exclaims, ‘if only I could hold Medea in my arms as I held it [the rose] in my fingers, kiss her lips as I kissed its petals, should I not be satisfied if she too were to fall to dust the next moment, if I were to fall to dust myself?’ (*Hauntings*, 70). She is likened to his Helen of Troy, raised from the dead by the devotion of the living:

Those pedants say that the dead are dead, the past is past. For them, yes; but why for me? – why for a man who loves, who is consumed with the love of a woman? – a woman who, indeed – yes, but let me finish the sentence. Why should there not be ghosts to such as can see them? Why should she not return to the earth, if she knows that it contains a man who thinks of, desires, only her? (*Hauntings*, 69)

His devotion to the past, as embodied by Medea, is akin to a religious devotion to a deity. Trepka acknowledges that his desire to be loved by and to possess Medea as a woman is a 'sacrilege', the punishment for which is death:

The possession of a woman like Medea is a happiness too great for a mortal man; it would turn his head, make him forget even what he owed her; no man must survive long who conceives himself to have a right over her; it is a kind of sacrilege. And only death, the willingness to pay for such happiness by death, can at all make a man worthy of being her lover; he must be willing to love and suffer and die. (*Hauntings*, 57)

Trepka's desire to possess Medea and, through her, the past, is akin to religious devotion which resonates also with chivalric love. 'The feeling terrifies me', he explains, 'but it is delicious' (*Hauntings*, 69).

Trepka makes the error of desiring and seeking intense emotions that he believes can only come from the past. Yet despite knowing that he cannot possess Medea, he does seem compelled by a death drive. It is as if he believes such a dramatic ending to his life would offer him the intensity and beauty he so craves. As his obsession deepens he convinces himself that he has a special insight into Medea's character and that this insight sets him apart from her other suitors. Thus, he willingly sacrifices himself for Medea's approval.

In 'Dionea', the second tale in the collection, the academic narrator, Alessandro De Rosis, is writing a book on the theme of the 'gods in exile'. A little girl is found



stranded on the shore after a mysterious shipwreck and is named Dionea, a name associated with the goddess Venus. De Rosis secures for Dionea the patronage of Lady Evelyn Savelli, a princess and aesthete, who pays for her education, and he keeps her informed with regular bulletins about her protégée's progress. It quickly becomes apparent that Dionea is responsible for several undesirable romantic unions and the story reaches its climax when the sculptor Waldemar attempts to sculpt Dionea's form and is unable to because she becomes more and more beautiful as he works. In this way Dionea evades proper physical representation through sculpture.

Both the narrator of the story, Doctor Alessandro De Rosis, and his correspondent, Lady Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina, can be identified as Aesthetes. There is a slight suggestion that Lady Savelli, in providing financially for Dionea, and thus being the recipient of De Rosis' epistolary accounts of her life in the village, also pays for an entertaining story. This can be inferred partly by the tone of De Rosis' letters to her. In his first letter the Doctor appeals to Lady Savelli for financial support for the shipwrecked Dionea whilst outlining the mysterious circumstances under which she was found. When she accepts, Dionea becomes known in many of the letters as Lady Savelli's '*protégée*'. Lady Savelli, whose father had taken De Rosis into his home during his exile and who, as a Savelli is, according to Maxwell and Pulham, part of a 'prominent and influential Italian noble family of illustrious ancestry' (*Hauntings*, 92; 81, fn. 1).

The letters imply that Lady Savelli is a stereotypical Aesthete, and it becomes clear that De Rosis attempts to appeal to her Aesthetic sympathies in his letters. He makes reference to her Hellenic interests, addressing 'your Excellency, who is, I fear but

a Pagan woman' (*Hauntings*, 81). In his letters De Rosis appeals also to her preference for sensationalism over usefulness. He writes,

You ask me how poor Dionea is getting on. Not as your Excellency and I ought to have expected when we placed her with the good Sisters of the Stigmata: although I wager that, fantastic and capricious as you are, you would be better pleased (hiding it carefully from that grave side of you which bestows devout little books and carbolic acid upon the indigent) that your *protégée* should be a witch than a serving-maid, a maker of philtres rather than a knitter of stockings and sewer of shirts'. (*Hauntings*, 93)

This hints at Lady Savelli's dual nature – on the one hand morality is performed by bestowing 'little books', as an act of charity, to the lower classes, while on the other sensationalism is privileged over morality.<sup>50</sup> He also uses the language of popular Aestheticism in his correspondence, explaining that Dionea 'is a lovely sight, a thing fit for one of your painters, Burne Jones or Tadema' (*Hauntings*, 81). In an early letter he refers to her fashionable tastes, explaining that the cost of keeping Dionea should be no more than what she would normally spend on 'a little mannish cloth frock' (*Hauntings*, 78). Asking if she has read 'Longus, a Greek pastoral novelist' he adds that 'he is a trifle free, a trifle rude for us readers of Zola' (*Hauntings*, 83). Later he refers to the

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<sup>50</sup> In popular Aestheticism, as Lee shows in *Miss Brown*, this duality is dangerous partly because it lacks harmony. As I shall show in Chapter Two, Lee's critical aesthetics emphasised the importance of harmony between all things, including one's human cravings for pleasure and one's sense of moral responsibility. In *Miss Brown* and in this story, Lee criticises popular Aestheticism's acceptance of this lack of harmony.

objects that decorate her house, writing that ‘you had evidently added a volume on folk-lore to that heap of half-cut, dog’s-eared books that litter about among the Chineseries and Mediæval brocades of your rooms’ (*Hauntings*, 99). He appeals also to her poetic sensibilities by describing the rural idyll in which he lives. In his invitation to her he writes,

You shall have some very bare rooms with brick floors and white curtains opening out on my terrace; and a dinner of all manner of fish and milk (the white garlic flowers shall be mown away from under the olives lest my cow should eat it) and eggs cooked in herbs plucked in the hedges. Your boys can go see the big ironclads at Spezia; and you shall come with me up our lanes fringed with delicate ferns and overhung by big olives, and into the fields where the cherry-trees shed their blossoms on to the budding vines’.  
(*Hauntings*, 83)

To this Arcadian scene is added ‘goats [which] nibble perched on their hind legs’ and ‘the voices of unseen boys and girls, singing about love and flowers and death, just as in the days of Theocritus whom your learned Excellency does well to read’ (*Hauntings*, 83). Lady Savelli also apparently takes part in séances, and in this she is similar to the dangerous Sacha in *Miss Brown*, from whom Anne must save Hamlin.<sup>51</sup> De Rosis writes,

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<sup>51</sup>Séances were very fashionable at the time among the Aesthetic set. Dante Gabriel Rossetti took part in them. As T.J. Lustig has explained, ‘mesmerism, animal magnetism, reincarnation, hypnotism, clairvoyance, telepathy, possession, trance,

You think our peasants are sceptical? Perhaps they do not believe in thought-reading, mesmerism, and ghosts, like you, dear Lady Savelli. But they believe very firmly in the evil eye, in magic, and in love potions. Every one has his little story of this or that which happened to his brother or cousin or neighbour. (*Hauntings*, 93)

This quotation is interesting also because it hints at a strange knowingness. ‘You think our peasants are sceptical?’ De Rosis asks, before assuring her that the villagers genuinely are superstitious and believe in the supernatural. Is it the case that Lady Savelli believes Dionea to be a strange revenant but thinks the villagers are sceptical of this? That De Rosis makes reference to her belief in the supernatural would support this. If so, however, De Rosis does not admit openly to such a belief.

Yet De Rosis’ account of the interactions between Dionea and the villagers does seem knowing at times. His tone in the letters is not without a sense of irony. When the sisters try to baptise the child he writes that she ‘kicked and plunged and yelled like twenty little devils, and positively would not let the holy water touch her’ (*Hauntings*, 79). He records that ‘the child, they say, had evidently been baptized before, and knew that the operation ought not to be repeated’ (*Hauntings*, 79). De Rosis seems to adopt a

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hallucination, the divided self, the split consciousness, amnesia, hysteria: these were the limit phenomena and borderline states which fascinated writers, scientists, researchers and charlatans in the age before (and after) Freud’ (87). Helen Sword offers a lengthy list of Victorians who took part in séances, which includes Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, John Ruskin, John Addington Symonds, Christina Rossetti, Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling. *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.5.

mocking tone here. Despite Dionea's actions, described as being like 'twenty little devils', 'they say', that she must have been baptised already, not that she did not wish to be. His tone is mocking again when he explains the reactions of those who witnessed the event:

The Mother Superior, who always took for granted that the baptism had taken place before, says the child was quite right, and that Heaven was trying to prevent a sacrilege; but the priest and the barber's wife, who had to hold her, think the occurrence fearful, and suspect the little girl of being a Protestant. (*Hauntings*, 79)

There is something comical about the logic used by the Barber's wife and the priest who, sensing the presence of something 'fearful', decide the child must be a Protestant. The way in which De Rosis delivers this seems to display an awareness of the comedy. He is also disparaging about the Sisters of the Stigmata, referring to the 'dear little nuns (nuns always go straight to the heart of an old priest-hater and conspirator against the Pope, you know)', and in particular 'the sister-book-keeper, who apparently detests monotony' who enabled Dionea to keep her name because she found a Saint Dionea in the "Flos Sanctorum, or Lives of the Saints, by Father Ribadeneira' (*Hauntings*, 79-80). The saint's page is decorated with 'a border of palm-branches and hour-glasses' (*Hauntings*, 80). Again, the idea of a nun who 'hates monotony' is rather comical.

There are several strange occurrences in the village which are associated with Dionea which De Rosis notices. He explains that he is writing a book on the gods in

exile and, perhaps unconsciously, this may be a reason why he does not intervene in the strange occurrences surrounding Dionea. He writes to Lady Savelli that in the village 'she is regarded as possessing the evil eye and bringing love misery' (*Hauntings*, 85). This 'love-misery' includes 'an extraordinary love epidemic at the Convent of the Stigmata' so that 'the elder schoolgirls have to be kept under lock and key lest they should talk over the wall in the moonlight' (*Hauntings*, 87). Meanwhile the apparently love-struck priest, Father Domenico of Casoria, commits suicide. Dionea is said always to respond to these occurrences with a 'smile like the twist of a young snake' (*Hauntings*, 89). De Rosis declines Lady Savelli's offer to have Dionea sent to Rome but admits that 'I am, however, very anxious to get Dionea out of the neighbourhood' (*Hauntings*, 89). Despite the strange occurrences which surround Dionea, he secures for her a place in the house of a wealthy family, ironically as the maid of a young woman about to be married. A cynical view might suggest that his, perhaps unconscious, desire is to provoke another strange occurrence. 'I hear that one of the rich men of our part of the world', he writes, 'a certain Sor Agostino of Sarana, who owns a whole flank of marble mountain, is looking out for a maid for his daughter, who is about to be married' (*Hauntings*, 89). He adds that 'that house is so good, simple, and peaceful, that I hope it may tame down even Dionea' (*Hauntings*, 89). His reasons for these hopes seem strange considering the strained relationship between Dionea and the convent in which she was raised. When Sor Agostino is struck down by lightning and Dionea explains calmly that she told him 'that if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident', De Rosis admits that 'the coincidence is strange and uncomfortable' (*Hauntings*, 90).

De Rosis often reveals his feelings of superiority over the villagers, for whom he fulfils the role of doctor. After the strange death of Sor Agostino he still refuses to send Dionea to Rome. He writes, 'here is Dionea back upon our hands once more! I cannot send her to your Excellency. Is it from living among these peasants and fishing-folk, or is it because, as people pretend, a sceptic, is always superstitious?' (*Hauntings*, 90). Here he admits to a 'superstitious' suspicion and decides to leave the villagers at risk rather than his friend in Rome. In terms of the narrative, it is interesting to consider whether De Rosis fails to make crucial connections which would reveal to him Dionea's likely identity. The possibility that he chooses to ignore the obvious in order to manipulate reality and turn it into interesting art is always present as well. Like the Cold Fremley scene in *Miss Brown*, the story's violent ending places De Rosis' actions, or failure to take action – under ethical scrutiny.

These narrative possibilities are only ever suggested.<sup>52</sup> They are never resolved and yet these rational explanations for the action (or lack of action) taken by De Rosis do not hinder the ghostly in the story. Indeed, the possibility that De Rosis supports what might be supernatural occurrences adds ghostliness to the tale. His efforts to appeal to Lady Savelli's Decadent sensibilities result in an inability or refusal to recognise and act on the strange occurrences surrounding Dionea. What is even more interesting, however, in terms of Lee's critique of Decadence, is the relationship between the sculptor Waldemar and his subject-of-art, Dionea. When he begins work on his sculpture he treats her like a material object and commits the crime of sacrificing the subject-of-art for the

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<sup>52</sup> Perhaps it can also be said that Lee identified with De Rosis who, through his letters, creates a narrative that is always suggestive and never resolved, thus following Lee's rules for maintaining the supernatural.

artwork, an imbalance which Lee warns against in 'Faustus and Helena' (300). De Rosis notes that,

I could never have believed that an artist could regard a woman so utterly as a mere inanimate thing, a form to copy, like a tree or flower. Truly he carries out his theory that sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human. The way in which he speaks to Dionea after hours of the most rapt contemplation of her is almost brutal in its coldness. And yet to hear him exclaim, "How beautiful she is! Good God, how beautiful!" No love of mere woman was ever so violent as this love of woman's mere shape. (*Hauntings*, 98)

The exiled goddess decides what Waldemar is able to see and when and her beauty increases slowly and tantalisingly, so that his artistic efforts are always just thwarted. In so doing, Dionea evokes the ghostly which provokes Waldemar's frustration and fury. De Rosis records that when Waldemar acknowledges the inadequacy of his sculpture 'that odd spark of ferocity dilated in his eyes, and seizing the largest of his modelling tools, he obliterated at one swoop the whole exquisite face' (*Hauntings*, 100). As Patricia Pulham has noted, 'although, reputed by de Rosis to be obsessed with Dionea, Waldemar's passion is the infatuation of the artist with the living work of art, for Dionea exceeds his own creation' (Pulham 2008, 142). I would suggest that Waldemar's eventual passion for 'the living work of art' could be seen as his punishment for his original devotion to his own artistic ability and Dionea's mere form.



As an artist he finds himself unable to cope with the living, shifting subject-of-art. His devotion is then transferred to the enigmatic Dionea and he worships her for her ability to transcend his art. Waldemar commits a crime against the artistic subject by dismissing Dionea's interiority and privileging her form and his artistic representation of it. Waldemar's wife, Gertrude, commits the added crime of considering it Dionea's duty to be an artistic muse.<sup>53</sup> De Rosis admits to being angered by this on Dionea's behalf, writing that 'I really do feel indignant that such a snow-white saint should wish another woman to part with all instincts of modesty merely because that other woman would be a good model for her husband; really it is intolerable' (*Hauntings*, 97). There are parallels between Waldemar's wife Gertrude, and Mrs. Perry in *Miss Brown*, who also considers it Anne's duty as a beautiful 'object' to pose for Hamlin. Perhaps the greater crime, however, is Gertrude's suspicion that Waldemar and Dionea are engaging in a sexual liaison. De Rosis notes that 'I wish I could make her understand, and yet I could never, never bring myself to say a word [. . .] surely she knows best that her husband will never love any woman but herself. Yet ill, nervous as she is, I quite understand that she must loathe this unceasing talk of Dionea' (*Hauntings*, 100). As a goddess, it would be inconceivable that Dionea would condescend to have such a relationship with a mere mortal. It is suggested that this jealousy brings Gertrude 'creeping downstairs' to Waldemar's studio on the night of the fire (*Hauntings*, 103). In the end she is literally sacrificed on the altar of Venus, 'her blood [. . .] trickling

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<sup>53</sup> Gertrude had been made to feel uncomfortable about the fact that her husband only ever sculpted male models (97). That 'folk have twitted him' for sculpting only male models perhaps implies that his sexual preference has been questioned. This leads Gertrude to inspect 'the girls of our village with the eyes of a slave dealer' in order to find a suitable female model, and it is perhaps for this reason that she is so keen on the prospect of Dionea as a model (97).

among the carved garlands and rams' heads, blackening the heaped-up roses' (*Hauntings*, 104). 'Dionea' is the most physically violent story in the collection, and it is also the one in which pagan elements play the largest role. In this story, the exiled goddess refuses to be sacrificed again to artistic manipulation and she takes her revenge against the artist who strives to focus on his own artistic talent and creation. The subject-of-art takes her long-awaited revenge against the artist and the artistic form that tries to undermine her power.<sup>54</sup> Both Waldemar and Gertrude are sacrificed.

The third story, 'Oke of Okehurst' is set in England and is told by an artist commissioned to produce a portrait of a couple, William Oke and his Aesthete wife and cousin Alice Oke. Questions arise over whether Alice Oke is actually the reincarnation of her seventeenth-century ancestor and namesake and the suggestion, along with the constant references to this ancestor's murdered lover, the poet Christopher Lovelock, eventually drives William mad. The struggle between the subject-of-art and the artwork that is depicted in 'Dionea' is played out again in 'Oke of Okehurst', and this shall be the focus of my reading of this story.

The line between the subject-of-art and the artwork that depicts it is blurred in this story. Here, the haunted character is a woman who is both artistic subject *and* artistic form. Alice Oke models herself after her seventeenth-century ancestress and bases her recreation on a portrait of her seventeenth-century namesake and on letters to and from her lover, the poet Christopher Lovelock. Unlike the male characters who engage with various art forms in the stories – prose, sculpture, painting, and music –

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<sup>54</sup> Dionea could be said also to be De Rosis' subject-of-art. Yet both Lee and Dionea are sympathetic towards him. Perhaps this is because it is likely that any wrongdoing on his part is unintentional.

the form which Alice uses is her own body and personality. But she is also the subject of the narrator's attempted portrait, and part of why he chooses her as his preferred subject (over her less eccentric and therefore boring husband) is that she seems to model herself after another portrait. The narrator seems to appreciate Alice's attempt to make her life more interesting and intense through such artifice, which he calls her eccentricity. He explains that she exhibited 'an artificial perverse sort of grace and research in every outline and movement and arrangement of head and neck, and hands and fingers', which he found fascinating (*Hauntings*, 106). As Alice gets closer and closer to her artistic subject, the narrator struggles artistically to depict her appearance and personality which are continually in flux. Alice's ever-changing personality and appearance will not be captured by his static art, just as it will not be captured by the chivalric love of her husband. By modelling herself after the portrait of her deceased namesake she becomes living art briefly before being metamorphosed into the dead subject of the portrait through her death at the hand of her husband. Indeed, the narrator explains that 'it seemed an appropriate end for her; I fancy she would have liked it could she have known' (*Hauntings*, 107). Both Alices become one in death and come to share the same portrait – the only completed portrait produced by an artist whom the professionally jealous narrator calls 'some stray Italian of the early seventeenth century' (*Hauntings*, 118).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Oddly, the narrator describes the portrait as being 'full length, neither very good nor very bad', and yet it must somehow have captured the essence of the original Alice Oke, enough at least, for the nineteenth-century Alice to model her appearance and character after it. That the narrator does not acknowledge this might suggest a degree of professional jealousy.

The issue of punishment for crimes committed against art is complicated in this story, as it is not entirely clear who or what the subject-of-art is. Is the subject-of-art the seventeenth-century portrait of Alice Oke, the nineteenth-century Alice Oke, or her seventeenth-century namesake? It seems likely that all three are subjects-of-art, with the nineteenth-century Alice being the only one who does not inspire a completed artwork. This ambiguity complicates the idea of punishment, however, because the nineteenth-century Alice and her husband, William Oke, are the ones sacrificed in the end. In addition to this, however, it can be said that the murdered Alice Oke does complete her art through her own death and appropriation of the only completed portrait. If we can see the nineteenth-century Alice as a performance artist, what role, then, does the painter and narrator play in this story?

The narrator, like the others in the collection, is unable to complete his project. Yet Lee is less sympathetic towards the narrator in this story than she is towards the other narrators, with whom she seems partly to identify. Despite filling sketchbooks with his attempts to capture artistically Alice's enigmatic personality, the closest thing to a completed portrait is, in his words, 'a huge wreck' (*Hauntings*, 106). Nevertheless, the narrator does seem to exhibit pride in his story of the events and his own part in it. Speaking to a visitor, whose identity is not revealed, he asks

I suppose the papers were full of it at the time. You didn't know that it all took place under my eyes? [. . .] You have never heard the story in detail? Well, I don't usually mention it, because people are so brutally stupid or sentimental; but I'll tell it to you. (*Hauntings*, 106-7).

In addition to this, the narrator in this story admits to a level of manipulation not exhibited by the others. He admits that he ‘required to put her into play’ in order to ‘do my subject justice’ (*Hauntings*, 122). He tries to exonerate himself from any guilt by claiming that,

But after all, how was I to guess that I was making mischief merely by chiming in, for the sake of the portrait I had undertaken, and of a very harmless psychological mania, with what was merely the fad, the little romantic affectation or eccentricity, of a scatterbrained and eccentric young woman? How in the world should I have dreamed that I was handling explosive substances? (*Hauntings*, 122)

Yet while he calls his interest in Alice Oke a ‘psychological mania’, he is not emotionally involved with his subject to the same extent as the other artists depicted in the stories. He is disappointed not to have completed his portrait but seems able to enjoy telling the story. This narrator’s interest in his subject-of-art remains a perplexed curiosity rather than an obsession.

William Oke undergoes the greatest punishment in this story, and his seeming innocence is what makes the ending particularly discomfoting. According to the narrator,

he was, I found, extremely good, – the type of the perfectly good conscientious young Englishman, the sort of man who ought to have been the Christian soldier kind of thing; devout, pure-minded, brave, incapable of any baseness, a little intellectually dense, and puzzled by all manner of moral scruples. (*Hauntings*, 117)

His greatest crime was that he ‘was one of those chivalrous beings to whom every woman, every wife – and his own most of all – appeared in the light of something holy’ (*Hauntings*, 120). William dislikes talking about the family’s scandalous past and tries to dissuade his wife from indulging in her fascination with her ancestress. Yet his dislike and fear of such conversations merely encourage his wife to continue. He does not prevent the narrator from completing the portrait. Indeed he contributes to the artwork by inadvertently spurring Alice on in her obsession with the past, so that she is a compelling subject for portraiture. The narrator explains that ‘the poor fellow’s honest soul was quite brimful of pain, which he was determined not to allow to overflow, and which seemed to filter into his whole nature and poison it’ (*Hauntings*, 139).

The ghostly in this story resides in various imaginative probabilities. It is possible that Alice is the reincarnation of her ancestor. It could also be the case that Alice projects the ghost of Christopher Lovelock, or that she is haunted by his ghost and welcomes and engages with it. In this way, Lee’s story anticipates the ghostly in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) in which the governess suspects that the children see and engage with the ghosts. The ghosts themselves do not, after the first

sighting, add to the governess' terror. The ghostly resides in the probability that the children are haunted. Lee expressed an awareness of this source of the ghostly when she asks in 'Faustus and Helena', 'why do those places affect us most of which we merely vaguely know that they are haunted? Why most of all those who look as if they might be haunted?' ('F&H', 310). In 'Oke of Okehurst', the house itself contributes to the feeling of the ghostly. It reminds the narrator of 'the palace of the sleeping beauty' (*Hauntings*, 111). The house is silent like a tomb, unencumbered by objects from the present. Objects look 'as if no modern hand had ever touched them' and there was 'a vague scent of rose-leaves and spices, put into china bowls by the hands of ladies long since dead' (*Hauntings*, 112). The ghostly atmosphere of the house permeates the narrator's senses and he explains that 'the air seemed heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume, not that of any growing flower, but like that of old stuff that should have lain for years among spices' (*Hauntings*, 126).

William Oke kills his wife in a hallucinatory fit, although it could be the case that he did see his wife with the ghost of Christopher Lovelock. According to the narrator, the expression on Alice's face suggests that she took some pleasure or satisfaction in her own death. He describes 'Mrs. Oke, a pool of red forming in her white dress. Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly' (*Hauntings*, 152). The satisfaction that Alice seems to have achieved through her death is reminiscent of Spiridion Trepka's sacrifice in 'Amour Dure'. By means of her death Alice is able to become one with her ancestor through their shared portrait. However, the violent suicide of the apparently innocent William Oke is disturbing and demonstrates that the consequences

of obsession – in this case Alice Oke’s obsession with her ancestor – are wide-reaching.

The final story in the collection – ‘A Wicked Voice’ – is set in Venice. In this story the attempts of the composer Magnus to write his own opera are thwarted by the ghostly music of the castrato Balthasar Cesari, known as ‘Zaffirino’, the possessor of a voice of fatal beauty. A follower of Wagner, Magnus travels to Venice to complete work on his opera *Ogier the Dane*. Venice is a strange choice of location for the completion of an opera based on the son of a Danish king, and it seems an even stranger choice considering Magnus’ dismissal of the eighteenth-century Venetian operatic tradition, which Lee had researched for *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880). In her chapter ‘The Musical Life’ she explained that ‘the greater the distance from the original importation of the opera, the worse it became’ and added that the French, for example,

never dreamed of introducing into France the Italian style of musical drama, nor the exclusive and passionate worship of the human voice which formed the mainspring of Italian music. They wanted to retain their own national style and just varnish it over with Italian gloss; they wanted the singer to remain subordinate to the composer. (*Studies*, 72-3)

Magnus’ confidence in his own artistic ability and in his power over his own artistic inspiration allows him to fail to recognise the influence his surroundings might have on his art. Instead he mocks the eighteenth-century Italian opera and the Italian librettist’s failure to control his artistic instrument – the voice. This idea is particularly poignant in



an age of pre-recording when the voice can itself be considered a ghost. In the introduction to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* Lee describes her own encounter with the ghostly quality of old music. She writes that she had to leave the room when her mother played from eighteenth-century airs:

I can remember when the first packet of copied out airs arrived from Bologna, and my mother was going to try some of them over at the piano for me, I could not remain in the presence . . . of what, I really do not know; I felt shy of those unknown, longed-for songs, and had to escape into the garden [...] it is impossible to put into reasonable words the overwhelming sense that in that piece hung the fate of the world – the only one which mattered – the world of my fancies and longings. (Quoted in Gunn, 65)<sup>56</sup>

In the opening scene of his narrative, Magnus mocks the sounds of eighteenth-century Italian opera when he sings *Biondina in Gondoleta*, which he refers to as ‘the only song of the eighteenth century which is still remembered by the Venetian people’:

I sing it, mimicking every old-school grace; shakes, cadences, languishingly swelled and diminished notes, and adding all manner of buffooneries, until the audience, recovering from its surprise, begins to shake with laughing; until I begin to laugh myself, madly, frantically,

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<sup>56</sup> That she describes the world of her fancies and longings as ‘the only one which mattered’ resonates with the experience of some of her characters in *Hauntings*, in particular Spiridion Trepka who is concerned only with his selective interpretation of history.

between the phrases of the melody, my voice finally smothered in this dull, brutal laughter... And then, to crown it all, I shake my fist at this long-dead singer, looking at me with his wicked woman's face, with his mocking fatuous smile. "Ah! you would like to be revenged on me also!" I exclaim. "You would like me to write you nice roulades and flourishes, another nice *Aria dei Mariti*, my fine Zaffirino!" (*Hauntings*, 162-3).

Magnus fails to recognise that his choice of location is entirely incongruous to the subject of his opera. His lack of respect for Italy's operatic tradition and his belief in his own artistic ability leaves him vulnerable to extreme impressions from his surroundings.

Magnus is punished by the voice of Zaffirino which overwhelms his own artistic efforts.<sup>57</sup> Part of his punishment seems to involve an awareness of his position. He explains that 'My reason, after all, is free, although my artistic inspiration be enslaved; and I can despise and loathe the music I am forced to compose, and the execrable power that forces me' (*Hauntings*, 155). Magnus' power is transferred to the operatic voice, which becomes the subject of Magnus's future art *and* the privileged artistic form. Magnus can only create for the eighteenth-century voice – which can never again be heard – and the new operatic style imposed on him forces him to privilege the voice over the music. As in 'Oke of Okehurst', the division between subject-of-art and artistic form in this story is also blurred. Magnus will only ever be

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<sup>57</sup> Patricia Pulham offers an excellent exploration of the significance of the castrato in Lee's supernatural fiction in her Chapter 'Castrato Cries and Wicked Voices' in *Transitional Objects* (2008).

able to create for and with the eighteenth-century operatic voice. Yet because the castrato voice can never be reproduced, this creative impulse represents a temporal impossibility that stifles his art. Although Zaffirino disappears, he succeeds in punishing Magnus by turning him into an echo of bygone music.

It is interesting that Lee chose to end her collection with a story which highlights the haunting power of music. Indeed, all of the stories in this collection use musical metaphor and sound to create rounded performances that appeal to the mind, the emotions, and the senses. This is most powerful in ‘A Wicked Voice’, where the feeling of impending catastrophe is, at times, acute. The operatic climax signals the climax of the story:

while I was struggling with that locked door I heard the voice swelling, swelling, rending asunder that downy veil which wrapped it, leaping forth clear, resplendent, like the sharp and glittering blade of a knife that seemed to enter deep into my breast. Then, once more, a wail, a death-groan, and that dreadful noise, that hideous gurgle of breath strangled by a rush of blood. (*Hauntings*, 180)

As I shall explain in greater detail in Chapter Two, Lee was interested in the extent to which one can experience art with all of one’s being – physical, emotional, and mental. The idea that these parts can interact harmoniously in the experience and appreciation of art fascinated Lee and in these stories she creates a whole textual atmosphere that appeals to all of these parts.

In 'Oke of Okehurst', the story is set against 'a vague disconsolate bleating' of lambs which, as the story progresses and begins to near its conclusion becomes louder and more sinister (*Hauntings*, 110). Upon returning from his drive with Mrs Oke, during which the narrator explains that 'it seemed that I was in the hands of a mad-woman', he adds that 'outside, the mists were beginning to rise, veiling the park-land dotted with big black oaks, and from which, in the watery moon-light, rose on all sides the eerie little cry of the lambs separated from their mothers' (*Hauntings*, 135). The increasing tension – from 'disconsolate bleating' to an 'eerie little cry' culminates in a dramatic and sudden 'loud report, a sharp cry, and the thud of a body on the ground' when William Oke shoots his wife (*Hauntings*, 152).

In Dionea, Lee builds the tension more gradually by juxtaposing softer sounds with sudden peaks and crashes. DeRosis hears the 'long guttural vowels, *amore* and *morte* and *mio bene*' which rise from the convent against the backdrop of 'the boom of the surf' and the 'twanging' of 'guitars' (*Hauntings*, 87). The sounds on the night of Gertrude's murder and Waldemar's suicide convey a sense of expectancy: 'From the mysterious greyness [...] rises a confused quaver of frogs, and buzz and whirr of insects', as if nature was aware of what was to come (*Hauntings*, 102). In 'Amour Dure' the sounds emanating from San Giovanni Decollato increase the story's sense of urgency and drive Trepka to despair. He explains that 'I was suddenly stopped by the sound as of an organ close by; an organ, yes, quite plainly, and the voice of choristers and the drone of a litany' (*Hauntings*, 66). The music teases him, 'I retraced my steps to the top of the lane. All was dark and in complete silence. Suddenly there came again a faint gust of organ and voices. I listened; it clearly came from the other lane, the one

on the right-hand side' (*Hauntings*, 66). He tries to follow the sounds but they cease. 'I stopped a minute', he adds, 'and then the chant rose again; this time it seemed to me most certainly from the lane I had just left. I went back – nothing. Thus backwards and forwards, the sounds always beckoning, as it were, one way, only to beckon me back vainly, to the other' (*Hauntings*, 66-7). Trepka is taunted by the elusive sounds until 'at last I lost patience; and I felt a sort of creeping terror, which only a violent action could dispel [...] half-maddened, I rushed up the two or three steps, prepared to wrench the door open with a tremendous effort. To my amazement, it opened with the greatest ease' (*Hauntings*, 67).

In 'Oke of Okehurst' the narrator describes the intangible quality of Alice Oke's beauty by referencing the elusive quality of music. 'Something', he explains, 'and that the very essence – always escapes, perhaps because real beauty is as much a thing in time – a thing like music, a succession, a series – as in space' (*Hauntings*, 115). Music, like beauty and the ghosts that cannot be understood or possessed, are all put to work in these stories, each building on the another to create an overall haunting atmosphere. Lee's exploration into the nature of literary art would consider the ways in which the creation of a literary atmosphere in a written piece can be used to create a holistic aesthetic experience for the reader, which utilises the senses, the emotions, and the intellect. In this way, as I shall later show, Lee's writings can be seen as performances of the aesthetic harmony she valued so strongly.

### **The Responsibility of Aesthetics**

At the end of *Miss Brown*, Anne sacrifices herself by marrying Hamlin. She does so to save him from the influence of his destructively Decadent cousin Sacha Elaguine. Yet part of Hamlin's moral salvation involves being able to create art, and by marrying him Anne sacrifices herself as a subject-of-art and muse to Hamlin's artistic manipulation. In the stories in *Hauntings*, Lee revises this sacrifice. Instead, the artistic subjects refuse to be sacrificed for art and sometimes go as far as sacrificing the artist. In addition to this, the line between subject-of-art and artwork is sometimes blurred, thus re-empowering the subject-of-art.

The hauntings, deaths, and loss of control over artistic inspiration experienced by her characters in these stories call for a certain degree of pity from the reader. As I hope to show in the next chapters, Lee's theoretical writings on aesthetics as well as her literary criticism, historiography, psychological aesthetics, and travel writing reveal an awareness of the emotional, physical, and psychological effects of, as she explained in 'Faustus and Helena', 'the imagination wrought upon certain kinds of physical surroundings' ('F&H', 76).

Lee's chastisement of the Aesthetic set in *Miss Brown* was largely unsuccessful because she pitted Anne and the narrator against the Aesthetes and Decadents. In *Hauntings*, her sympathetic portrayals of the narrators suggest that she perhaps identified with their desire for intense experience and emotion at the expense of the quotidian and the subject-of-art. By accepting complicity in desiring to commit these Decadent crimes whilst also inflicting punishment on the fictional perpetrators, she creates stories that are not only artistically successful, but that carry a strong didactic purpose as well. I would suggest that Lee's awareness of the lure of Aestheticism and

Decadence that is displayed in these stories marks a critical turning point in her aesthetic career. Her theory of aesthetic harmony, which I shall discuss in Chapter Two, is premised on an awareness of our own fallibility and of the lure of beauty, excess, and materialism. Thus, her theory of aesthetic harmony underscored the importance of aiming to manage these desires rather than eradicate them. The supernatural seems an appropriate space in which to explore, confront, and challenge these desires. As Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell have noted, ‘the supernatural was both fearful and terribly and ardently desired’.<sup>58</sup> Her use of the supernatural in these stories enabled her not only to identify with her protagonists but also to punish them. These stories call attention to the need for a balanced aesthetic philosophy that offers strategies with which to understand the ways in which we appreciate art and the necessary relationship between the artwork and the subject-of-art. I shall now consider the methodologies by which Lee develops this philosophy.

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<sup>58</sup> Introduction to *The Victorian Supernatural* ed. by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 1.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Towards Practical Aesthetics**

Studies on Vernon Lee always mention and frequently focus on the difficulties of placing Lee the woman and Lee the writer within fixed categories of genre, sexuality, nationality and epoch. Her own preoccupation with classifications and her constant attempts to evade them can be said to be components of a conscious intellectual exercise intended to stimulate progressive thinking. Yet it can also be said that her ambivalence was strongly influenced by the dominant questions of the times in which she lived. In an age which has come to be so strongly associated with movements to categorise and classify everything from plants to human emotions it is both remarkable and telling that many of its leading figures themselves defy such categorisation.



Recently, historians have done much to counter the assumption that the Victorians were entirely at ease with their methods of organising knowledge.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, there was a fairly clear consensus in favour of a system of organising the information which had recently become so readily available to the public. With the growth of the popular press so too grew the amateur's ability to influence public opinion, and this became a source of deep concern to those who felt themselves responsible for the education of the masses.<sup>60</sup> How were the newly literate masses to know what information was outdated, or proved wrong or right? In short, how were people to know what was worth knowing? As Martin Daunton explains, 'the emergence of a formal [university] curriculum offered a means of legitimising knowledge, incorporating new ideas and theories into the teaching of schools and colleges'.<sup>61</sup> What followed seemed inevitable. Surely, those men fit to decide what was worth knowing in the universities were fit to decide for the masses as well? On the other hand, it also soon became clear that the system of organisation could become the focus of attention at the expense of proper consideration of the information itself.<sup>62</sup> Considered in this light, it seems reasonable to argue, as Shafquat Towheed has done, that Lee's evasion of classifications, both professionally and personally, was a conscious effort to undermine an increasingly professionalised intellectual sphere

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, the essays collected in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>60</sup> See Alan Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: the Victorians, Morality and the "March of the Intellect"* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Daunton, introduction to *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> For a thoughtful essay on the problems of categories and classifications in the field of botany in the nineteenth century see Jim Endersby's 'Classifying Sciences: Systematics and Status in Mid-Victorian Natural History', in *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, pp. 61-88.

which excluded self-educated women like herself.<sup>63</sup> I wish to suggest that Lee was also wary of categories because she believed they had the potential to act as impediments to progressive thinking.

In this chapter I shall explore Lee's approach to the questions of aesthetics with which she was concerned: what is the relationship between art and life? What are the ways in which the viewer perceives art forms? How should art be defined? Ultimately, does the mind play a more important role than the body in the act of aesthetic experience? My focus here will be on the methodologies through which Lee approaches these questions. I shall begin by discussing her views on the importance of categories and the role of scientific methods in the appreciation of art. As a Victorian, it is not surprising that Lee accepts classifications and categories as suitable means by which to organise knowledge. Her writings show that she believed knowledge of artworks, art movements, and of the ways in which art is experienced and appreciated, enhances aesthetic experience. Yet her writings also show that she was wary of fixed arguments, which, I shall suggest, reveals a commitment to intellectual openness and transparency in the development of ideas. I shall then address her theories on harmony which shed light on her conception of the aesthetic experience as a holistic one which incorporates the body, the mind and the emotions and which requires an equally holistic method of study. Through a reading of her essay 'The Economic Parasitism of Women' (1902), and her earlier dialogue, 'About the Social Question' (1894), I shall show two ways in which Lee applies aesthetic theory to social problems in order to argue that her aesthetic

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<sup>63</sup> Shafquat Towheed, 'Determining "Fluctuating Opinions": Vernon Lee, Popular Fiction, and Theories of Reading', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 60:2 (2005), 199-236 (p. 214).

philosophy was intended to have practical and wide-ranging applications.<sup>64</sup> I shall then discuss her work on psychological aesthetics and consider the importance she attaches to openness and transparency of methodology and procedure, both for their theoretical value and, more practically, for the benefit of her readers. I shall conclude by discussing the significance of this transparency through which, I shall argue, Lee bridges the gap between professional and amateur.

Many critics have addressed the difficulties of labelling Lee. Christa Zorn comments on entries on Lee in reference books which ignore the interdisciplinary nature of her work and indiscriminately select labels to describe her so that the terms seem chosen almost at random (Zorn 2003, 62). Lee's first biographer, Peter Gunn, notes the ambiguous gender of her chosen pseudonym, particularly as it was originally conceived.<sup>65</sup> More recently, Catherine Anne Wiley, in an essay which addresses some of the criticisms of Lee's writing style by her contemporaries, argues that there is a noticeable distinction in Lee's writing between her conscious and unconscious authorial selves, before using her essay 'The Lake of Charlemagne' to show how the line between the two can get blurred.<sup>66</sup> Writing on the critical treatment of Lee's sexual preference

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<sup>64</sup> First published as 'The Economic Dependence of Women' in the *North American*, 175 (July 1902), pp. 71-90 and later published as 'The Economic Parasitism of Women', in *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908). Apart from the title, there are no significant changes between the two publications. 'About the Social Question' was published in *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1910), New Edition, pp. 143-203.

<sup>65</sup> Gunn, p. 62. Lee's originally chosen pseudonym was 'H.P. Vernon Lee' which she explained in a letter to her friend and mentor, the novelist Mrs Jenkin, 'had the advantage of leaving it undecided whether the writer be a man or a woman', in *Vernon Lee's Letters*, ed. and privately printed by Irene Cooper Willis (London, 1937) p. 49.

<sup>66</sup> Catherine Anne Wiley, "'Warming Me Like a Cordial': The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee's Aesthetics", in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 58-74.

and desire for companionship, Jo Briggs argues that scholarly attention to her personal life, especially her sexuality, too often obscures the intellectual quality of her work.<sup>67</sup> Joseph Bristow makes a similar claim in his essay on Lee's experiments with psychological aesthetics, asserting that 'speculations on her ambiguous sexuality have tended to distract modern scholarship from the high regard she long held as a theorist of art'.<sup>68</sup> In her essay 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between', Hilary Fraser suggests that the ambiguities in Lee's life and writings are most helpfully termed as 'being in-between', a phrase she adopts from Homi Bhabha.<sup>69</sup>

These last three arguments are particularly relevant to this chapter. In her essay, Briggs provides a survey of feminist criticism on Lee which she claims 'function[s] as an ever more elaborate and complex "outing" of Lee's lesbian sexuality' (Briggs 2006, 161). Tracing these evaluations of the influence on her work of her supposedly repressed sexuality back to Burdett Gardner, who 'read[s] pathological sexual repression into Lee's approach to and writings on the subject' of psychological aesthetics, Briggs surveys more recent discussions which return to and uphold Gardner's thesis (Briggs 2006, 163). She explains that 'although the readings of Lee put forward by feminist critics are groundbreaking and significant, in basing them in Gardner's reductive

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Wiley argues that this division between Lee's conscious and unconscious selves results in a loose, 'unbridled' writing style, an assertion which I shall argue against in Chapter Four (Wiley, 67).

<sup>67</sup> Jo Briggs, 'Plural Anomalies: Gender and Sexuality in Bio-Critical Readings of Vernon Lee' in *Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 160-173.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Bristow, 'Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling', *Tulsa Studies in English Literature*, 25 (2006), 117-139 (p. 125).

<sup>69</sup> Hilary Fraser, 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between' in *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self Fashioning, 1880-1930*, ed. by Marysa Demoor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 114-133 (p. 114).

theories they omit equally important factors operating in Lee's work' (Briggs 2006, 164). Both Bristow and Briggs rightly suggest that this concentration on a hidden dissident sexuality is at 'the expense of the intellectual content' of her work (Briggs 2006, 164). I agree with Briggs and Bristow's calls for a move away from 'Bio-Critical Readings' of Lee's work in favour of a focus on the quality of her theories and writings, and the discussions in this chapter spring from the premise that to evaluate the 'intellectual content' in these writings first requires an understanding of Lee's intellectual process at work. The aim of this chapter is to understand Lee's intellectual process and to consider the ways in which it was applied to investigations into the nature of the aesthetic experience and social questions. This chapter is also concerned with the ways in which Lee's intellectual process is linked to her writing, in particular her fondness for the dialogic form. In an essay on Lee's marginalia in her personal library, Fraser asks whether the annotations, which reflect Lee's interdisciplinarity, 'signify a lack of discipline?'.<sup>70</sup> She concludes that Lee's varied interests and continuous questioning and engagement with everything she read, as evidenced by her marginalia, 'suggests a mind so disciplined that it engages and challenges at every turn, as only a highly focused and concentrated reader can do' (Fraser 2005, 239). I agree with Fraser's conclusion that Lee was a disciplined thinker and this chapter will explore the ways in which this discipline was manifested and what she hoped it would help her and others to achieve.

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<sup>70</sup> Hilary Fraser, 'Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines in Vernon Lee's Library', in *Vernon Lee e Firenze Settant'Anni dopo*, ed. by Serena Canni and Elisa Bizzotto (Florence: The British Institute of Florence, 2005), pp. 231-241 (238).

Moreover, it is necessary to look deeper into those ambiguous ‘in between’ spaces in her work, to which Fraser also draws attention, and explore the possibility that Lee was not only aware of these spaces, but that she wittingly created and preserved them. I believe that this can be explained through her expressions of a belief in the interconnectedness of all things, despite her acknowledgement of the intellectual value of marking distinctions between different branches of knowledge. Fraser rightly suggests that in the stories included in *Hauntings*,

The exiled state of the returning gods, forever condemned to an “in-and-out” existence, articulates with their sexual indeterminacy, and is oddly suggestive of Lee’s interstitial condition, of the hybrid, *becoming* identity she fashions for herself that is not conceived as ordinary and fixed, but forever in process. (Fraser 2004, 121)

Lee herself admits to a preference for fluidity of ideas in her introduction to *Althea: Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (1895), which she described in a letter to her mother as ‘far the most important work I have so far written, and it immeasurably advances on Baldwin’.<sup>71</sup> She writes that,

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<sup>71</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, 13 July, 1893. Special Collections, Miller Library, Colby College, Waterville, Maine U.S.A. Catalogue no. 686. Lee adds in this letter, rather comically, that ‘the book treats openly only of such persons as the Gospels call the Salt of the Earth. The question is how are they not to lose their saviour, or as little of it as possible? So of course it will be financially + otherwise a dead failure’. *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: John Lane, 1894), new edition. All future references will appear in text.

Taken as a whole, the ideas and tendencies distributed among my half-dozen speakers are my own ideas and tendencies, various, shifting, but never really conflicting. So that the whole of a dialogue, the various parts united or balanced, will give the impressions, fluctuating, consecutive, but consistent, which I find in my mind or my note-book. (*Althea*, x)

Lee's self-fashioning as an intellectual who is constantly 'in process' necessitates an examination of the deliberate and continuous unfolding of her theories and methodologies.

### **'Evil Necessities'**<sup>72</sup>

In this section I shall consider Lee's ambivalence towards categorisation as a means by which to organise and understand knowledge. On the one hand, she accepted that intelligent comparisons, which categories enable, could enhance one's awareness of the individual qualities belonging to a certain group of objects, people or ideas. On the other hand, her writings show that she was against allowing ways of organising knowledge to take precedence over a thoughtful consideration of the significance of such knowledge, and what it can help us to do or to understand about the world and our place in it. For

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<sup>72</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1880), p. 21. Lee is referring here to the methods museums use to organise and display their collections. She argues that, whilst it is necessary to group artworks, such groupings can overlook similarities and differences which results in a removal of the artwork from the context – i.e. the way in which the artwork was intended to be viewed and what it was meant to be surrounded by. This affects the way in which museum patrons view and interpret the work.

Lee, the process by which one holds knowledge and then understands it relies on an acceptance of fluidity and active interaction between different categories. I shall focus on two essays in this discussion – ‘Valedictory’ and ‘Tuscan Sculpture’ – both published in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) – in order to show how Lee conceived of these preliminary stages in the ideal intellectual process.

In ‘Valedictory’, Lee outlines some of the ways in which categorising art can both enhance and inhibit its appreciation. Beginning with the assertion that ‘all knowledge is bound to be useful’, she goes on to explain that the ‘study of art’, whether its approach is ‘historic or psychological’, serves to heighten ‘our familiarity, and hence our enjoyment’ of art (*Fancies*, 236; 241). She adds that ‘the mere scientific inquiry into the difference between originals and copies, into the connection between master and pupil, makes us alive to the special qualities which can delight us’ (*Fancies*, 241-2). On a practical level, a knowledgeable familiarity with art and with the individual qualities of the work of a specific artist enables the viewer to make crucial distinctions between ‘genuine’ originals and time-wasting ‘spurious’ reproductions (*Fancies*, 242). She explains that ‘as long as we looked in a manner so slovenly that a spurious Botticelli could pass for a genuine one, we could evidently never benefit from the special quality, the additional excellence of Botticelli’s own work’ (*Fancies*, 242). For Lee, understanding the qualities which appeal to us through a comparison with those that do not, can lead ultimately to a greater sensitivity and appreciation of those special qualities.

In this essay, however, Lee cautions against allowing ‘scientific methods applied to art’ – which she defines as the intellectual evaluation and objective categorisation of



the artwork and of the artist's techniques and materials – to detract from the sensuous pleasure of the work (*Fancies*, 242). Such evaluations can allow the viewer to 'forget a little that art, besides being, like everything else, the passive object of scientific treatment, is (what most other things are not) an active, positive, special factor of pleasure' (*Fancies*, 242). She warns against allowing any one thing to 'tak[e] up too much of our attention', and argues for a pleasurable balance between the sensuous enjoyment of artistic forms and the self-conscious knowledge that enhances it (*Fancies*, 243).<sup>73</sup> She explains that,

art is the outcome of a surplus of human energy, the expression of a state of vital harmony, striving for and partly realising a yet greater energy, a more complete harmony in one sphere or another of man's relations with the universe. (253)

She advocates harmony and interaction between the senses and the mind as a means of appreciating art and she defines art as an expression of the harmony between imagination and life, without necessarily privileging one over the other. It is perhaps for this reason that Lee chose to title her book *Fancies and Studies* [my emphasis]. Part of what is interesting in this essay is how Lee argues for a holistic way of gathering information – in which the senses and the intellect and the emotions work together in the

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<sup>73</sup> As I have discussed in Chapter One, Lee warns against overindulgence and obsession most explicitly in the stories collected in *Hauntings*. The narrators and/or artists in the stories, despite their compulsive fascinations with their art, fail to complete their projects, and it is suggested that their unhealthy obsessions played a crucial role in thwarting their artistic ambitions.

act of perception – and a constantly shifting and evolving process by which to organise and make the most of the information. By arguing against allowing any one thing to take ‘up too much of our attention’, whilst recalling that the ultimate goal of aesthetic understanding is appreciation of the particular pleasure offered by the artwork, Lee constructs a methodology that is aware of, and indeed embraces, its own fluidity.

In her earlier essay ‘Tuscan Sculpture’ (1892), Lee also cautions against placing too much trust in fixed methods of organising knowledge for understanding and appreciating art.<sup>74</sup> She argues that by their very nature categories necessitate an act of comparison in which a hierarchy of status is established. She explains that,

Times, countries, nations, temperaments, ideas, and tendencies, all benefit and suffer alternately by our habit of considering that if two things of one sort are not identical, one must be in the right and the other in the wrong. The act of comparison evokes at once our innate tendency to find fault; and having found fault, we rarely perceive that, on better comparison, there may be no fault at all to find. (*Fancies*, 137)

Such superficial comparisons obscure the nature and aesthetic value of the things in question. However, ‘A more patient comparison’, she argues, ‘will enable us to enjoy the very different merits of both’ (*Fancies*, 138). In this essay, Lee puts this method into

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<sup>74</sup> This essay was first published as ‘The Tuscan Sculpture of the Renaissance’, *Nineteenth Century*, (June 1892), 938-49, and republished in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, pp. 137-161.

practice. She offers an example of the kind of informed and patient comparison for which her theory calls.

In this essay Lee takes us through a comparison of antique sculpture and medieval sculpture. She explains that the study of art used once to focus on the character of the artist, an approach which Lee herself explored, and ultimately found lacking, in her essay ‘A Seeker of Pagan Perfection, being the Life of Domenico Neroni, Pictor Sacrilegus’.<sup>75</sup> According to Lee, critics then became aware that there were too many similarities in style and content between various artists and artworks, so that ‘a statue or a picture which was unsigned and of obscure history was constantly attributed to half-a-dozen contemporary sculptors or painters by half-a-dozen equally learned critics’ (*Fancies*, 139). And so, Lee explains, environment was looked to as a replacement for character as a means of understanding the characteristics of an artwork. According to Lee, in this type of study, ‘Greek art henceforth was the serene outcome of a serene civilisation of athletes, poets, and philosophers, living with untroubled consciences in a good climate’, whilst ‘the art of the Middle Ages was the fantastic, far-fetched, and often morbid production of nations of crusaders and

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<sup>75</sup> This essay was also published in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, pp. 163-231. It was originally published in two parts as ‘Pictor Sacrilegus: A.D. 1483; Life of Domenico Neroni’, *Contemporary Review*, 60 (August 1891), 188-206 and (September 1891), 372-87.

Lee would remain interested in the relationship between the artist and his or her art throughout her career. In keeping with her methodology, as I shall show, despite finding fault with this method through her own investigations, she did not discard it entirely as an approach to the study of art. Instead she reverted partially to it at times whilst striving always to be aware of its limitations. For example, she considered the relationship between the writer’s character and his or her writings in the essays in *The Handling of Words* (1923), but also defended the writer from being tied to the reader’s response to the work in essays such as ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’ (1892). I shall discuss this further in Chapter Three.

theologians, burning heretics, worshipping ladies, seeing visions' (*Fancies*, 139).

However, such comparisons were found to be lacking as well because what Lee called 'the theory of environment' ultimately 'fails to explain certain qualities possessed in common by various schools of art and various arts which have arisen under the pressure of different civilisations' (*Fancies*, 140). To accept such a theory results in a falsehood because the critic

is obliged to slur over the fact that the sculpture of the time of Pericles and Alexander, the painting of the early sixteenth century, and the music of the age of Handel, Haydn, and Mozart are all very much more like one another in their serene beauty than they are any of them like the other productions, artistic or human, of their environment. (*Fancies*, 140)

The mature critique recognises the limitations of all of his or her methods and, as Lee does in this essay, utilises a combination of approaches, swiftly shifting from one to the other as he or she sees fit – in this case, in such a way so as to avoid adhering to a falsehood.

While Lee does accept that the materials available to the artist affect his or her way of seeing and of feeling the world, she does not agree that 'the accident of the surroundings' should be the primary focus of the art historian (*Fancies*, 146). She asserts that, for example, 'it is no empty coincidence that the hillside villages which still supply Florence with stone and with stonemasons should have given their names to three of its greatest sculptors, Mino da Fiesola, Desidero da Settignano, and

Benedetto da Maiano’ and that ‘Michelangelo should have told Vasari that the chisel and mallet had come to him with the milk of his nurse, a stonecutter’s wife from the same slopes’ (*Fancies*, 143). However, she uses the ‘accident of the surroundings’ as a springboard for further investigations by returning to her original comparison between medieval and antique sculpture and offering yet another investigative layer for understanding their difference – intended location of the sculpture. Medieval sculpture, she explains, ‘rarely called upon for free open-air figures’ (*Fancies*, 150). And so Mediæval sculpture was ‘forever producing architectural ornament, seen at a given height and against a dark background; and indoor decorations seen under an unvarying and often defective light’ (*Fancies*, 150). Thus, the sculptures and architecture ‘required a treatment that should adapt to its particular place and subordinate it to a given effect’ (*Fancies*, 150). According to Lee, removing the art from its context by, for example, placing it in a museum, obscures the effect.

She explains that the sculptors of Antiquity, on the other hand, strove for reproductions of reality, moulded in clay and then bronze and marble. This resulted in ‘the closest reproduction[s] that art has given of beautiful reality placed in reality’s real surroundings’ (*Fancies*, 156). And so, ‘whether [the statue] appeared foreshortened on a temple front, or face to face among the laurel trees, whether shaded by a portico, or shining in the blaze of the open street’, the sculpture was made to be seen and admired from all angles and distances (*Fancies*, 156). Thus, placed in adjacent rooms in a museum, Medieval sculpture may appear the lesser of the two. But Lee argues against this and implores the reader to ‘see [Medieval sculpture] when it does what Antiquity never attempted’ (*Fancies*, 157). Here, she shows what a

superficial comparison between two categories of sculpture – Antique and Medieval – might lead one to conclude about their individual worth. However, Lee then leads us through the steps which make up an informed, and therefore more sensitive, evaluation. In the end, such a patient evaluation enables one to appreciate both forms of sculpture, whereas a more hurried and uninformed comparison would lead one to sacrifice one category to the other. Ultimately, Lee considered superficial comparisons to be intellectually limiting but argued that patient and informed comparisons can be revealing.

### **Aesthetic Harmony**

Lee's understanding of categories as useful but potentially limiting means of organising knowledge and of understanding its significance is closely linked to her theory of aesthetic harmony. Whilst categorisation and the hierarchical comparisons it enables can impede intellectual progress, it also, if handled correctly, draws attention to the benefits of allowing ideas and objects to interact, rather than assuming that difference must result in binary oppositions. In this chapter I aim to show how Lee's ideal intellectual process is shaped by this desire for an interaction of ideas and a dislike of fixed arguments. I now wish to explore her idea of aesthetic harmony, for I believe that it is informed by her conceptualisation of the ideal intellectual process and therefore serves as a prime example of this process at work. As I showed in the previous section, Lee's methods of enquiry strove for patience and balance. In this section I shall show how this method is

particularly well suited to Lee's subject – the study and appreciation of art and its role in daily living. Lee defines art as an expression of harmony between the realities of life and the imagination; it is, as she explains in 'Valedictory', 'the expression of the harmonies of nature, conceived and incubated by the harmonious instincts of man' (*Fancies*, 254). As such, it is fitting that the methods of experiencing art and life should interact. As she explains, 'art and thought arise from life; and to life, as principle of harmony, they must return' (*Fancies*, 260).

In her essay 'Higher Harmonies', published in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (1908), Lee offers special insight into her belief in the vital importance of balance and interaction both in life and in aesthetic practice.<sup>76</sup> The essay begins with a quotation from Plato's *Symposium*, in which the priestess Diotima reveals to Socrates the secrets of the soul's path to higher understanding: 'To use the beauties of earth as steps along which he mounts upwards' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 79). Lee begins her argument by suggesting that if one could understand the beauty of a true masterpiece, such as Praxiteles' Hermes, one could follow the path laid out in Diotima's theory. She writes that if it were possible to 'become really familiar with him, could eye and soul learn all the fulness of his perfection, we should have the true starting-point for knowledge of the antique, for in great measure, of all art' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 83). This would lead to the revelation not only of 'what art is and should be, but, in a measure, what life should be and might become' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 83). Here Lee describes a productive and equal collaboration between the body ('eye') and 'soul' in the attainment of 'knowledge' of art and of the ideal life (*Laurus Nobilis*, 83). She adds to this the importance of moving

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<sup>76</sup> Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909).

beyond mere seeing or knowing by explaining that the goal of this process is ‘so as to feel’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 83). Again, Lee draws attention to the ways in which aesthetic theory can have a practical function – this being to enhance one’s experience of life, not only through pleasure, but by making accessible the feeling of ‘that much-disputed over ideal’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 88).

Lee defines harmony as ‘the organic correspondence between the various parts of a work of art, the functional interchange and interdependence thereof’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 86). This ‘interdependence of parts, of interchange of function’ must occur in all living things and she explains this by analogy to the human body, ‘if the muscles and limbs, nay the viscera and tissues, did not adjust themselves to work together [. . .] there would be, instead of a living organism, only an inert mass’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 86). For Lee, because there cannot be life without harmony, we are constantly searching for congruence between the inner self and the outer, as well as with our artistic surroundings. She explains that ‘artistic creativeness is conditioned by the desire for it, nay, is perhaps mainly seeking to obtain it’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 88). She repeatedly states in this essay that one should not limit the ‘theory of higher aesthetic harmonies’ to art or define one’s surroundings as merely material positions, but writes that one should ‘apply it to ever wider circles of being; not merely to the accessories of living, but to life itself’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 82; 96). Lee asserts that art and life are intimately connected, and she reveals a desire for a similar connection, for moments in which a human commonality that transcends time becomes apparent. Art reveals such moments. She asks,



is not art a delicate instrument, showing in its sensitive oscillations the most intimate movements and habits of the soul? Does it not reveal our most recondite necessities and possibilities, by sifting and selecting, reinforcing or attenuating, the impressions received from without; showing us thereby how we must stand towards nature and life, how we must feel and be? (*Laurus Nobilis*, 84)

Since Praxiteles' Hermes was created to satisfy the artistic needs of the age in which it was made then the fact that it answers also to the needs of modern man suggests that some of those modern needs are not at odds with those of the past; they actually may be quite similar. She explains that 'the great work of art is vitally connected with the habits and wants, the whole causality and rhythm of mankind; it has been fitted thereto as the boat to the sea' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 91). The union between aesthetic theory and Lee's aesthetic theory of harmony relies on the premise that art is the vital link which transcends time and highlights the commonalities of mankind.

As in her novel *Miss Brown* (1884), Lee argues against the selfishness condoned by 'the theory which makes it a duty to accumulate certain kinds of possessions, to seek exclusively certain kinds of impressions, on the score of putting beauty into our lives' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 102). She explains that to live harmoniously is to acknowledge that one's life affects the lives of others and that it is necessary to 'put our life into the life universal' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 104). The ideal life is one for which a higher beauty is sought which requires harmony, not only between one's inner and outer selves and

one's immediate surroundings, but in the lives of others and in man's relationship with nature as well. In her words,

Whenever we come in contact with real beauty, we become aware, in an unformulated but overwhelming manner, of some of the immense harmonies of which all beauty is the product, of which all separate beautiful things are, so to speak, the single patterns happening to be in our line of vision, while all around other patterns connect with them, meshes and meshes of harmonies, spread out, outside our narrow field of momentary vision, an endless web, like the constellations which, strung on their threads of mutual dependence, cover and fill up infinitude. (*Laurus Nobilis*, 108)

This theory of harmony underpins Lee's sense of morality and social justice and reveals a belief in the importance of acknowledging the connections between all things. It also acts as the unifying force between aesthetic theory and a system by which the ideal life could be led. Lee's essay 'The Economic Parasitism of Women' and her dialogue 'On the Social Question' are examples of how she applies her theories on the principle of harmony to critiques of social problems in which the connections between productivity and the harmonious working together of all members of a community have been overlooked through the gendered and class-based division of its parts. Part of what I wish to show in this next section is the variety of subjects to which Lee applied her theory of harmony as well as her methodology in practice. Lee's was evidently a

versatile philosophy of thought, meant to facilitate a contemplative and active life that engages with aesthetic questions and problems in a rounded way. I shall first consider ‘The Economic Parasitism of Women’ before moving on to a discussion of her theory of harmony is put into practice in her dialogue ‘On the Social Question’.

### **Practical Applications**

‘The Economic Parasitism of Women’ is a review of and response to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s book *Women and Economics: a Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898), to which Lee credits her ‘conversion to the importance of the Woman Question’.<sup>77</sup> In it she explains that her earlier reticence towards the debate resulted from her belief that, rather than focusing on ‘the one fact of sex’, the debate should centre on ‘the other fact of human nature, the universal, chaste fact represented by the word *Homo* as distinguished from mere *Vir* and *Femina*’ which ‘seemed for the moment lost sight of’ (*Gospels*, 138). She disagrees with the narrowness and superficiality of the comparisons between the sexes which underpinned all discussions of the removal of ‘barriers – legal, professional, educational and social’ and explains that ‘the inevitable harping on what can or cannot, or must or must not be done, said or thought by women, because they

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<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman is referred to as Mrs. Stetson throughout Lee’s essay. Two recent and insightful essays on ‘The Economic Parasitism of Women’ are Patricia Pulham’s ‘A Transatlantic Alliance: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Vernon Lee’, in *Feminist Forerunners: New Womanism and Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. by Anne Heilmann (London: Pandora Press, 2003), pp. 34-43, and Fraser’s essay ‘Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines in Vernon Lee’s Library’, already cited (2005). Fraser considers the relationship between Lee’s marginalia and reading habits and her essay, whilst Pulham looks at letters between Gilman and Ethel Smyth to Lee.

are not men (women! women! everlastingly women!), produced a special feeling, pervading, overpowering, unendurable' (*Gospels*, 138). 'The originality', Lee argues, 'the scientific soundness and moral efficacy of "Women and Economics"' lies in its 'reversal' of the assumption that the Woman Question fits within a larger and more important question of social justice, heredity and re-distribution of wealth. Lee explains that Gilman's book rightly asserts that 'the present condition of women – their state of dependence, tutelage, and semi-idleness [. . .] in fact their economic parasitism' is actually a root cause of social problems. It is 'a most important factor in the wrongness of all our economic arrangements', and as such, is self-perpetuating (*Gospels*, 140).

Lee criticises the reinforcement of gender stereotypes which are fuelled by superficial comparisons between the sexes. As I explained in the previous section, she believed that hierarchical comparisons could obscure the nature of the thing in question, and here she argues that any consideration of the Woman Question should not concentrate on 'what women must or must not be allowed to do, and what women must and must not succeed or fail in' but should instead be concerned with 'what women *are* [...] as a natural product, as distinguished from women as a creation of men' (*Gospels*, 155).<sup>78</sup> This idea echoes her earlier assertion that the study of art should make one aware of the specific nature of the artwork and of the artist and that

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<sup>78</sup> Pulham draws attention to unpublished galley proofs held in the Colby College archive, titled 'Why I want women to have a vote'. Here, Lee points out that arguments in favour of women's suffrage should not depend on an expectation that women would use the vote in a more responsible way than men or that they would show a greater morality. This follows the argument which Lee makes in 'Economic Parasitism of Women' that society does not yet know what women are capable of in their own right and that assuming the vote will make women like men or better versions of men does nothing to further the debate.

this enhances one's experience of the work far better than any simple comparisons of different schools of art ever could. Here she applies this same principle to understandings of the nature of sexuality. Defining women as fixed opposites to men is 'an impediment' to progress because it enforces an artificial "division of labour" between [society's] two halves' which limits production (*Gospels*, 147). Allowing these artificial definitions to apply to all men and all women whilst labelling any deviations from the accepted norm abnormalities rather than accepting them as evidence that the definitions are flawed has, in Lee's words,

not merely limited the amount of productive bodily and mental work at the disposal of the community, but it has very seriously increased the maldistribution of that work and its products by creating, within the community, a system of units of virtuous egoism, a network of virtuous rapacity which has made the supposed organic social whole a mere gigantic illusion. (*Gospels*, 151)

This 'illusion' of a society whose parts work together harmoniously to produce a productive whole is partly the result of over-simplified 'narrow and crass categories' of sexuality and is at the expense of economic progress. She agrees with Gilman that 'womankind has not acquired that degree of bodily, mental, and aesthetic efficiency which can result only from the competition of such qualities, and from that professional education which is itself a result of competition' (*Gospels*, 147). These social systems, she argues, under which the development of one sex has been 'condemned' to 'atrophy'

has 'ceased to be either beneficial or inevitable, however beneficial or inevitable they may have been' (*Gospels*, 147; 144). Lee considers the roots of the problem from which the Woman Question arose and finds that the rejection of humankind's instinctive desire for harmony in the name of so-called civilisation is responsible for a great many of its social ills. She argues that it is necessary to re-evaluate any theories or social structures which ignore one's duty to ensure harmony in the lives of others as well as oneself.

Lee's dialogue, 'About the Social Question' also reveals how she applied her theory on harmony in the intellectual process to a practical issue. Mirroring the style of questioning which Lee advocates and puts into use in her study of antique and medieval sculpture, in this dialogue each argument presented by the characters brings the discussion one step closer to a proper understanding of the problem at hand. As the dialogue progresses, each character's argument builds upon and slightly alters the previous ones in a process of continuous shifting and alteration. In the dialogues in this collection, Althea's character, like Baldwin before her, acts as mediator, ultimately holding a position which moderates the other, rather more extreme, views. On their own, the views of the other characters lean towards undesirable inactivity, but these dialogues display the intricate balance which Lee argues should form the basis of a patient and informed consideration of a subject. Only after a thorough consideration can a worthwhile plan of action be devised.

Underpinning the discussion of what Lee calls The Social Question, is the issue of class, specifically of the pitting of one class against the other and the reality of the current relationship between the two. The conversation is between Boris, a disillusioned Socialist, Donna Maria, a lady of leisure who declares from the beginning that 'I have

read a lot of books, and I have understood what your former friends think', Althea and, towards the end of the dialogue, Baldwin (*Althea*, 167). From the beginning it is made clear that Boris and Donna Maria hold opposing views. Boris is described as a man who 'only saw the pessimistic points in any argument' and Donna Maria had been compared 'to the Roman sea-wind: the little gentle breath, warm, kind, scarcely rippling things, making trees bud, flowers bloom [. . .] but at other moments turning into a blustering gale, carrying off hats and cloaks, and pulling up trees by the roots' (*Althea*, 186; 154). It is the duty of Althea and Baldwin to mediate the conversation and to find the correct balance between the two extremes. Nevertheless, the discussion also reveals that Boris and Donna Maria's arguments each make up, in crucial ways, those of Althea and Baldwin. In a sense, we are given, through these dialogues, a glimpse into Lee's conceptualisation of how an argument should be constructed. Each new argument builds on the previous and discards the portion that is proven incorrect or unhelpful.

Boris has found himself disillusioned by the promises and clear-cut answers of Socialism. He explains that 'I was very happy when I could still believe that the world's misery is all due to an easily altered system' (*Althea*, 159). He adds that,

all these Socialistic remedies have come to mean, in my eyes, merely so much juggling, transferring, transferring property from one pocket to the other, and loosing a great deal in the transfer [. . .] I wish I could still believe that a clean sweep can be made of all this inequality and injustice, which means waste – waste of wealth, of feeling, of energy, of time; waste of those who are rich and of those who are poor. (*Althea*, 159)

Donna Maria points out what she sees as the extremes which contributed to Boris's disillusionment. The problem she saw with Socialism was the pitting of one class against the other, what she calls 'sow[ing] class hatred' through the belief that 'the rich are deliberately and systematically oppressing the poor, that they hate them, and that the poor ought simply to hate them back as hard as they can' (*Althea*, 149). This too, she explains, leads to a wastefulness of energy, which necessarily requires the sacrifice of energy from somewhere else. Both Boris and Donna Maria called for a response that would not sacrifice any existing good. Whilst Boris recognised that his discarded Socialism called for a radical reconstruction of existing mores and social systems, for Donna Maria there existed a bad disinterestedness and a good one, the good being comprised of qualities which she believed required leisure to attain. She asks, 'will not the world require every scrap of decent disinterestedness, of cultivated feeling, of sober thought, to prevent this sea of covetousness and vindictiveness, and ignorance from overwhelming all noble and beautiful things?' (*Althea*, 150).

This dialogue is striking for its prescience. Lady Althea endeavours to explain how the circumstances require the acceptance of two categories and that, as in 'The Economic Parasitism of Women', it is necessary to come to terms with this reality in order to begin to think of a solution to the problem. She explains that the current social question,

is due to the economic fact, which no Socialistic sophisms can alter, that capital and the abilities required for the management thereof are less



plentiful and more in demand than mere labour, and that labour consequently gets the lesser share of the wealth it helps to produce.

(*Althea*, 157)

She adds, ‘but it is a mere accident that capital and labour should stand in this particular relation at this particular point in the world’s history’ (*Althea*, 157). The conversation reaches an impasse, with each character retreating to his or her corner. Donna Maria exclaims, ‘Oh why is the world like this, and what are we to do?’ (*Althea*, 161). Boris explains that, ‘when you have been made thoroughly miserable by such thoughts, you will have, like me, to give up thinking them’, and adds that ‘it is difficult to become stoical even to the sufferings of other people, but one has to become so’ (*Althea*, 161). Both characters retreat to a state of resignation. Althea steps in, asking that they should not allow themselves to be overwhelmed by small-scale problems or what happens to appear directly before them. Instead she challenges them to create a vision of the ideal future which they can work towards in their own small ways. ‘Let us use the present, the near at hand,’ she argues, ‘to learn from it what must be the future and distant, getting to know the larger by our knowledge of the smaller, instead of letting the smaller make us forgetful of the larger’ (*Althea*, 165). Althea tactfully reveals her method, explaining to Donna Maria that ‘after your cousin’s plea in favour of hard-heartedness I thought it useful to point out the necessity also of the reverse’ (*Althea*, 166).

In the second part of this dialogue, Baldwin returns. Recalling the previous day’s discussion, Donna Maria explains that, although her views have been expressed

in what seem, at times, to be extreme terms, she understands the balance which Althea represents. She explains,

But even if I exaggerate, am I not right at bottom? Surely the bulk of what the Past has left behind, in ourselves and in our own thoughts and institutions, is sound enough; we need only weed away what has come down, half-dead, to us, and add new things to suit new times. I know I don't do it enough myself (*Althea*, 173).

Baldwin agrees, 'of course the more dogmatic and rabid we are the more dogmatic and rabid will become our opponents'. He adds,

and the more chance there will be of things finding their level with a maximum of breakage in the process; the more chance of such wisdom and decorum as have been hitherto acquired being lost in the scuffle over the new right and wrong. (*Althea*, 175)

The lesson which Althea and Baldwin mean to teach, ultimately, is moderation. They argue against allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by a desire for the ideal, and in so doing resorting to inactivity. Althea argues that 'it is not because we cannot save everything [. . .] that we should not save what we can' (*Althea*, 176).

In the end, however, Donna Maria fails to understand the lesson and focuses on the smaller issue rather than the wider picture. Althea asks,

Shall we go on, honest folk that we are, returning most scrupulously to its owner the sixpence found on the street, and not returning to the classes below us the advantages which they have lost and we have gained in the windings and ups and downs of the world's history? (*Althea*, 202)

The reader is meant to recognise that Donna Maria – the character who from the beginning claimed to understand because she had read books on the issue – falls into this very trap in the end of the dialogue. By offering an obvious example of what not to do – in the case of Donna Maria, it is smugness linked to false thrift in not buying new pearls – Lee points the way towards a patient and informed evaluation of the contribution one is best placed to make. Donna Maria, in a way, makes the mistake of wishing to implement a quick fix. She expresses amazement that ‘a great duty should be so simple and so near at hand’ (*Althea*, 202). Both ‘The Economic Parasitism of Women’ and ‘On the Social Question’ show that Lee believed that complex problems require thorough and well-rounded evaluations and, eventually, careful and thoughtful solutions.

**‘The great science of perception and emotion’<sup>79</sup>**

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<sup>79</sup> Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, first published in *Contemporary Review*, 72 (1897: July/Dec) and republished in *Beauty and Ugliness, and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, with Clementina Anstruther Thomson (London: John Lane, 1912), p. 545. I use throughout the 1912 version of the text in which the author’s initials are added to each section. This quotation shows how Lee saw the intellect (‘science’), the body (‘perception’) and emotions as integral to the study of aesthetics.

Lee's writings reveal that she accepted categories as a means of organising knowledge and enabling understanding. However, her writings also show that she was wary of the limitations of categories and of the false sense of security which they afford and which could impede progressive thought. Lee's intellectual process took this into consideration and she resolved the problem by incorporating into her methodology her theory of harmony. By bringing together her theory of harmony and her belief in the importance of patient, thorough and well-rounded analyses of existing categories that embrace fluidity, Lee's methodology could be used to consider both art and social problems. That both art and social problems could be confronted with the same practical philosophy shows how Lee aimed to bring together art and life. Having considered Lee's application of her methodologies to social questions in the previous section, I now wish to consider the ways in which Lee applies her intellectual methodology, which includes her theory on harmony, to her investigations into the nature of the aesthetic experience.

In a letter to the adolescent Lee from her friend and mentor Mrs Jenkin, she is advised to remember 'that you are a complex machine – body, soul, mind and heart – and that all your component parts must have a due share of attention'.<sup>80</sup> Lee's writings and her approach to the study of art and of the ways in which the viewer experiences art suggest that she accepted Mrs Jenkin's advice. Her theories on aesthetic harmony, in which one experiences art in a holistic way whilst being mindful of the common need for harmony in the lives of others, stem in part from her explorations of the collaborative roles of the body, the mind, and emotions in the aesthetic experience, the study of which

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<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 57. For a discussion of the relationship between Lee and Mrs Jenkin see Colby, p. 14 and Towheed, "Determining 'Fluctuating Opinions': Vernon Lee, Popular Fiction, and Theories of Reading" (2005), already cited, p. 205.

she names in her essay 'Beauty and Ugliness' (1897), 'the great science of perception and emotion' ('Beauty and Ugliness', 545). In this section I shall consider the ways in which Lee applies her holistic theory of aesthetic harmony to understanding the process of aesthetic experience and appreciation.

In her essay 'In Praise of Old Houses' in *Limbo and Other Essays* (1897), Lee acknowledges a distinction between two ways of seeing. One is purely physical and the other is imaginative and follows in the Romantic tradition of the 'mind's eye'.<sup>81</sup> Writing about her childhood in Switzerland where her habit of 'keep[ing] one's eyes on the ruts of roads and the gravel of paths' in search of Roman artefacts seemed 'useless' because 'the Romans had, perhaps never, come here', she felt reanimated by the story of a man who had found Roman coins in a nearby field (*Limbo*, 25). Years later she could remember the invigorating effects it had on her at the time but she could not recall whether or not she had seen these coins 'with corporeal eyes', though she was sure of having seen them with 'those of the spirit' (*Limbo*, 25). For Lee, the mental image she possessed of these coins, as well as the recovered sense of possibility which they sparked, were as real to her as the sketch she hung in her bedroom and as real as the coins themselves. In 'Valedictory' she explains that objects that are seen with the imagination, because of their meaningfulness to the viewer, are as real as objects that are external to it:

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<sup>81</sup> Vernon Lee, 'In Praise of Old Houses', *Limbo and Other Essays* (London: Grant Richards, 1897). All further references will appear in text. In 'The Book and its Title' in *Belcaro* she refers to this way of seeing as 'inner sight', p. 3.

the things in our mind, due to the mind's constitution and its relation with the universe, are, after all, *realities*; and *realities* to count with, as much as the tables and chairs, and hats and coats, and other things subject to gravitation outside it. [my emphasis] ('Valedictory', 238-9)

Lee rejects dualism, 'the spiritualising philosophy which maintains the immaterial and independent quality of the mind', adding, 'granted that the mind is not a sort of independent and foreign entity, we must admit that what exists in it has a place in reality, and requires, like the rest of reality, to be dealt with' ('Valedictory', 239). By accepting two realities equally – the mind's reality and an external, tangible reality – she equalises them and rejects a hierarchical evaluation of the two.

This equality enables her to enter into a discussion of the working relationship between the two ways of seeing in her chapter 'Sensations' in *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913).<sup>82</sup> In it she accepts that one reality may directly influence the creation of the other but allows them ultimately to remain equally important. Her use of the word reality is somewhat misleading. It is helpful here to note the fluidity of Lee's terminology. When she refers to a 'reality' she does not intend to convey something that is fixed, and this is how she can refer to the process by which one 'reality' directly influences and affects another. It is perhaps more constructive to think of Lee's understanding of an aesthetic reality as a phase. In this way, we can understand her idea that the aesthetic experience is comprised of several phases that contribute to an overall impression. In 'Sensation', she identifies two phases: sensation and perception.

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<sup>82</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913).

The first phase is reliant on the appearance of external objects, such as a landscape, to the viewer whose senses ‘receive’ the sensation. It is, in Lee’s words, ‘a question of bodily and mental reflexes in which our conscious activity, our voluntary attention, play no part’ (*The Beautiful*, 24). Perception, on the other hand, occurs at the moment in which the receiving becomes taking through conscious ‘attention’ and a desire to remember the scene for future pleasure, adding that ‘whatever psychologists may eventually prove or disprove *attention* and *memory* to be, these two, let us unscientifically call them *faculties*, are what chiefly distinguishes *perception* from *sensation*’ (*The Beautiful*, 32, Lee’s emphasis). This process, which she calls ‘effort’ (but which can also be called ‘will’), results in ‘the merging of the activities of the subject in the object’ which takes place when the observation, as Lee explains, that “‘*I* taste or *I* smell something nice or nasty”” becomes “‘*this thing* tastes or smells nice or nasty””, a transformation which is part of the process by which the mind creates a reality which is meaningful to itself (*The Beautiful*, 58, Lee’s emphasis). The third phase – or reality, to use Lee’s term – is the personal and entirely subjective relationship between the viewer and the object, achieved through the collaboration of sensation and perception.

It is this third reality which carries real significance for the viewer because it is based on the relationship between the external object and the self, and it is through the body, and the experience of the world through that body (for example, a chair might be big or small depending on the relative size of the viewer) that these relationships exist. Sensation, including, of course, sight, cannot take place without the body. Ultimately, however, Lee is concerned with the ways in which the body, the intellect, and the

emotions work together to experience art: in an earlier essay entitled 'Beauty and Ugliness', Lee and her companion, Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, referred to by Lee as 'Kit', attempt to break down and analyse the process by which a viewer's physical responses to an artwork affect the emotional response to the work in such a way as to create a feeling of pleasure or pain, which translates into a positive or a negative aesthetic experience.

In 'Beauty and Ugliness' Lee and Anstruther-Thomson call for a broader definition of art, one which rejects the 'wish for neat classification' which has 'tended to limit the recognition of a work of art or an artistic performance to objects and proceedings independent of practical utility' ('Beauty and Ugliness', 177). Arguing again against the theory of 'art for art's sake', the authors defend Ruskin's contention that art and life should not be separated. Lee writes,

It is in the cathedral undertaken for religious or civic reasons; in the fresco or picture intended as an illustration of a story or an aid to devotion; in the mass, or oratorio, or opera intended, above everything, to be expressive, that we can see the unflinching selections, the imperious orders and counter orders of the organic desire for beauty. ('Beauty and Ugliness', 178)

Every work of art has a purpose given to it by the artist, though what is conveyed may not be what was intended. Labelling art according to generalisations based on the emotions certain works are meant to convey allows viewers to focus on the end result of



an aesthetic experience without personally experiencing and understanding its various stages. This allows superficial comparisons to compromise the development of personal taste.<sup>83</sup> In the introduction to Anstruther-Thomson's book *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (1924), which Lee published after Anstruther-Thomson's death, Lee admits that, despite having thought about and written on art throughout her entire professional life, until she studied the stages of the aesthetic experience and learned of its importance from Anstruther-Thomson,

I did not really know them when they were in front of me: did not know a copy from an original, a school-pastiche from a masterpiece. I did not know what I liked or disliked; still less why I did either.<sup>84</sup>

Lack of time poses a great threat to the aesthetic experience and Lee explains in 'Beauty and Ugliness' that 'the greater part of most men's lives is thus too busy to be, in any sense, aesthetic'. She adds that 'hurry of any kind is absolutely incompatible, on account of its special bodily adjustments, with the particular kind of bodily adjustment requisite for full perception of Form' ('Beauty and Ugliness', 179). The authors attempt to break down and clarify this process, which itself is a source of aesthetic enjoyment, and they argue in favour of 'the aesthetic pleasure and displeasure by which such realisation is attended' ('Beauty and Ugliness', 179). In the essay, Anstruther-Thomson conducts a series of experiments which aim to identify the

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<sup>83</sup> As I showed in Chapter One, this idea forms the basis of Lee's critique of Decadent materialism.

<sup>84</sup> Vernon Lee, ed., *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* by Clementina Anstruther-Thomson (London: John Lane, 1924) p. 29.

ways in which the body reacts to external stimuli. Following their aim to broaden the definition of art, Anstruther-Thomson records her reactions to objects ranging from a chair and a blank wall to a vase, suggesting that any object which inspires an aesthetic experience could be defined as art.<sup>85</sup>

Lee constantly strives for the ideal intellectual process and she draws fine lines between good practice and bad practice. In her preface to the second publication of her collaborative essay with Anstruther-Thomson, published fifteen years after the first, Lee describes the progression of her ideas away from those described in the essay. As I showed earlier, Lee understood and valued the power of suggestion for the success of

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<sup>85</sup> For two recent discussions of the experiments and theories in this essay see Jo Briggs, 'Gender and Sexuality' (2006) and Joseph Bristow's, 'Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling', *Tulsa Studies in English Literature*, 25:1 (2006), 117-139. Both of these essays outline previous work in psychological aesthetics by William James and Karl Groos which influenced Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's essay. Lee devoted three books to explaining the evolution of her theories from those in the original essay, 'Beauty and Ugliness', and the theories held by Anstruther-Thomson. These books are *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912), *The Beautiful* (1913) and her introduction and notes to Anstruther-Thomson's *Art and Man* (1924). It is for this reason that I wish to focus on the evolution of Lee's theories and what that reveals about her intellectual process, rather than the experiments conducted by Anstruther-Thomson and theorised by Lee in this first essay. However, it is important to note, for Briggs and Bristow's arguments as well as my own, that, according to Lee, she was not present when Anstruther-Thomson conducted her experiments. In her introduction to *Art and Man* Lee explains that, 'I fell to reading every psychological book and periodical which came within reach [. . .] Thus, while in galleries and museums Kit was filling book after book [. . .] with half-legible pencil jottings, I was wading through mental science, including the physiology of the sense organs' (46). Consequently, the essay was compiled in such a way that the reader is able to credit entire passages which run on for several pages to one or other author. It was not until 1901 that Lee recorded her own experiments in her gallery diaries which she published in *Beauty and Ugliness*. Briggs and Bristow survey and argue against readings of the early essay 'Beauty and Ugliness' by, for example, Diana Maltz, which see it primarily as a manifestation of Lee's lesbian attraction to Anstruther-Thompson. I disagree with Maltz's reading on the grounds that Lee states that her main input was reading rather than watching Kit's experiments, and that Lee's future publications reveal a continuing interest in the theoretical framework and theoretical merits of the study. Thus, whether or not Lee was physically attracted to Anstruther-Thompson, it is far too limiting to credit the entire essay to this attraction.

the supernatural. But she also strongly valued the power of suggestion for intellectual progress. For Lee the best theories are those which always admit to being works in progress and which spark new ideas and reveal further areas of inquiry. A successful theory does not, at any stage, claim to be absolute and it can evolve without being destroyed. In 'Beauty and Ugliness' Lee invites readers to engage with their essay and test their methods and propositions. By asking for what is essentially a peer review, Lee asks those who are interested to enter into their collaborative circle, writing that, 'the joint authors of these notes are desirous of premising that their object in publication is considerably to invite criticism, correction and amplification of their ideas' (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 157). The pair offers their suggestions for a new framework through which to approach the question of the perception and experience of art forms and, for Lee, the truly worthwhile part of the process lies in the response to these suggestions and the eventual 'amplification' of these ideas.

The 'evolution' of her ideas on psychological aesthetics begins with Groos's *Inner Wachahmung* (inner mimicry), which forms the basis of 'Beauty and Ugliness', and ends with Theodore Lipps's *Einfühlung* (empathy), which she discusses in detail in the exercises in *The Beautiful* and in the other essays collected in *Beauty and Ugliness*. She explains in the preface to the essay 'Beauty and Ugliness' that 'my own present theory of Æsthetic Empathy is the offspring, or rather only the modified version, of the theory set forth in the following essay' (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 154). That Lee's ideas evolved after the first publication of the essay but did not break entirely from her original views suggests that the pair's collaborative work, despite the criticism it received immediately following publication, was, intellectually at least, sound and

viable. The stated aim in the beginning of the essay suggests that Lee and Anstruther-Thomson hoped to offer a new methodology to approach the question of how the viewer perceives artistic forms:

The following notes are expected to prove only that the subject demands a new method of study, and that its problems admit to new solutions; in other words, that aesthetics, if treated by the method of recent psychology, will be recognised as one of the most important and suggestive parts of the great science of perception and emotion. (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 545)

Their work on that first essay, and the criticism received after its publication, suggested to Lee a possible route for future thinking. In her book *Beauty and Ugliness* and in her introduction to *Art & Man*, Lee makes it clear that though her ideas had changed, the change does not represent a complete rift between the two methods, and argues instead that they should be seen as two sides of the same coin. She writes in the preface to *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912) that ‘Both hypotheses [of the nature of aesthetic preference] are, as I have constantly repeated, in all probability necessary for a complete and physiologico-psychological explanation’ (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 154).

Having placed each hypothesis [that of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ and Lee’s later view] in its own category – each offering a different emphasis in its approach to the question of the perception of form – she explains that ‘the divergence between my collaborator and myself [is] concerned with the comparative importance and relative position, primary or secondary, of the two hypotheses’ (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 154).

Lee does not discredit the earlier work. Instead she explains that the earlier and later views complement each other and that each reader must decide for him or herself which theory best describes his or her own experience. But, arguing that it is important not to privilege the emotion generated by the artwork over the aesthetic process by which that emotion is attained, Lee suggests that the conclusion reached by a theory should not supersede the process by which it is reached. Having been left unsatisfied by the conclusions reached in her early essay 'Beauty and Ugliness', Lee was able to retrace the thinking in the first piece and decide what the new line of enquiry should be. The ideas which arose from the first piece and the process by which they were conceived became the starting point for her later explorations. This allowed her to consider her work with Anstruther-Thomson a theoretical success.

### **Defining an Audience**

In 'Valedictory', Lee admits that her primary concern in writing both *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* was to satisfy first her own spiritual and intellectual needs, noting that 'I have found myself at last wondering in what manner thoughts and impressions could make the world, the Past and Present, the near and the remote, more satisfying and useful to myself' (*Fancies*, 236). After establishing this for herself she considers how her studies can benefit a wider community. She asks, 'what can the study of history, particularly the history of art and other manifestations of the past conditions of soul, do for us in the present?' (*Fancies*, 236). Lee follows her own advice in 'Higher Harmonies' to 'put our life into the life universal' and she steps back to question, not only how her studies can work towards a greater good, but how

the intellectual process itself, in which the intellect, the senses and the emotions work together, can benefit others (*Laurus Nobilis*, 171). At times in her writings she draws the reader in as her companion, asking him or her to follow her lead. In her earlier essay 'The Book and Its Title' in *Belcaro* (1881), she had explained that when she writes in her characteristic 'we', it 'is not the oracular *we* of the printed book, it is the *we* of myself and those with whom, for whom, I am speaking; it is the constantly felt dualism of myself and my companion' (*Belcaro*, 8).<sup>86</sup> In a letter to her brother, the poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton, in 1893, she explains that she expects her readers to be only those to 'whom I can give pleasure or profit, those who stand, naturally, in want of exactly the writer I am'.<sup>87</sup> In the epilogue to *Euphorion*, Lee admits that the readers who would get the most out of her impressions of the Italian Renaissance and for whom her impressions might make the period come alive are those 'who think like myself' (*Euphorion*, 437).

Lee's essay entitled 'Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists' (1882), published in the *Contemporary Review*, makes clear the audience for whom she envisioned herself writing.<sup>88</sup> She begins by explaining that she feels 'entitled and obliged' to enter into the debate and to share her pained ambivalence about the issue because of the lack of objective information available to those who, like herself, wish to take an informed position. She explains that

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<sup>86</sup> Although Lee refers especially to Mary Robinson in this instance, the intimacy suggested by her use of 'we' throughout this and later volumes affects the reader as well.

<sup>87</sup> Vernon Lee, letter to Eugene Lee-Hamilton dated 31 August 1893, in *Vernon Lee's Letters*, p. 364.

<sup>88</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists', *Contemporary Review*, 41 (January/June 1882), 788-811. All further references will appear in text.

The evidence against vivisection is read and re-read mainly by the people who have thoroughly made up their minds against it, and to whom, for the most part, scientific facts have no sort of interest; while the minds capable of judging of the scientific reasons for continuing the practice and the moral lessons for suppressing it, the minds, therefore, by whom the question can really be weighed and judged, are permitted to know of vivisection only as much as its professed advocates feel inclined to tell them. ('Vivisection', 797)

Lee writes for those who 'can weigh the *pros* and *cons*' and who will not accept simply 'that Professor A. or Dr. B is the best authority about his own doings' ('Vivisection', 795; 807). She envisions an independent class of thinkers to whom academic intellectuals can be held accountable. Her intended audience consists of 'the intellectual waverers who may conscientiously desire to seek out the facts and weigh the moral arguments for themselves', a group she calls her 'intellectual comrades' ('Vivisection', 798; 795).

Part of what is noteworthy about this essay is the way in which Lee rationally outlines the arguments for and against vivisection, each in a convincing way. It is not until the second half of the piece that she reveals her own leanings. Instead, she demonstrates to the reader the process by which she reaches her own conclusions.<sup>89</sup> Lee

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<sup>89</sup> Lee ultimately rejects the legitimacy of vivisection, arguing that the exploitation of creatures who will not in any way benefit from the scientific findings for which they have been sacrificed, is morally objectionable and represents an unacceptable lack of

intended for her work to be instructional, not merely by offering information but by making transparent her methods. She writes in ‘The Book and Its Title’ that ‘my object is not to teach others, but to show them how far I have taught myself, and how far they may teach themselves’ (*Belcaro*, 13). Her hope that like-minded readers, inquisitive and passionate about art and history, could find the kind of intellectual and personal satisfaction she had enjoyed made her acutely aware of the stigma attached to non-professional researchers. Lee often wrote with the amateur in mind. In the ‘Preface and Apology’ to her volume *The Beautiful*, she admits to an awareness of her potential non-professional readership, explaining that her book,

is addressed to readers in whom I have no right to expect a previous knowledge of psychology, particularly in its more modern developments. I have therefore based my explanation of the problems of aesthetics as much as possible upon mental facts familiar, or at all events easily intelligible, to the lay reader. (*The Beautiful*, v)

Whilst Lee did not consider herself to be a non-professional amateur – indeed she applied several titles to herself throughout her career, including psychologist (*Art and Man*, 100, and *The Poet’s Eye: Notes on some Differences between Verse and Prose* (1926), 14) and aesthetician (*Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, 1880, 8) – she did value the importance of a passionate interest in one’s project, regardless of whether

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harmony between man and his fellow living creatures. The method which Lee adopts in this essay differs from the dialogues in that she does not create other characters in order to express differing views. Instead, in this essay, Lee speaks for herself.



the person has professional credibility or not. Writing about Clementina Anstruther-Thomson in *Art and Man*, she explains that Anstruther-Thomson was not a professional intellectual, and that

Perhaps this was a gain as well as a loss. Perhaps in this world of pedantic specialization and professional cavailing there is need for the untrammelled thought and imagination – yes, even for the irresponsibility – of the Amateur. For, after all, is not the Amateur the one who, if sometimes breaking off where he is bored, works on only because he loves? (*Art and Man*, 63)

Lee's epistolary novel *Louis Norbert: A Two-Fold Romance* (1914) is an illustration of this. Lady Venetia Hammond, the central character, comments on the amateur's need for a mystery which is both absorbing and fulfilling.<sup>90</sup> After being locked in the 'Ghost's room' of her family home as a child, she discovered the portrait of her seventeenth-century relative, Louis Norbert (*Louis Norbert*, 29). She explains that

Somehow I stopped being frightened as soon as I saw him. He was so awfully kind and sad, as if he wanted to help me, and at the same time (and that was more to the point) he wanted *me* to help *him* [. . .] I'm not sure he didn't want to marry me at the end. (*Louis Norbert*, 30)

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<sup>90</sup> Vernon Lee, *Louis Norbert: A Two-Fold Romance* (London: John Lane, 1914). All further references will appear in text.

She solicits the help of an archaeologist to solve the mystery of the true identity and death of Norbert after she comes across a slab in the Campo Santo di Pisa on which his name is inscribed. As in 'Amour Dure', Lee's story of Spiridion Trepka, the historian whose obsession with the sixteenth-century Medea da Carpi begins when her portrait reveals itself to him suddenly in the archives in Urbania, Louis Norbert makes himself known to Lady Venetia twice, in her family home and in Pisa. When the archaeologist, who refers to himself as 'Schmidt' in one of his letters, suggests they conclude their investigations into his murder at a moment when it appears they have reached a dead end, Lady Venetia makes it clear that she needs to persevere (*Louis Norbert*, 100). She complains of the lack of purpose in her life as a spinster whose brother is soon to be married and comments on her inability to move easily from one passion to another.<sup>91</sup>

She writes,

Well, you are young and an archaeologist, and I suppose you have dozens of other mysteries in the future – archaeologists are a kind of Don Juan

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<sup>91</sup> It is difficult to miss the similarities between Lady Venetia and Lee's personal situations. Lady Venetia is summoned to care for her brother who is left crippled after a stroke and she explains in her first letter to the Archaeologist that caring for her brother has interrupted her research into Louis Norbert (51). When her brother recovers, he announces that he will marry, leaving Lady Venetia homeless (255). Lee's older half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, suffered from what is now believed to have been a psychosomatic illness which left him bed-bound for twenty years. For an insightful discussion of the literary and personal relationship between Lee and Lee-Hamilton, see Catherine Maxwell, 'Vernon Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 21-39. In her introduction to *Art and Man*, Lee explains that upon returning from their mother's funeral in 1896, 'my half-brother told me that now that our mother was gone he wished to separate his life from mine and make the best of the health to which he had been so unexpectedly restored. I therefore had only Kit to consult about my own plans' (19).

passing from mystery to mystery, instead of from mistress to mistress. So it's all very well for *you*. But think of me! (*Louis Norbert*, 254)

In this novel the professional is depicted as irresponsible and fickle, enjoying the ease with which he can simply drop one project and move on to another, but it is the amateur's 'love' of her subject which carries her through to its completion.

In Lee's introduction to Anstruther-Thomson's *Art and Man*, published three years after Anstruther-Thomson's death, she describes some of the shortcomings and strengths of the pair's working relationship whilst collaborating on their jointly written essay, 'Beauty and Ugliness'. Here Lee draws a portrait of two halves, each with their own critical methods, coming together to create a complete aesthetic point of view. Lee's assessment of the strengths Anstruther-Thomson brought to the working relationship suggests that her collaborator may have reminded her of the truth of Mrs Jenkin's advice. On the one hand, Anstruther-Thomson is often described as intuitive, with the unabashed inquisitiveness of a 'clever child', whilst Lee, on the other hand, admits that, she was most comfortable resorting to books and provided Anstruther-Thomson with 'a psychological framework' for her 'observations and experiments' (*Art and Man*, 12; 41). Yet Lee's claim in *Euphorion* that a focus on books at the expense of experience is an incomplete aesthetic method supports her statement in *Art and Man* that 'long before I became her [Anstruther-Thomson's] collaborator, I gradually became her pupil, almost unknown to myself and certainly to her' (*Art and Man*, 28).

In this introduction, Lee explains their difference in approach to the question of the experience of art. According to Lee, Anstruther-Thomson's aesthetic responses

all grew out of her own life. Moreover, out of a life which was not spent among books and atlases and plates, nor even in museums armed with inch-measure and photographs and comparison, but wandering among whatever works of art happened to be within reach, and among Nature's forms [...] letting herself be led hither and thither by her eyes, never shutting those eyes to anything beautiful, however irrelevant, because, from the very nature of her interest, nothing beautiful could be irrelevant.

*(Art and Man, 41)*

In their essay 'Beauty and Ugliness', Anstruther-Thomson widens the definition of art to include all lines which inspire movement, and compares those of a glass jar to the lines of the Venus de Milo. Lee, on the other hand, retreated to books during this time, explaining that 'I fell to reading every psychological book and periodical which came within reach' (*Art and Man*, 46). Each half (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson), individually, had its own faults. According to Lee, Anstruther-Thomson could not be made to understand that an artwork's reception is entirely subjective, and that the meaning which the viewer or reader interprets may not be what the artist had intended. Despite her friend, 'an archaeologist (Mrs. Arthur Strong)' and 'a psychologist, such as I was [...] both insisting', Anstruther-Thomson could not 'realize anything so different from the impression filling her own imagination' (*Art and Man*, 100). Equally, Lee herself had discovered that, before Anstruther-Thomson's influence on her way of looking at art, she truly had not distinguished the forms, or lines, of the artwork from the subject of the

piece and often was frustrated by her awareness of the multiplicity of associated narratives which can colour one's impression of an artwork.<sup>92</sup> Anstruther-Thomson's way of looking at art influenced Lee's and inspired her to aim for a more homogenous approach to her aesthetic theory, one which incorporates both theoretical frameworks and empirical observations. Lee's awareness of the particular strengths and needs of the passionate amateur leads her to write detailed explanations of the methods she uses to construct and test her theories, and the development of what, in her essay 'The Central Problem of Aesthetics' in *Beauty and Ugliness* she calls 'the evolution of my own ideas'.<sup>93</sup> By drawing attention to the intellectual process and making it accessible to readers, she gives to it as much importance as her conclusions.

Thus, it is important to pay close attention to these methods when evaluating her consideration of the necessary harmony between the mind and the body, and between the self and its surroundings. It seems likely that Mrs Jenkin influenced Lee's approach to her studies by bidding her not to ignore any of her 'component parts'. When researching the music of the eighteenth century for her study *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, for example, Lee took singing lessons so that she could better understand her subject.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, when researching the history of the Arcadian Academy for her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, she was not content simply to read about the Academy and its members but made sure to visit the grounds (*Studies*, 8). In the introduction to *Euphorion*, she explains that the associations and emotions

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<sup>92</sup> The difference between the artwork's subject and its artistic qualities is the subject of Lee's essay 'Orpheus and Eurydice: Lessons of a Bas Relief', published in *Belcaro*.

<sup>93</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Central Problem of Aesthetics', in *Beauty and Ugliness* pp. 77-152 (p. 80).

<sup>94</sup> Gunn, p. 64.

elicited by written descriptions in books cannot compete with the strength and potency of those inspired by actually ‘living among such things’ (*Euphorion*, 19). In a striking moment she opines that ‘impressions are not derived from description, and thoughts are not suggested by books’ (*Euphorion*, 19). The sense of urgency conveyed by her words is suggestive of the particular depth of her conviction that experience must be prioritised over book learning. She does, however, also convey a belief in the artistic merits of these descriptions. In her essay ‘The Use of Beauty’, published in *Laurus Nobilis*, she explains that books can ‘become the training-place of our soul’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 131). They can ‘train us to open our eyes, ears and souls, instead of shutting them, to the wider modes of universal life’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 131). In other words, aesthetic texts can help one to see and experience more clearly and deeply those worthy impressions with which one *is* surrounded. For Lee, the pleasure derived from aesthetic theory is not complete without the active interaction which enlivens theory and turns it into useful practice. In *Euphorion* she asserts that, if given a choice, one should always choose to interact with one’s surroundings, to look to oneself for answers rather than retreating to the safety of what others have discovered, ‘you find everywhere facts without opening a book’ (*Euphorion*, 19). Lee appeals to readers to seek their own knowledge and understanding and offers them her methods. She writes that,

The explanation which I have tried to give of the exact manner in which Mediæval art was influenced by the remains of antiquity, came like a flash during a rainy morning in the Pisan Campo Santo; the working out and testing of the explanation in its details was a matter of going from one

church or gallery to the other, a reference or two to Vasari for some date or fact being the only necessary reading; and should any one at this moment ask me for substantiation of that theory, instead of opening books I would take that person to this Sienese Cathedral, and there bid him compare the griffins and the arabesques, the delicate figure and foliage ornaments carved in wood and marble by the later Middle Ages, with the griffins and arabesques, the boldly bossed horseman, the exquisite fruit garlands of a certain antique altar stone which the builders of the church used as a base to a pillar, and which must have been a never-ceasing object of study to every draughtsman and stoneworker in Siena. (*Euphorion*, 19-20)

Lee's writings can be viewed as on-site guides through which she draws the reader's attention to the sights which impressed her. Ultimately, however, her aim is to instil in readers a sense of the pleasure accessible through being open to these personal impressions.

### **The Cult of the Amateur**

Lee's desire to share her methods and intellectual systems with her readers, as well as the writings which she addresses specifically to the amateur and which praise his abilities reveal a belief in the importance and virtue of self-education. The intellectual cooperation which she advocates benefits both professionals and amateurs because each offers what the other may lack. Despite the human instinct for harmony, in 'In Praise of Old Houses' she explains that

Man seems unable to attend to one point without neglecting some other;  
 where he has a fine fancy in melody, his harmony is apt to be threadbare; if  
 he succeeds with colour, he cannot manage line, and if light and shade,  
 then neither. (22)

The ‘intellectual comrades’ to whom Lee addresses her writings are intended to question and monitor the class of professionals who can, as Lee herself admitted to doing, often forget to look at the wider picture and at the effects their work may have on others. Having benefited from the perspective offered to her by Anstruther-Thomson, Lee hoped to empower her readers by providing insight into the ways in which knowledge can be attained, organised and interpreted and the ways in which theory is applicable to life. By applying aesthetic theory, which incorporates perception, sensation and the intellect, to life, she blurs the line between professional and amateur and undermines the system which insists on distinguishing between the two.

This chapter has identified the main questions of aesthetics with which Lee was concerned and looked at the methods of study by which she explored these interests. In-depth readings of essays in which she described her intellectual process reveal an ambivalence towards categories and a distrust of fixed ways of organising knowledge. Ultimately she saw categories as being potentially helpful but also, if adhered to too strictly, intellectually stifling. That she continually returned to previous ideas throughout her career, altering and applying them to various studies, shows that a fluidity of thought, transparency of process, and collaboration with others were integral in the



development and dissemination of her aesthetic theories. This process represented a way of interacting and engaging with one's surroundings (not just artworks) which both shaped and acted as an example of her theory of aesthetic harmony. As this chapter has hopefully shown, Lee's methodology shaped her approach to her studies on psychological aesthetics, but her collaboration with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, an amateur in the field of aesthetics in general, reminded Lee of the importance of a rounded approach to the study of art, one which did not rely too heavily on intellectual methods but which also incorporated one's physical and emotional responses to art and one's surroundings. These findings, I argued, shaped her theory of aesthetic harmony in which she advocated a belief in the connection and interdependence of the individual's component parts of body, mind, and feeling in both aesthetic appreciation and in society more generally. Lee's theory of aesthetic harmony also underpinned her social critiques.

This chapter shows how Lee approached questions regarding the relationship between art and life, the ways in which one perceives, internalises, and appreciates art, and how the mind, the body and the emotions work together in this experience. What has also emerged from these discussions is Lee's interest in broadening the definition of art. When she considered the importance of Anstruther-Thomson's response to objects such as a chair and wall in their essay 'Beauty and Ugliness', and when she applied the methods of aesthetic enquiry to understanding and responding to social problems, she broadened the scope both of art and of aesthetics. I now wish to explore further the ways in which she does this and consider some of her reasons for doing so.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Broadening the Scope of Critical Aesthetics

In January 1923, Vernon Lee published a collection of ‘variously dated essays and notes’ on literary art called *The Handling of Words and Other Essays in Literary Psychology*.<sup>95</sup> Critics instantly recognised the innovative nature of the study yet were unsure about its implications for the study of literature and how it was to sit with the rest of her work and reputation.

Percy Lubbock (1879-1965), who often reviewed Lee’s work and who himself contributed to literary studies with *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), made a distinction in the *Times Literary Supplement* between ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’ activities, suggesting that for the essays which made up *The Handling of Words*, Lee had slaved away at the drudgework which would not normally concern the great masters.<sup>96</sup> He wrote,

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<sup>95</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words And Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, 1923). Most of essays in this collection had been published in periodicals in the 1880s and 1890s. The original publications are as follows: ‘On Literary Construction’, *Contemporary Review*, 68 (September 1895), 404-19; ‘Studies in Literary Psychology’, *Contemporary Review*, 84 (November 1903), 386-92; ‘The Nature of the Writer’, originally published as ‘The Nature of Literature’, *Contemporary Review*, (September 1904), 377-91; ‘The Handling of Words’, *English Review*, 5 (June 1910), 427-41; 5 (July 1910), 599-607; 6 (September 1910), 224-35; 9 (September 1911), 231-41; 9 (October 1911), 441-48.

<sup>96</sup> Percy Lubbock, ‘The Handling of Words’, *Times Literary Supplement*, (22 March 1923), 185-6.

Up there they examine the nature of beauty, the philosophy of art, the basis of aesthetics; down here we deal only with the very elements of the craft of letters, the actual words on the page, the mere parts of speech in the phrase. (185)

Lubbock, of whose *The Craft of Fiction* Lee had been critical in her collection, was eager to separate the empirical nature of the work from what he considered to be the more elevated critical aesthetics. Prior to this collection, he claimed, Lee had partaken solely in upstairs activities. In his review of *The Handling of Words*, Lubbock focused on the chapters ‘Studies in Literary Psychology’ and ‘The Handling of Words’ because he saw them as belonging to the kind of ‘downstairs’ activity he believed Lee now engaged in. In these two chapters Lee concentrated on randomly selected 500 word excerpts from various writers. Lubbock made explicit his critique when he asserted that ‘a critic of the humbler and everyday sort [. . .] will find plenty to learn from watching Vernon Lee while she attacks the entertaining little series of problems she has proposed herself’, and claimed that the collection as a whole is ‘one of the humbler, of the humblest, of the levels of literary criticism’ (185).

This separation between critical aesthetics and Lee’s pioneering use of close textual analysis has continued in more recent studies on Lee, albeit without the hierarchical connotations. Recent attention to the collection has aimed to place *The Handling of Words* in a chronology of linguistic studies and philological theory. David Seed, in his 1992 introduction to *The Handling of Words*, does argue that she ‘arrived at the method demonstrated in *The Handling of Words* only after assimilating a whole range of influences from William Corbett, through Pater and William James to writers

on psychological aesthetics'.<sup>97</sup> Yet whilst he admits that the 'method' used in *The Handling of Words* was influenced by 'writers on psychological aesthetics', ultimately he sees the collection as a departure from Lee's own critical aesthetics.<sup>98</sup> Arguing that 'for our purposes it is more useful to note Lee's writings on psychological aesthetics as a phase in her career rather than delving into their outdated intricacies', he then adds that *The Handling of Words*

should not be viewed as a late contribution to aesthetics but it should be compared more usefully (and more favourably) with the manuals of composition which appeared at the turn of the century [. . .] The simple fact that the term "beautiful" occurs so rarely in *The Handling of Words* suggests that Vernon Lee has shifted her focus to language. (Seed, vi)

Likewise, Christa Zorn, in her essay '*The Handling of Words: Reader Response Victorian Style*', has suggested that 'returning literary criticism into its historical possibilities, then, should provide the context for evaluating *The Handling of Words* today' (Zorn 2006, 176). Zorn, whose own study engages with Seed's, agrees that 'it is tempting to imagine a direct line between *The Handling of Words* and Lee's experimental studies in psychological

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<sup>97</sup> David Seed, introduction to *The Handling of Words and Other Stories in Literary Psychology* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. xxvi.

<sup>98</sup> For my purposes I define Lee's critical aesthetics as her ongoing preoccupation with beauty and harmony in which she incorporates psychological, physiological and intellectual processes. Ultimately, I see her critical aesthetics as a move towards a more rounded philosophy of life which turns theory into practice, an idea she makes explicit in her essay 'Higher Harmonies' in *Laurus Nobilis* (1908), which I discussed in Chapter Two.

aesthetics, such as *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912) and *The Beautiful* (1913) but this proves to be a more complicated issue' (Zorn 2006, 175). Whilst both critics note the empirical methods which run through *The Handling of Words* and Lee's work on psychological aesthetics – and Seed also rightly sees a connection between the case studies in *The Handling of Words* and the later listener surveys in *Music and its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotion and Imaginative Responses to Music* (1932) – they draw a line between Lee's literary criticism and her critical aesthetics proper.

Seed's assertion that 'it would be a mistake, however, to pigeon-hole such a versatile writer' by associating all her work with aesthetics, is an interesting one, as is Zorn's contention that to do so is 'tempting' but ultimately 'a more complicated issue' (Seed, iii; Zorn 2006, 175). In this chapter I shall explore the relationship between Lee's critical aesthetics and her literary criticism. It is my belief also that Lee's interest in psychological aesthetics can be seen as an integral part of her aesthetic philosophy, and that it helped to shape her investigations into the workings of literary art. Lee herself expressed some regret at the 'confusion of thought' in 'that [. . .] often quoted but little understood essay called 'Beauty and Ugliness'' (1897) which she co-wrote with her partner Clementina Anstruther-Thomson.<sup>99</sup> And she devotes her large volume *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912) to correcting and explaining these confusions of thought. The fact, as I showed in Chapter Two, that she continued to engage with the ideas in the original essay fourteen years after its initial publication suggests that rather than being a phase in her career, as Seed suggests, she

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<sup>99</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Central Problem of Aesthetics', in *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), pp. 77-151 (78, 80). According to Phyllis Mannocchi this essay was first published in German as 'Weiteres über Einfühlung und ästhetisches Miterleben' in *Zeitschrift Für Ästhetik* 5 (1910), pp.145-90.

allowed her interest in psychological aesthetics to evolve and mature over the years. In the essay ‘The Central Problem of Aesthetics’ in *Beauty and Ugliness* she states that ‘it is this alteration I propose to explain, not from any wish to justify myself, but because the explanation may save younger students some of the confusion of thought which I have gradually cleared up for myself’ (*Beauty and Ugliness*, 77-8). Her interest in the nature of beauty in its various forms – and of its role in daily living – was ongoing and wide-ranging.

The aim of this chapter is to trace the evolution of Lee’s definition of aesthetics and of the questions which she associated with its study. I shall argue that her investigations into psychological and literary aesthetics were crucial components of her overall aesthetic theory, which aimed to be practical and applicable to a wide and realistic range of topics. My intention in this chapter is also to consider the ways in which Lee broadens the scope of art, and therefore aesthetics, to include literary art. I shall argue in favour of connecting Lee’s various studies, rather than dividing her interests into phases. Furthering my discussion of Lee’s distrust of strict categorisations in Chapter Two, I shall highlight some of the recurring ideas about aesthetics that appear in seemingly unlikely essays throughout her career. My aim is to show that Lee did not believe in discarding ideas but instead preferred to alter them until they could be useful again. In the next section I shall address the ways in which Lee both limits and broadens the scope of aesthetics by carefully redefining its boundaries as a discipline. I shall then consider essays in *Beauty and Ugliness* and *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* to show how her work on psychological aesthetics and literary is linked, before moving on to a discussion on Lee’s conceptualisation of the various strengths of the different art forms. Next, I shall consider the importance which Lee

attributes to literary art. Whilst she accepts that literary art might be considered the least aesthetic of the art forms, she connects it to her idea of aesthetic harmony. In the final section I show that Lee's idea of literary art is linked to her belief in the importance of creating congruity between reality and the ideal. By bringing together literary art and aesthetics – via her work on psychological aesthetics – she highlights literature's role in making readers more sensitive to other forms of art and to the interconnectedness and interdependence of the individual and society's component parts.

Bearing in mind the chronology of Lee's literary output, the difficulties critics have in labelling her as a writer, and her belief in the potentially enlightening connections between all things, it is reasonable to assume that she did not separate her interests in any straightforward way. It is important to consider that she wrote the essays which make up *The Handling of Words* concurrently with her thinking and writing on music, art history, travel writing and aesthetic theory. The result is that one can detect the emergence of her ideas on literary art in essays which do not, at first, appear relevant to the subject at hand. For this reason, in this chapter I refer to Lee's engagement with literary art, and look at a series of essays that deal with the subject, some more explicitly than others, rather than focusing solely on *The Handling of Words*. Moving beyond my discussion of her theory of aesthetic harmony in Chapter Two, I situate her theories on literary art within her critical aesthetics. It is my contention that Lee's writings on literary art are not tangential to her work on aesthetics, but that they are instead efforts to widen the scope of aesthetics, which she defined in *Music and Its Lovers* (1932) as

‘the study *not* of behaviour, but of feelings and thoughts in themselves’.<sup>100</sup> I hope to show that by widening the scope of literary art and of the study of aesthetics, Lee strove to create a philosophy of life which made the most of what art and its appreciation have to offer.

### **Connected Studies**

Before considering Lee’s definition of art and the disciplinary boundaries she sets for the study of aesthetics, it is important to explore the ways in which she conceptualised her own varied interests and studies. Lee did not separate her interests according to modern categorisations, and that it is therefore important to consider the subjects on which she wrote as part of a connected whole. To do this, the aim of this section is to show that several of the major themes in Lee’s later writings on literary art, psychological aesthetics, and aesthetic harmony can be traced back to her earliest writings on music.

Lee was interested in the evolution of ideas, and in the ways in which seemingly separate studies can be strengthened by interdisciplinarity. I mean to show this by exploring the links between Lee’s earlier interests and writings and her later explorations. Lee’s aesthetic philosophy was wide-ranging and as such, benefited from a broad range of applications. In the introduction to *The Handling of Words* she admits that ‘it is my experience that I have never really grasped any new or nearly new idea until I had been shown several different applications thereof’ (*Handling*, viii). An investigation into the chronology of her publications reveals that the different branches of her aesthetic theory developed over a lifetime and that, as I showed in Chapter Two,

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<sup>100</sup> Vernon Lee, *Music and Its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotion and Imaginative Responses to Music* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 14.



she did not discard ideas, preferring instead continually to test them in different ways and to salvage and incorporate any relevant ideas into future theories.

In an 1877 essay, ‘Musical Expression and the Composers of the Eighteenth Century’, Lee considers the ways in which listeners verbalise their reactions to music and what that process can reveal about music as an art.<sup>101</sup> The essay is infused with her knowledge of music in Italy in the eighteenth century on which she was drawing for her impressive *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880).<sup>102</sup> Yet many of the ideas which she first mentions in this essay were expanded upon in her future writings, both fiction and non-fiction. Her assertion in ‘Musical Expression’ that ‘the composer indicates the notes, but the singer gives to each its duration, its force, its quality’, for example, is reminiscent of the relationship between the composer Magnus and the singer Zaffirino in her story ‘A Wicked Voice’, which would be published thirteen years later in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890).<sup>103</sup> This essay is also remarkable because it shows that as early as 1877 Lee was considering the similarities and differences between the various art forms and the ways in which people react to these forms of expression. She writes,

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<sup>101</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Musical Expression and the Composers of the Eighteenth Century’ in *New Quarterly Magazine*, 8 (April 1877), pp. 186-202.

<sup>102</sup> Three of the essays from *Studies* had been published earlier: ‘The Academy of the Arcadi: A Study of Italian Literary Life in the Eighteenth Century’, was published in two parts in *Fraser’s Magazine*, 17 (June 1878), 779-98; 18 (July 1878), 33-59. This was followed by ‘Studies of Italian Musical Life in the Eighteenth Century’, published in *Fraser’s* in three parts: 18 (September 1878), 339-61; 18 (October 1878), 423-46; (November 1878), 566-79; ‘Metastasio and the Opera of the Eighteenth Century’, also in *Fraser’s*, 19 (March 1879), 371-93; (April 1879), 495-510; (May 1879), 583-614. There are minor but not significant differences between the original publications and the essays as they were published in *Studies*.

<sup>103</sup> Lee had published an earlier version of ‘A Wicked Voice’ in French as ‘Voix maudite’ in *Les Lettres et Les Arts, Revue Illustrée* (August 1877), pp. 125-53.

music has qualities of its own, but its general aim is the same as that of the plastic arts – that of embodying what is highest in man’s minds, that of creating beautiful forms. Whether the forms be shapes drawn with the pencil, or melodies combined out of sounds, matters nothing [. . .] Those who really appreciate music speak much as those who really appreciate sculpture – they feel with intense keenness the beautiful modulations of a passage, the charming turn of a close, the magnificent breath of phrase, the exquisite delicacy of an ornament, – they savour all this with the eager pleasure of an artist examining an ancient fragment. (‘Musical Expression’, 187)

Her description of this appreciation acknowledges a physical experience of art through words such as ‘feel’, ‘breadth’, ‘savour’, and also refers to the emotional yearning for more, in this case likened to ‘examining an ancient fragment’. This is an evocative image which would be used again in her essays ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’ (1880) and ‘Symmetria Prisca’ (1879) in *Euphorion* (1884), in which she describes a sixteenth-century excavation of a ‘broken fragment of an antique sculpture’ and asks the reader to consider ‘what passes in the mind of that artist? What surprise, what dawning doubts, what sickening fears, what longings and what remorse are not the fruit of this sight of Antiquity?’ (*Euphorion*, 193-4).<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> ‘Symmetria Prisca’ was originally published as ‘The Artistic Dualism of the Renaissance’, *Contemporary Review* (September 1879), 44-65. For an enlightening discussion of Lee and the power of fragments, see Catherine Maxwell’s ‘Of Venus, Vagueness and Vision: Vernon Lee, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, and “the spell of the fragment”’, in *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008), pp. 114-65.

The language in the passage from ‘Musical Expression’ also suggests an awareness of physical movement in the experience of art. Words like ‘modulations’ and ‘turn’ call to mind her theory of aesthetic empathy (*Einfühlung*), to be expanded in *The Beautiful*, which argues that one physically experiences the movements of the shapes and lines in an artwork.<sup>105</sup> I wish to suggest that Lee’s studies were not disconnected from each other, even though she did not always make these connections explicit. Her frequent labelling of her writings as ‘notes’ suggests that she did not wish to limit the scope of her studies by identifying these connections herself, preferring instead to allow her readers the freedom to do so. In *Hortus Vitae* she refers to her ‘unconnected notes’, and in the conclusion to *Beauty and Ugliness* she explains that these ‘seemingly heterogeneous notes, which I have kept in their chronological order [. . .] I have done so, instead of working them into orderly essays, because I wanted to place my materials unspoilt at the disposal of other students’ (*Beauty*, 365). Indeed, her use of the word ‘notes’ in many of her titles: *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (1899); the essay ‘The Poet’s Eye: Notes on Some Differences Between Verse and Prose’ (1926), in which she argues that the poet enjoys greater freedom of expression than the prose writer; ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’ (1880); ‘North Tuscan Notes’ (1884); ‘The Need to Believe: An Agnostic’s Notes on Professor William James’ (1899), suggests a lack of completion and that these studies are ongoing. The implication is that by offering her notes to readers, Lee offers fragments of ideas and theories, as well as suggestions for future lines of enquiry. It can be inferred from these titles that she hoped others might also expand the scope of possible applications of her observations.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> The *OED* credits Lee with this translation.

<sup>106</sup> *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (London: Grant Richards, 1899); ‘The Poet’s Eye: Notes on Some Differences Between Verse and Prose’ (London: The Hogarth Press,

As I showed in Chapter Two, her attempts to define the vague field of aesthetics whilst simultaneously arguing that strict categories can be intellectually stifling, suggest that in a time when universities were playing a stronger role in establishing academic disciplines, Lee struggled to propose a link which would be accepted by this new professional world and which would tie together often marginalised subjects into one accepted discipline – aesthetics. Perhaps her labelling of her writings as ‘notes’ suggests a rejection of these professional constraints and a call for some intellectual humility. By offering her collections of essays as notes, Lee implies that her ideas are not fixed absolutes, but are instead open to interpretation and reappraisal, and that she welcomed the application of her ideas and observations to different disciplines. Indeed, the Colby College archive reveals that she periodically returned to her commonplace books and added notes in the margins. In 1920, she went through all 12 volumes (1887-1900), crossing out in red all ideas and draft paragraphs which had been used in published writings, and in blue all those which had been only partially used, and which she thought might prove useful in the future. This practice reveals that she considered her studies to be always in process and incomplete, and that old ideas might be useful in new investigations.

Yet the early twentieth-century divisions between art-history, musicology, psychology, literature and philosophy show just how difficult Lee’s predicament really was. Her preoccupation with the importance of a harmonious interaction between work and

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1926); ‘Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art’, in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), first published in *Cornhill Magazine*, 42 (August 1880), 212-28; ‘North Tuscan Notes’, *The Magazine of Art*, (January 1884), 1-8; ‘The Need to Believe: An Agnostic’s Notes on Professor William James’, in *Gospels of Anarchy, and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), first published in *Fortnightly Review*, 72:99 (November 1899), 827-42.

leisure, art and life, theory and practice, as well as the balanced interaction between one's intellect, body and emotions, is central to her writings on music, psychological aesthetics, literary psychology, pacifism, travel, art-history, and is also present in her fiction. I will argue that the subjects on which Lee wrote should not be divided into phases in her career or be made to fit within twentieth and twenty-first century disciplinary boundaries. It is perhaps more beneficial to an understanding of the quality and aims of her work to consider the subjects on which she wrote as experiments with various applications of her central ideas on aesthetics, as she herself suggests in the introduction to *The Handling of Words*. Before moving on to an exploration of the various applications of Lee's ideas and observations, I will consider the ways in which she defines the field of aesthetics and her reasons for defining the discipline. I will suggest that her repeated attempts to define the field of aesthetics according to her interests are a testament to the interconnectedness of her studies.

### **Definitions**

In the previous chapter I argued that Lee's writings and methodology reveal a distrust of binary oppositions and fixed theories. For Lee, a useful theory was one which could shift with the times and which could be applied widely. Before moving on to a discussion of the links between Lee's psychological aesthetics and literary criticism, and their relationship to her philosophy of aesthetics more generally, I wish to discuss the ways in which she defined the field of aesthetics. I also wish to consider some of the reasons why Lee might have needed to define the field in the first place, and how her definition shaped – and was in turn shaped by – the development of her aesthetic theories.

In her essay ‘Anthropomorphic Æsthetics’ (1912), published in *Beauty and Ugliness*, Lee underscores the importance of establishing clearly defined boundaries for the study of aesthetics.<sup>107</sup> The question of what constitutes the field is central to this essay and Lee suggests that the question offers the means by which critics can establish a system for its study and through which its reputation as an important field of inquiry can firmly be cemented. Without this clarification, she argues, these studies will continue to be advanced in a haphazard way, with little or no collaboration among its students and with the bulk of the discoveries being made by ‘biologists, psychologists, students of bodily and mental evolution, who, for the most part, misunderstand or disdain the very existence of æsthetics’ (‘Anthropomorphic’, 3). Lee drew attention to the problem of dividing the interests and questions which make up the study of aesthetics into separate studies and then allowing them to be absorbed into other disciplines whose primary objectives lie elsewhere. This would lead, Lee argued, to the eventual demise of aesthetics because, without a wide respect for aesthetics as a valid field, the essential collaboration between different disciplines could be thwarted. Lee experienced this problem firsthand. In her essay ‘The Central Problem of Æsthetics’, also published in *Beauty and Ugliness*, she explains that the authors were thwarted in their attempts to invite others to engage with their investigations as presented in their essay ‘Beauty and Ugliness’. She complains that ‘although copies of “Beauty and Ugliness” were sent to a great number of psychologists, nothing came of this appeal except a brief but friendly notice [. . .] nothing daunted by this silence, I appealed once more to the specialists who ought to have been interested in these questions’ (‘Central

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<sup>107</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’, in *Beauty and Ugliness*, pp. 1-44.

Problem', 98). The outcome of this second attempt was also unfavourable. She writes that, 'I need scarcely add, for those who have experience of the treatment of æsthetics by general psychologists, that not the very smallest notice was taken of this summing up of the problems and hypotheses discussed in *Beauty and Ugliness*' ('Central Problem', 98). Today, aesthetics can be recognised in Music, History, Philosophy, Psychology and English university departments. In her time, Lee hoped that clearly defining the field of aesthetics would establish its independence and its importance as a valid field of enquiry with its own set of paradigms and analytical systems.

Her starting point in 'Anthropomorphic Æsthetics', as in the Socratic method, is to define 'the adjective from which this study takes its name' ('Anthropomorphic', 3). The 'vague field of æsthetics' must be more clearly defined if critics are to move 'eventually to its thorough systematic cultivation' ('Anthropomorphic', 3). She adds that the question is not 'a mere dispute about terms' but that 'the definition of the word "æsthetic" provides a clue to the whole question, "what is art, and what has the beautiful to do with art?"' ('Anthropomorphic', 5). This is the question which, in this essay, Lee identifies as being central to a study of aesthetics. However, compiling a catalogue of beautiful objects without attempting to answer this question has 'so far been the chief reason why the problem of beauty and ugliness has been defrauded of any study commensurate to its importance and dignity' ('Anthropomorphic', 5). Such investigations, whilst useful to art historians, do not advance one's understanding of what beauty is and of its relation to art. For Lee, limiting the study of art to such comparisons allows one to surround oneself with objects without necessarily knowing why those objects are preferable to others. This can also lead to the sacrifice of personal aesthetic preference to the tastes of the majority, a concern which, as I

showed in Chapter One, runs through her novel *Miss Brown* and her essay 'Valedictory'. In both of these writings, Lee is openly critical of aesthetic laziness which prevents the individual from seeking out the art which answers most closely to the needs of his or her particular soul (*MB*, II. 212; 'Valedictory', 243-4). Identifying such art works requires, according to Lee, careful consideration of the specific qualities of the art.

Lee explains in 'Anthropomorphic Aesthetics' that an in-depth comparative study of 'the works of art of different kinds, periods and climates' can, however, 'reveal what answers to the name of beauty, and on what peculiarities of form this quality of beauty depends' ('Anthropomorphic', 10-11).<sup>108</sup> Lee argues that this kind of study 'should become the very core of all aesthetic science' ('Anthropomorphic', 10-11). Such a study enforces the relationship between art and beauty by highlighting what she calls the 'æsthetic desire', which is shown to be present in all works considered to be artistic ('Anthropomorphic', 9). She writes that

we shall find that [the æsthetic desire] is the demand for beauty which qualifies all the other demands which may seek satisfaction through art, and thereby unites together, by a common factor of variation, all the heterogeneous instincts and activities which go up to make the various branches of art. ('Anthropomorphic', 5)

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<sup>108</sup> This statement echoes her earlier assertion in her essay 'Tuscan Sculptures' (1892) that 'a more patient comparison of these two branches of sculpture, and of the circumstances which made each what it was, will enable us to enjoy the very different merits of both, and will teach us also something of the vital processes of the particular spiritual organism which we call an art' (*Fancies*, 138).



This discovery enables Lee to broaden the definition of art to include all objects which reveal the workings of aesthetic desire, asserting that the drive for beauty ‘makes sometimes play and sometimes work artistic’ (‘Anthropomorphic’, 8).<sup>109</sup> Whilst recognising that certain art forms may exhibit other instincts besides the artistic, Lee suggests that the creator’s expression of the aesthetic desire can define the work as worthy of artistic consideration. Yet she also asserts that the aesthetic success of an artwork depends upon the extent to which it manages to ‘avoid as much ugliness and to attain as much beauty as the particular circumstances will admit’ (‘Anthropomorphic’, 8). In this way, a useful object can also be artistic even if a conscious aesthetic desire is not present.<sup>110</sup> ‘Mankind has normally preferred its visible goods and chattels, for instance, to embody certain peculiarities of symmetry and asymmetry, balance and accent’, she explains, ‘and has invariably, when acting spontaneously and unreflectingly, altered the shapes afforded by reality or suggested by practical requirements until they have conformed to certain recurrent types’ (‘Anthropomorphic’, 10). Thus the aesthetic drive does not have to be conscious, and often it

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<sup>109</sup> In ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’, Lee engages with what she calls “Mr. Spencer’s formula of the “art-as-play” theory’ and shows how the theory has emerged in a circular way without a satisfactory conclusion, going from Schiller to Spencer and back to Schiller via Groos (6). She briefly responds to the theory’s shortcomings and the aim of her essay is to offer her alternative. For the purposes of this chapter I am interested in the conclusions which Lee reaches. For a discussion of this branch of aesthetic inquiry see Catherine Rau, ‘Psychological Notes on the Theory of Art as Play’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 8 (June 1950), 229-38 and Mary J. Reichling’s ‘Music, Imagination and Play’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 31 (Spring 1997), 41-55. For a fascinating study of Lee, D. W. Winnicott’s theory of the ‘transitional object’, and play theory see Patricia Pulham’s *Art and the Transitional Object*, 2008.

<sup>110</sup> This idea seems striking in its seeming similarity to Marcel Duchamp’s recycled art, as Paula Cohen has noted in her essay, ‘The Elusive Aesthetics of Vernon Lee’, *The Yale Review*, 95:1 (Jan 2007), 188-192 (p. 29). However, Duchamp’s ready-mades eschewed the idea that art need be in any way aesthetically pleasing. Perhaps a more apt comparison, therefore, could be between Lee’s broadening of the scope of art and Man Ray’s photographs of Duchamp’s ready-mades which seem to play with the idea of imaginative re-creation.

is not so. This assertion broadens the scope of beauty by allowing for an unconscious, perhaps instinctive, drive. This assertion also broadens the scope of what constitutes art:

The required building or machine may be inevitably awkward in parts; the person to be portrayed may be intrinsically ugly; the fact to be communicated may be disgusting; the instinct to be satisfied may be brutal or lewd; yet, if the building or machine, the portrait, the description, the dance, the gesture, the dress, is to affect us as being artistic, it must possess, in greater or lesser degree, the special peculiarity of being beautiful. ('Anthropomorphic', 8-9)

The idea that beauty must be present for an object to be defined as art is not new. Indeed, it is a central theme of aestheticism and can be found in her earliest writings on art.<sup>111</sup> What is particularly interesting about this quotation, however, is Lee's assertion that so many things, actions even, can be considered art because all that has to be present is beauty, whether or not it is there consciously, and whether or not it is the primary attribute of the thing in question. In this she is following in the footsteps of Walter Pater, who offers a broad list of potential sources of aesthetic experience in his Conclusion to *The Renaissance*: 'any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or the work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend' (*Renaissance*, 189). Both Pater and Lee offer an inclusive definition of art.

This broadening of the scope of art reveals something further about the 'aesthetic condition', which is that

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<sup>111</sup> Pater used the word 'gesture' in his Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, p. 186.

art, so far from delivering us from the sense of really living, merely selects, intensifies, and multiplies those states of serenity of which we are given the sample, too rare, too small, and too alloyed, in the course of our normal practical life. ('Anthropomorphic', 7)

Lee suggests that art isolates beauty into clearer and more concentrated forms which make it more easily accessible. Whereas the art-as-play theory argues that the creation of art cannot arise out of a practical need, Lee suggests that art can arise from both play and work and that it can, but does not have to be, a release from life. Lee's definition of art in this essay includes objects, suggestions or actions – Lee accepts 'dance' and 'gesture' as art for the first time in this essay – that exhibit some kind of beauty. Anything that has this quality can be considered art. Rather than narrowing the focus of aesthetics by defining its main concerns, Lee uses her definitions to broaden it significantly.

Lee moves on to a consideration of beauty and literary art in this essay. Identifying the particularities of beauty as a quality in literary art is, she explains, 'immensely complicated by other interests, logical, emotional, and practical, which make up the bulk of what is only partially fine art' ('Anthropomorphic', 13). As she demonstrated in her essay 'Faustus and Helena' and 'Orpheus and Eurydice', literary art, unlike visual art, cannot exist without the reader, and the distinction between the subject-of-art and the artwork is not, and cannot, easily be defined. Thus, the relationship between literary art and beauty is 'obscured by detail [sic] questions like those of the direct action of words, none of which have been

properly examined as yet' ('Anthropomorphic', 13). Far from moving away from aesthetics, as Seed suggests, Lee applies the main questions of aesthetics to literary art. She adds that 'the aesthetics of music are, if possible, in a still more backward condition, owing to the special difficulty of self-observation and the hopeless confusion of the terms employed' ('Anthropomorphic', 13). I wish to suggest that in her investigations into literary art in *The Handling of Words* and elsewhere, she attempts to investigate those 'detail questions' which stand in the way of understanding the aesthetics of literature much as she tries to solve the problem of the aesthetics of music in *Music and Its Lovers*. Lee's definitions of art and aesthetics are inclusive in that they accept both play and work as components of the aesthetic instinct. In so doing, she broadens the definition of art and its study to include literary art, thus paving the way for studies which apply the questions of aesthetics to literature. The following section will explore Lee's application of aesthetics to literary art in *The Handling of Words*.

### **Literary Art**

This section will focus on the links Lee creates between literary art and aesthetics. I shall argue that her explorations into psychological aesthetics constitute a significant bridge between what may at first seem to be separate interests. As I have argued, Lee strove to develop an aesthetic philosophy that was useful and that could be applied widely. It seems fitting, then, that she would be interested in the ways in which her own chosen career path – that of a professional writer – could be incorporated into a philosophy that advocates the working together of the different parts that make up the self for the enhancement of the experience and appreciation of life. Furthermore, a

critical component of her theory of aesthetic harmony was the interaction between the individual and his surroundings and fellow human beings. Lee's investigations into the workings of literary art reveal that she found this art form to be particularly well suited to fulfilling this need. As I will show in this section, her interest in the nature of literary art – its relationship to beauty and the ideal, its relationship to artistic creation, and the relationship between writer and reader, and between reader and text – were intimately linked to the questions of aesthetics with which she was concerned.

The timing and subject matter of Lee's studies on psychological aesthetics and 'literary psychology' overlap. Her literary studies can be seen as an attempt to experiment with another application of her evolving aesthetic theory. By asserting that an object must be beautiful in order to be considered art but that beauty does not have to be its overriding purpose or quality, she accepts that literary art, despite the intellectual discipline which is required for its creation – alongside the sensuous and emotional discipline normally associated with visual art – is worthy of aesthetic consideration. Lee asserts that one does not have to set out to create art in order to do so, nor does one have to strive consciously for beauty. This enables her to acknowledge the overriding importance of expression in literary art whilst still allowing for the contemplation of beauty. Her reason for this position is partly moral. If only objects that are created with the sole purpose of being artistic are considered art, artists may lose any incentive to engage with life. If artists do not engage with life they may lose their ability to respond harmoniously to the spiritual needs of mankind which transcend artistic fashions. In 'Anthropomorphic Aesthetics' she explains that

The separation of a class of ‘artists’ (with its corresponding class of ‘art-lovers’) from ordinary craftsmen and average mankind has always brought about aesthetic uncertainty, since this independent class has invariably tended to what is called ‘art for art’s sake’, that is to say, art in which technical skill, scientific knowledge, desire for novelty or self-expression have broken with the traditions resulting from the unconscious sway of spontaneous aesthetic preference. (‘Anthropomorphic’, 32)

By limiting what can be considered art, the groups allowed to call themselves artists and art aficionados are also limited. This allows for a separation between artists and the wider community, as well as between art and everyday life. This slippery slope alienates people from art because, having lost touch with the realities of life, the artist and his art can no longer answer to the spiritual needs of the people. However, if work and art can be recognised as not being mutually exclusive, then beauty can become a harmonising force in the life of a community as a whole and of its individuals.

In her essay ‘The Nature of the Writer’ (1904) in *The Handling of Words*, Lee states, in a way that is reminiscent of the Romantic notion of poetic genius, that those who create art must particularly be sensitive to their surroundings. She explains that

the great Writer or artist is a creature who lives in a way more intense and more unified than the rest of us, in those fields, at all events, which especially concern him. And hence he can lay hold of our perceptions and emotions, make it [sic] move at a pace surpassing our own, and compel our

labouring thoughts, our wandering attention, our intermittent feelings, into patterns consistent and self-sufficing, vigorous, harmonious, unified; in the presence of which all else dwindles and is forgotten.<sup>112</sup>

The writer offers primarily an emotional service and, as such, the sources from which the writer draws for his or her art and the effects literary art has on people cannot be as limited as in visual art. In ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’ she explains that

No one, for instance, can deny that the drama, the novel, poetry in general, are of the nature of art. But no one can deny that in all of them, besides [sic] appeals to our desire for beauty, there are appeals to quite different demands of the human soul, such as the demand for logical activity, for moral satisfaction, and for all manner of emotional stimulation, from the grossest to the most exalted; let alone the demand for self-expression, for construction, and for skilful handicraft. (‘Anthropomorphic’, 4)

Lee suggests that the nature of beauty in literary art, because it draws upon and speaks to a greater variety of sources and spiritual needs, must be considered differently from the type of beauty offered through music and visual art.

In order to understand the specific quality of beauty in literature, Lee first aimed to establish the artistic and emotional offerings of the different art forms. In her essay

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<sup>112</sup> ‘The Nature of the Writer’, in *The Handling of Words*, pp. 73-135 (82). Originally published as ‘The Nature of Literature’, *Contemporary Review* (September 1904), 377-91.

‘Cherubino: A Psychological Art Fancy’ (1881), the scope of musical expression is compared to those of literary art and what she calls the ‘plastic arts’, such as sculpture and painting.<sup>113</sup> Using the character Cherubino in Mozart’s opera *The Marriage of Figaro* (1812), she explains that music and the visual arts can convey ‘a definite state of mind’, but that they can only convey one state at a time (*Belcaro*, 157). The complexities of a well-rounded character, for example, cannot be expressed through these arts. ‘Unliterary art, plastic or musical is inexorable [. . .] the mood is the mood’, she writes, and adds that ‘the connection between moods, the homogeneous something which pervades every phase of passion, however various, escapes the power of all save the art which can speak and explain’ (*Belcaro*, 157). As if to prove the point, she uses tactile, yet elusive, imagery to describe how the writer conveys expression. Expression is achieved ‘by subtle phrases, woven out of different shades of feeling, which glance in iridescent hues like a shot silk’ (*Belcaro*, 155). There is something simultaneously concrete and vague about this statement, as if the fabric will slip through one’s fingers, and it seems this is the point Lee is trying to make. Literary expression is capable both of greater range and precision but its nuances mean that it is also more delicate and elusive.

In opera, for example, the only way that the complexities of a character can be expressed is through the singer who, as an instrument that is first reader and then performer, has the ‘task of creating a second work’ (*Belcaro*, 151). Lee explains that, in relation to a libretto,

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<sup>113</sup> This essay was first published in *Cornhill Magazine*, 44 (August 1881), 218-32. It was published again in *Belcaro*, pp. 129-155. Page references are to *Belcaro*.



these words in the book [the libretto] suggest a thousand little inflections of voice, looks, gestures, movements, manners of standing and walking, flutter of lips and sparkle of eyes, which exist clear, though imaginary in the mind of the reader, and become clearer, visible, audible in the concrete representations of the actor. (*Belcaro*, 145)

The performer becomes the embodiment of these suggestions, of the ‘iridescent hues’ set out by the writer or librettist, and in this way ‘Cherubino comes to exist. A Phantom of the fancy, a little figure from out of the shadowland of imagination, but present to our mind as is this floor upon which we tread, alive as is this pulse throbbing within us’ (*Belcaro*, 145). She adds that music alone cannot achieve this level of characterisation, ‘it can give us emotion but it cannot give us the individual whom the emotion possesses’ (*Belcaro*, 146). It is the imaginative response to the words, this second act of creation, which enables the achievement of an understanding of a complex character. But, perhaps more importantly, it is the direct interaction between people, in the case of Cherubino, the performer and the librettist and the performer and the audience, in the attempt to express and understand something of the human condition, that adds to the power of this art form.<sup>114</sup>

In ‘A Dialogue on Novels’ (1885), the discussion centres on this question of characterisation which Lee would again consider in ‘On Literary Construction’ (1895).<sup>115</sup> Three characters carry on a discussion about the nature of literary art, the

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<sup>114</sup> In this essay Lee again gives greater power to the performer, an idea which is central to her story ‘A Wicked Voice’.

<sup>115</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘A Dialogue on Novels’, *Contemporary Review*, 48 (September 1885), 378-401, later published as ‘On Novels’, in *Baldwin: A Book of Dialogues* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886), pp. 185-245. Apart from the title, there are no differences between

novel in particular, and its purpose: Mrs Blake, an English novelist who values the more methodical characterisation in the fiction of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot; Monsieur Marcel, a French critic who prefers the passionate excess of *Wuthering Heights*; the eponymous Baldwin, whose arguments maintain an ardently moral tone expresses the idea that literature is by far the more important art even if it is not the most aesthetic; and his cousin Dorothy Orme, who becomes depressed by the co-existence of justice and injustice in the world.

An unwavering sense of morality takes precedence in this dialogue, making it easily traceable to the earlier part of Lee's writing career. Indeed, it appeared in print less than a year after the publication of her anti-Decadence novel *Miss Brown*. In 'On Novels' she goes so far as to accept a Platonic hierarchical division between the intellect, 'the higher side of our order', and the body, 'the lower', which lends Baldwin's speech a somewhat puritanical tone (*Baldwin*, 229).<sup>116</sup> She explains that her ideal novelist would 'deal with all the situations in which a normal human soul, as distinguished from a human body, can find itself' (*Baldwin*, 230). What I shall focus on here, however, are her ideas on literary art and how they sit within her understanding of the relationship between beauty and art. Interestingly, some of the ideas expressed in this dialogue predate similar ideas in her essay 'On Literary

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the two dialogues. Page references are to the *Baldwin* publication. 'On Literary Construction', first published in *Contemporary Review*, (August 1895), 404-19 and republished in *The Handling of Words*.

<sup>116</sup> Lee would later re-evaluate and reject this strict hierarchical division between the mind and the body, as I showed in Chapter Two. In the introduction to *Baldwin* she admits that the character Baldwin gives voice to her own opinions in these dialogues, though she does often agree with some aspects of the other characters' arguments. She explains that 'I agree in all his [Baldwin's] ideas, yet I can place myself at the point of view of some of his opponents' (13).

Construction', in *The Handling of Words*, by ten years. In 'On Novels' the discussion on the purpose of literary art begins with the premise that there is a marked difference between the styles of Emily Brontë on the one hand and Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot on the other. Marcel argues in favour of *Wuthering Heights* because the characters are not mere studies of personalities under certain conditions, but rather are sides of the writer's nature somehow infused with life. These characters, he adds, reveal something of the writer's soul, rather than something which is external to it. He explains that,

I give infinitely less value to one of your writers with universal intuition and sympathy, writing of approximate realities neither himself nor yourself, than to one who like Emily Brontë simply shows us men, women, nature, passion, life, all seen through the medium of her own personality. It is the sense of coming really and absolutely in contact with a real soul which gives such a poignancy to a certain very small class of books.

(*Baldwin*, 191)<sup>117</sup>

This type of characterisation is called artistic genius in 'On Literary Construction' because it represents a balance between the intellect and the spirit. What Lee calls 'an analytical novelist' can only explain the ways in which his characters respond to the

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<sup>117</sup> This is similar to what Pater refers to in 'Style' (1888) as the persuasive writer's 'appeal to the reader to catch the writer's spirit, to think with him, if one can or will – an expression no longer of fact but of his sense of it, his peculiar intuition of a world, prospective, or discerned below the faulty conditions of the present, in either case changed somewhat from the actual world' (5).

situations he or she has placed them in, whereas the ‘synthetic novelist [. . .] does not study his personages, but *lives* them, is able to shift the point of view with incredible frequency and rapidity’ (*Handling*, 29). For Lee, characters come from within the writer, filtered through his or her knowledge of and interaction with the world, and are then fed into the writing. For the ‘synthetic novelist’ writing is an organic activity which never loses its connection with and relevance to life. She explains that ‘the particular emotional sensitiveness which, just as visual sensitiveness makes the painter, makes the Writer’ (*Handling*, 31).

The connection between literary art and life is an integral one. In ‘On Novels’ Baldwin marks a distinction between the plastic arts and literary art in the strict aesthetic sense. He explains that

the arts which deal with man and his passions, and especially the novel, which does so far more exclusively and completely than poetry or drama, are, compared with painting, or sculpture, or architecture, or music, only half-arts. They can scarcely attain unmixed, absolute beauty; and they are perpetually obliged to deal with unmixed, absolute ugliness (*Baldwin*, 205).

Baldwin’s claim that beauty achieved through literary art is diluted by other unaesthetic qualities is one of which Lee is always conscious. As I mentioned above, in ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’ she explains how complicated the question of beauty in literature is because the question of beauty is obscured by other, often practical,

qualities inherent in literary art. Dorothy, however, takes this claim that literary art is not a full art to task, asking ‘why should art that deals with human beings be a mistake?’ (*Baldwin*, 206). For the purposes of his argument Baldwin suggests a split between art and life to suggest that ‘The novel has less value in art, but more importance in life’ (*Baldwin*, 207). This makes literary art ‘more noble’ (*Baldwin*, 209). So whilst in the strict aesthetic sense literary art falls short in comparison with visual art, the matter is not as simple as labelling one good and the other bad, or a ‘mistake’. The question remains, however, to what extent should pure beauty be a requisite for a successful work of art? Baldwin adds that ‘emotional and scientific art, or rather emotional and scientific play (for I don’t see why the word art should always be used when we do a thing merely to gratify our higher faculties without practical purposes), trains us to feel and comprehend, that is to say, to live’ (*Baldwin*, 208).<sup>118</sup> The dialogue ends on an optimistic note, with Baldwin claiming that novels must continue to be written because they can ‘represent a compromise between the knowledge of how things are, and the desire for how things ought to be’ (*Baldwin*, 245). Literary art enables one to face the realities of life without sacrificing a sense of the ideal.

In ‘The Æsthetics of the Novel’ in *The Handling of Words*, Lee again states that there are ‘non-æsthetic attractions of the novel’ (*Handling*, 68).<sup>119</sup> To understand this requires a distinction to be made between beauty and pleasure. Unaesthetic pleasures derived from literary art include the pleasure in finding the right words to

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<sup>118</sup> This statement suggests that Lee considered the relationship between art and play as early as 1885. She would amend the art-as-play theory in her essay ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’.

<sup>119</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘The Æsthetics of the Novel’, in *The Handling of Words*, pp. 66-72.

express a thought and the pleasure in expressing something in a clear and logical way. The pleasure derived from novels is also personal and emotional and involves ‘the gaining (or thinking we gain) a knowledge of mankind and of life’ (*Handling*, 68). Under the current definition this type of pleasure is separate from aesthetics. Lee does take care to clarify, however, that non-literary art also offers non-aesthetic pleasures and, though to a lesser degree than literary art, answers to the practical needs of an individual and of a community. In ‘The Nature of the Writer’, in *The Handling of Words*, she explains that

No art [. . .] ever came into being or remained there for the sake of its mere artistic perfections. There would be no beautiful patterns unless there had first been stuffs and vessels, no architecture or sculpture unless people wanted idols to propitiate and temples to keep them in; no music unless people had shouted and danced about for various reasons or no reason at all. And there would have been no literature if talking and writing, besides being practically useful, had not met the thousand different wants, whims, nay vices, of the soul of man. (*Handling*, 97)<sup>120</sup>

For Lee, the crucial difference is that in literary art, the non-aesthetic drive for expression overrides the desire for beauty. Agreeing with Baldwin’s earlier assertion that the term beauty can only truly be applied to literature metaphorically, Lee admits

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<sup>120</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘The Nature of the Writer’, in *The Handling of Words*, pp. 73-135.

in 'The Æsthetics of the Novel' that the nature of the aesthetic quality (beauty) in literary art is elusive.

What it is, I do not, and I suppose nobody nowadays does know: a charm due to the complex patterns into which (quite apart from sound) the parts of speech, verbs and nouns and adjectives, actives and passives, variously combined tenses, can be woven even like lines and colours, producing patterns of action and reaction in our minds, our nerve tracks – who knows? (*Handling*, 69)

Much good can be gleaned from novels if readers accept a balance between aesthetic pleasures and those moments when revelations are made about the human condition. Again, she calls for harmony, stating that 'even the most æsthetically sensitive persons must have other sides to their characters, else they would be dunces, criminals, paupers, bores and general incapables' (*Handling*, 70). This balance, she argues, should be catered for by novels: 'but in the question of novels, as in all others, the most useful thing, perhaps, is to be at the same time very æsthetic and very capable of momentarily shelving our æstheticism' (*Handling*, 72).

In the introduction to *Juvenilia: Essays on Sundry Æsthetical Questions* (1887), Lee continues with this strand of thought. Writing to Carlo Placci, the dedicatee of the collection of essays, she states that in everyday life it is important not to engage only with beauty because 'it behoves us to know what the world is; what we ourselves are; above all, what we think, and why we think it' (*Juvenilia*, 19). In her introduction to

*Hortus Vitæ: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (1904) she goes a step further to argue that

For some reason not of our choosing, we cannot be thoroughly alive except as a result of such exercises as come under the headings: Work and Duty. That seems to be the law of Life – Life which does not care a button about being æsthetic or wisely epicurean. (*Hortus Vitæ*, 8)<sup>121</sup>

A writer must engage with life, must interact with it, in order to create meaningful art. Likewise, the reader must also experience life in order to appreciate literary art. A sense of the shared experience of living is the necessary link between literary art's creation and its reception and justifies mixing the beautiful with the ugly. In *Juvenilia* she explains that this mix

gives to the world a meaning which it never had before, this seeing it no longer as a mere storehouse of beautiful inanimate things, but as a great living mass, travailing and suffering in its onward path; and it makes one feel less isolated, in a way, to recognize all around, among creatures of different habits and views from one's own, and profoundly unconscious of one's existence, the companionship of the desire for good. (*Juvenilia*, 20)

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<sup>121</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Garden of Life: Introductory', in *Hortus Vitæ: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (London: John Lane, 1904), pp. 3-12.



It is this awareness which comforts Dorothea and makes her feel ‘less dismal about life’ at the end of ‘On Novels’ (*Handling*, 245). Baldwin assures her that literature, because it offers the beautiful and the ugly, the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, and can elicit strong emotion against ugliness and injustice, is the ‘noble art’. This is the art which reveals a comforting and socially responsible sense of human commonality.

In her essay ‘On Style’ in *The Handling of Words*, Lee refers again to this sense of commonality which enables the writer to manipulate the contents of the reader’s mind. The relationship between the two is not a straightforward one in which emotions and ideas are siphoned from the mind of the writer to that of the reader. Rather, the reader comes to the process with his or her own mix of associations, ideas and experiences which the writer must control. ‘The words which are the Writer’s materials for expression’ she explains, ‘are but the symbol of the ideas already existing in the mind of the Reader [. . .], in reality, the Reader’s mind is the Writer’s palette’ (*Handling*, 41). This manipulation is as much about widening possible associations as it is about limiting them. This is made all the more difficult by the fact that the writer does not know the exact contents of the reader’s mind. The writer, then, must choose the symbols, or ‘signals’ which are most likely to represent or evoke the right images or emotions in the reader’s mind. Lee uses the work ‘halo’ to represent this in her essay ‘The Nature of the Writer’ in *The Handling of Words*. Here she explains that ‘it is on this stirring of half-conscious and, at best, confused recollections, upon this halo surrounding all clear literary suggestion, that depends very largely the fittingness or the reverse of certain Writers to certain Readers’ (*Handling*, 80). These literary suggestions, or signals, ‘call up the various items – visual, audible, tactile, emotional, and of a

hundred different other sorts – which have been deposited by chance in the mind of the reader’ (*Handling*, 44). She instructs writers to practise deconstructing the ‘connotations of words’ in order to gain mastery over their tools. The underlying assumption is that the writer and the reader share, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the suitability of a particular writer to a particular reader, a similar linguistic palette. In order for the magic of literary art to work there must be a bank of common associations for the writer to tap into. This requires a sense of human commonality, of shared experience. On a very basic level, this is necessary for all verbal communication. In literary art, however, which is inherently emotional and relies on suggestion, a sense of commonality is necessary both for its creation and for its reception. In the essay ‘Reading Books’ in *Hortus Vitæ* Lee explains this as a ‘little thrill’ of ‘united comprehension’ with others who have also been touched by a writer’s poem or piece of prose and describes the pleasurable feeling of ‘mind touching mind’ (*Hortus Vitæ*, 40). It is in moments such as these, she adds, ‘that one feels there really is something astonishing and mysterious in words taken out of the dictionary and arranged with commas and semicolons and full stops between them’ (*Hortus Vitæ* 41).

Lee asserts that because literary art deals with life and the human condition it has more to offer than visual art. In ‘The Nature of the Writer’ she explains that literature ‘is more closely connected with life, more universal and more permeating, and answers better to the preferences and repugnances of each individual case’ (*Handling*, 79). That the ‘great Writer’ is able to satisfy more spiritual needs through literary art than the painter or sculptor is a testament to the superiority of the form and to the writer’s ‘human superiority, not, believe me, his literary talent’. As Lee affirms

in the chapter ‘Can Writing be Taught’ in *The Handling of Words*, that writing can be taught with the ‘proviso: that you must be a writer-born before you can learn these things to any purpose’ (*Handling*, 290). For the writer to be successful in his or her aims he or she must possess the instinct to ‘be more interested in the world, unselfishly, platonically, passionately; to understand more and more quickly; to feel things into their furthest ramifications; this is, indeed, the characteristic of the great Writer’ (*Handling*, 125). ‘The Nature of the Writer’ offers insight into Lee’s belief that literary art is a nobler art form. Although the other arts may answer to practical human needs, as she also asserts in ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’ and ‘The Nature of the Writer’, literary art differs in that the practical need for expression is its primary aim. To achieve accurate expression in a way that happens also to be beautiful or pleasurable is a secondary concern. Literature, she argues, ‘revives, relieves and purifies the Reader’s feelings by telling him of similar but noble ones. It makes the Reader give, and thereby possess, his own soul through the illusion of having for a moment possessed that of the Writer’ (*Handling*, 107-8).

In the beginning of this chapter I referred to David Seed’s assertion that the fact that the word beauty seldom appears in *The Handling of Words* means that Lee had moved away from aesthetics and, in particular, psychological aesthetics. I disagree with this assessment. I believe that rather than moving on from aesthetics, Lee’s definition of aesthetics is broader than has previously been thought. I argued in this section that Lee’s conceptualisation of the field of aesthetics included literary art. Lee’s investigations into the nature of literary art were always closely connected to her interests in aesthetic theory. Her writings on literature show that she believed that

literary art epitomised her theory of aesthetic harmony because of its capacity to represent the quest for balance between reality and the ideal. Since Lee believed that art is created partly to answer to human needs, of which this balance is the most important, then it seems reasonable that she would have approached her investigations into the workings of literary art from within the field of critical aesthetics. I now wish to look more specifically at the ways in which Lee uses an aesthetic approach in her investigations into the workings of literary art in *The Handling of Words*.

### **Readers and Writers**

In this section I shall explore Lee's handling of the questions of literary art with which she was concerned. I shall show that she brought her evolving aesthetic theories – including her investigations into psychological aesthetics – to bear on these questions and I shall argue that that her findings shaped the development of her aesthetic theory in return. In order to do this I shall consider a series of essays that deal with these questions – what is the relationship between the writer and his or her art? what is the relationship between the writer and the reader? what is the relationship between the reader and the text? and ultimately, what is the relationship between the text and one's surroundings? These questions mirror the questions of aesthetics with which Lee was concerned and which I discussed in Chapter Two.

That Lee refers to the reader's sense that he or she has access to the writer's soul through his or her writing as an 'illusion' in 'The Nature of the Writer' raises important questions about the relationship between the person, the artist and his art and about the process of literary interpretation, questions which she considers in the essays

‘In Umbria’ (1881), published in *Belcaro*, and in ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’, published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1893. ‘In Umbria’ she asks ‘what are the relations between the character of the work of art and the character of the artist who creates it?’ (*Belcaro*, 76).<sup>122</sup> The discrepancy between Giorgio Vasari’s (1511-1574) portrait of the artist Pietro Perugino (1446-1524), which paints him as a wealthy, status-conscious and success-driven atheist, and the spiritual purity embodied in Perugino’s devotional paintings of saints leads Lee to reflect on ‘the typical contrast between this man and his works’ (*Belcaro*, 172). This essay offers greater insight into the ways in which Lee viewed the relationship between the man, the artist and his art, and into her belief that this relationship varies among the artists who engage in the different art forms. She explains that ‘the artist and the man are not the same: the artist is only part of the man; how much of him depends upon the art in which he is a worker’ (*Belcaro*, 177). She applies her interest in the act of artistic creation and the personality in which the artistic instinct resides to her concern over the different aims, functions and limitations of the various art forms. Because different art forms appeal to different receptive qualities in the viewer, listener or reader, Lee concludes that it is right that the portion of the artist’s nature that is used varies according to the art.

She aims to establish which art form uses a greater portion of the artist’s faculties, explaining that ‘there are some arts in which the work is produced by a very small number of faculties; others where it requires a very complex machine, which we call the whole individuality’ (*Belcaro*, 179). To do this she suggests that ‘we must set

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<sup>122</sup> First published as ‘In Umbria: A Study of Artistic Personality’, *Fraser’s Magazine* (June 1881), 800-17. Republished in *Belcaro*, pp 156-196. All page references are to *Belcaro*. ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’, *Contemporary Review*, (February 1893), 196-212.

afresh to examine what, in the various arts, are the portions of an individual necessary to constitute the mere artist, that is to say, the producer of a work of art' (*Belcaro*, 180). She sets out to construct a perfectly well-rounded artist who possesses all the faculties needed to create in all artistic mediums but finds that some faculties need to be heightened and others weakened because creation cannot come from one who 'is equally attracted by all sorts of visions' and who 'receives every kind of impression' (*Belcaro*, 187). As she runs down the list of art forms, trying to find which artistic medium requires a more equal balance between the intellect, emotions and the body, she finds that there is only one artist whose art benefits most from such a balance: 'this universal artist, this artistic organism which contains the whole intensified individual, is the poet' (*Belcaro*, 187). She distinguishes between the poet and the prose writer, arguing that 'the prose writer is for ever being driven to seek employment outside the land of pure art' (*Belcaro*, 189).<sup>123</sup> The poet, on the other hand, is 'the man who assimilates most, initiates most, perceives most of all that passes within and without him, and unites it all in a homogenous outer shape' (*Belcaro*, 190). Whilst Lee distinguishes between forms within literary art in this essay, what is particularly significant for the present discussion is that the essay also reveals an early move towards identifying literary art as the art form most inclined towards harmony.

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<sup>123</sup> This distinction raises the question to what extent can the qualities inherent in poetry merge with prose? Bearing in mind Lee's assertion in 'On Novels' that the synthetic novelist does reveal his soul in the process of bringing his characters to life in fiction, the extent to which poetry and prose are to be kept separate is important to consider. That Lee engaged in the blurring of literary genres throughout her career, including fiction and non-fiction, confirms the importance of this question in understanding the nature of Lee's writing, which I shall consider in Chapter Four. Lee returns to the question of the difference between the poet and the prose writer in *The Poet's Eye* (1926).

‘In Umbria’ establishes that the extent to which the artist gives of himself to his art varies among the different art forms. This enables her to assert a separation between the reader’s interpretation of a novel and the writer’s intention in ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’, published a year after the English translation of Max Nordau’s controversial text, *Degeneration* (1892), in which he claimed that genius, mental disorder and moral degradation were closely linked.<sup>124</sup> She explains that, despite the criticism levelled at Zola that his novels were immoral and dangerous, she found in them a strong ethical lesson and suggests that there may be more for other readers.<sup>125</sup> She is quick to clarify, however, that any moral lessons gleaned from the novels are created by the reader out of the materials which the writer has provided. She begins by explaining that her concerns in the essay are not strictly aesthetic: ‘the thoughts which have come to me in this course of reading are connected rather with right and wrong than with ugly or beautiful’ (‘Zola’, 197). Her interest in this essay is to do with the practical sides of Zola’s expression, with the content – the subject-of-art – rather than with the form used for expression. She admits that Zola engages in a ‘tragic one-sidedness’ and that he does not accurately ‘represent the real state of the world’s

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<sup>124</sup> See Richard Dellamora, ‘The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought: Vernon Lee, Max Nordau and Oscar Wilde’, *New Literary History*, 35:4 (2004), 529-46.

<sup>125</sup> Henry Vizetelly, Zola’s English publisher, was imprisoned in 1889. Critics in the press had attacked Zola’s novels, claiming, as did W.S. Lilly, a frequent contributor to the *Fortnightly*, that he ‘eliminates from men all but the ape and the tiger. It leaves him nothing but the “bête humaine”’ and adds that Naturalism displays ‘the victory of fact over principle, of mechanism over imagination, of appetites, dignified as rights, over duties, of sensation over intellect, of the belly over the heart, of fatalism over moral freedom, of brute force over justice, in a word, of matter over mind’. From ‘The New Naturalism’, *Fortnightly Review* (August 1885), p. 241. Quoted in Clarence R. Decker, ‘Zola’s Literary Reputation in England’, *PMLA* 40:4 (December 1934), 1140-1153, (p. 1143). Lee uses these claims against Zola in his defence in her essay when she asks ‘is not life full of all the same?’ and asserts that the reader should accept the responsibility for his own interpretations of the novels (213).

affairs; for if [he] did, there would be no world remaining' ('Zola', 197). She adds that 'the human material which is good – nay, that which is barely up to work – is rarely shown to us by Zola' ('Zola', 205). Even so, Lee argues that 'what Zola does show us is worthy of attention' ('Zola', 205), and she suggests that his detailed portrayals of the trials and degradations brought on by poverty can have a positive effect on certain readers because his characters 'remain human beings, wonderfully akin to ourselves, with power of reasoning, of loving and sacrificing like the highest among us, while living the lives of savages and animals' ('Zola', 202). The lesson which Lee found in Zola's novels is that there is not a natural, hereditary difference between the classes but that 'chance has made them into savages; and us, if we choose, into civilised things' ('Zola', 203). One can interpret these novels as showing that poverty is often the cause of vice among the lower classes whereas the '*bourgeoisie*' [Lee's italics], as Zola depicts them, engage in 'a perpetual using of false weights and measures in things moral' ('Zola', 206).

Lee accepts that such novels may do harm to those who only live life superficially. However, for those who do engage with life in a realistic and rounded way, and who look to literature to expand their understanding of the human condition, 'these books can do very little harm and may do very much good' ('Zola', 212). She adds that

It is well to be shown as a vast system what one's individual experience can show only in fragments. It is well to be forced to think on cause and effect while being made to feel other folk's woes; and still more to feel



them as really living, while one is wondering on their cause and effect. It is salutary to be horrified and sickened when the horror and the sickening make one look around, pause, and reflect. ('Zola', 212)

Whilst she accepts that Zola does reveal something of himself in his novels she argues that he does not expose as much as critics suggest. The writer selects from life, he or she 'gives us knowledge of life by showing how life has impressed one peculiarly gifted mind; and the peculiarities which this impression owes to the mind that receives it, increase, rather than diminish its value as a *human document*' [Lee's emphasis] ('Zola', 198). A novel may reveal what the writer considers to be noteworthy out of life's characters and occurrences, but it cannot reveal the lessons which the writer has extracted from them, nor can the novel make clear the full range of lessons which can be extracted from them since that relies entirely on the reader's own needs and experiences. In 'The Nature of the Writer' she explains that

The Writer's intention, even if not actually cast forth, is limited by the temper and experience of the Reader; it is, at best, transformed by unforeseen mixture [sic] till it becomes, sometimes, as enigmatic as a sphinx, half goddess and half beast, and often quite as monstrous. What have not commentators seen in Dante or Shakespeare? (*Handling*, 81)

That literary art depends so much upon the contents of the reader's mind leaves open the likelihood that the reader will interpret literary art in ways which the author never intended. The writer can express a mood but he cannot place a specific lesson in the

reader's mind. Ultimately, for Lee, the responsibility for extracting meaning from literary art lies with the reader. She explains in the essay 'The Handling of Words' (1910-11) that

the moral teachings of a book are not necessarily those which the author has deliberately set forth, nor even those which he has unintentionally implied. They are the teachings inherent in the work because it is a great one; they are the thoughts suggested to the reader by every faithful representation of life, by every strong imaginative or emotional summing up of any of life's realities. (*Handling*, 197)<sup>126</sup>

A good novel offers a wider and deeper understanding of life and the human condition but it does not reveal the intricacies of the writer's moral state. For Lee, a novel may advertise a certain morality. But this quality is separate from what the writer would or would not do. This corresponds with her earlier assertion in 'In Umbria' that 'the artist and the man are not the same' (*Belcaro*, 177). – an idea later echoed by T.S. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' Eliot explains that there is a separation between the man who lives and feels, and the man who creates. He writes, 'The mind of the poet may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who

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<sup>126</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Handling of Words' in *The Handling of Words*, pp. 187-274. First published in five instalments in *English Review* (June 1910, July 1910, September 1910, September 1911 and October 1911).

suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material'.<sup>127</sup>

In 'On Literary Construction' (1895), in *The Handling of Words*, Lee repeats the assertion made in 'Anthropomorphic Aesthetics', 'In Umbria' and 'The Moral Teachings of Zola' that literary and visual artists engage in a process of selection. The painter selects 'all that is most interesting and delightful and vital [. . .] in the visible aspect of things' and the writer selects 'all that is most interesting and delightful and vital in the moods and thoughts awakened by all things [. . .] the quintessence of experience and emotion' (*Handling*, 31-2). Through this process of selection from life and from among the words available to him or her, the writer reveals something of the way in which he or she views and experiences the world. The writer, however, never knows the extent to which his or her manipulation of the contents of the reader's mind is successful. In 'The Nature of the Writer' Lee states that the writer 'is doomed never to know what it will become in its real destination, in that unexplored country, the soul of the Reader' (*Handling*, 80). As she explains in 'Cherubino: A Psychological Art Fancy', the reading process involves a re-creation of the composer or librettist's work. She describes this pleasurable activity in 'Reading Books', in which she writes that

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<sup>127</sup> This idea was later echoed by T.S. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in which he explains that there is a separation between the man who lives and feels, and the man who creates. He writes, 'The mind of the poet may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material'. This essay was first published in two instalments in *Egoist* 6/4 (September 1919), 54-5 and 6/5 (December 1919), 72-3. It was republished in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920). I use a more recent edition: (London: Methuen & Co., 1950), pp. 47-59 (54).

the greatest pleasures of reading consist in re-reading. Sometimes almost in not reading at all, but just thinking or feeling what there is inside the book, or what has come out of it, long ago, and passed into one's mind or heart, as the case may be. (*Hortus Vitæ*, 41)

The piece of prose or poetry, however, is so often 'imperfectly remembered' (*Hortus Vitæ*, 40). The writer offers his text for the reader to re-create for himself afresh with each reading and then re-re-create it through his memory of it. Thus, while it may be easy to find fault with this conclusion, Lee expresses the view that literary art is never complete and, unlike visual art, cannot exist outside of the writer and the reader's minds.<sup>128</sup>

In 'The Moral Teachings of Zola' Lee posits that the writer cannot be held accountable for the moral lessons readers interpret from his or her novels. In 'On Literary Construction' she adds that the writer cannot feel fully secure that the reader has interpreted his signals in exactly the ways in which he intended. In these essays Lee considers the extent to which the interpretation of a novel's subject can be controlled by the writer and the extent to which the subject on which he or she chooses

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<sup>128</sup> For example, one could argue that visual art can be 'imperfectly remembered' and thus re-created in the same way that literary art and musical art can (*Hortus Vitæ*, 40). It is impossible to control how different viewers will interpret and identify colour much like it is impossible to control the exact notes that people will hear or the associations elicited by a word in a poem. While the conclusions Lee reaches in these essays with regard to the differences between the various art forms may not be entirely convincing, it is worth noting that she would continue to struggle and revise these conclusions throughout her career. The transparency of this process allows us the opportunity to track these shifts and changes and is in part what marks Lee out as an important intellectual figure worthy of further study.

to write reveals something about his nature. She concludes that the reader has more control over his interpretation, or re-creation, of a text and that the subject chosen only reveals the writer's process of selection from life. This process of selection lacks real meaning until the reader creates it through his own interpretation. In 'Studies in Literary Psychology' (1903), in *The Handling of Words*, however, Lee looks to the writer's written style to determine what the novel's form reveals about the writer's nature. She suggests that the forms used for expression do in fact reveal more about the writer than his or her actual subject matter. Beginning with an investigation into the written style of Thomas de Quincey, she posits that

there may be some necessary connection between the structure of man's sentences and his more human characteristics; and that style, in so far as it is individual, is but a kind of gesture or gait, revealing, with the faithfulness of an unconscious habit, the essential peculiarities of the Writer's temperament and modes of being. (*Handling*, 136)

In this essay she selects passages from novels written by De Quincey (1785-1859), Edmund Burke (1729/30-1797), Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864), the critic Sydney Colvin (1845-1927) and Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). The passages are subjected to the kind of linguistic and stylistic analysis normally reserved for poetry and Lee even looks to the written style of the critics to see what is revealed about the relationship between the two writers, de Quincey and Burke, and Colvin and Landor. Through her assessment of the relationship between these writers and her appreciation of each, she

also considers what that relationship and their styles reveal about their natures. Having established the aspects of de Quincey's personality which can be read from his writing – for de Quincey, verbs are 'not merely unimportant [. . .] they are also mismanaged' (*Handling*, 141) – she is then able to use this assessment to suggest that

it is quite probable that De Quincey was not only abnormally sensitive to the grandeur, the picturesqueness of the nouns in this passage [Burke's] [. . .] But that he did not feel the senseless quality of the action accompanied by the accompanying verbs, simply because verbs had little significance for him. (*Handling*, 153)

Lee analyses de Quincey's own written style to see what it reveals about his personality and, in turn, what that reveals about his relationship as a reader to other writers, in particular Burke. She argues that the writer's style reveals the extent to which the writer felt the mood he was trying to convey. She explains that 'all the powers of style are wasted if you do not care what you are writing about' and adds,

Now this *word* of command, or, if you prefer, this magician's spell, making our soul follow with docility, making it see, hear, feel solely what and in what matter the Writer [sic] chooses, can be given, I believe, on one condition only: that the writer feel very distinctly the moods he wishes to impart, and see in a given light and in a given sequence the things he wishes us to look at. (*Handling*, 164)

The words used in this passage are not intellectual: ‘spell’, ‘see, hear, feel’ and ‘moods’. They do not refer to a rational lesson or moral. Zola, therefore, must have felt the moods he was aiming to convey because Lee is able to assert in ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’ that ‘without any hyperbole, and in a sense inapplicable to any other book which occurs to my memory, I have lived through “Germinal,” rather than read it’ (‘Zola’, 202). Zola successfully expresses a particular mood, then, because he felt it acutely. The question remains, however: if the subject chosen by the writer cannot truly reveal the nature of the writer or his moral or ethical intentions, how can the writer’s style reveal such things?

Drawing a distinction between the terms artistic and aesthetic helps to clarify Lee’s position. In a footnote in ‘The Nature of the Writer’ she suggests this distinction to explain why literary art is less aesthetic, in the strict sense, but more important in life than other arts. She asserts that ‘by *aesthetic* I do not mean *artistic*. I mean, as in my Cambridge Manual, *The Beautiful*, that which relates to the contemplation of such aspects as we call “beautiful” whether in art or in nature’ (*Handling*, 79). For Lee, artistic intention plays a crucial role in this distinction. The artist may consciously strive for beauty whilst aiming for expression, but he or she always runs the risk of aesthetic failure. Aesthetics, in the strict sense, however, is concerned with beauty which may exist in the artwork, irrespective of the artist’s intention. That beauty does not have to be created consciously in order for it to exist, as she asserts in *Beauty and Ugliness*, enables Lee to include nature in her statement. For Lee, contemplation of beauty, as I showed in Chapter Two, is essentially holistic and incorporates the body,

the intellect and the emotions. Writing is artistic because it can strive for beauty and it can, at times, attain beauty. For Lee, regardless of whether literary art succeeds in creating beauty, however, it can still legitimately remain within the realm of the artistic. The artistic in literary art is to do with the artist's selections from life. In other words, the artistic is concerned with the subject the writer chooses to express and with the way in which he or she chooses to express it. The strictly aesthetic, on the other hand, is to do with the quality of feeling expressed through the writer's style. The style can be said to possess beauty if it is imbued with the writer's feeling. Thus, Lee's definition of beauty in literary art seems to be linked to intense feeling in a way that is reminiscent of the Decadence she eschewed in *Miss Brown*. Yet she moves away from Decadence by concluding that the extent to which the writer manages to combine the artistic and the aesthetic in his or her writing measures the artwork's success. Writing about Landor she explains that he 'did not really care for what he was writing about, but only for the fact of writing. This is proved by his metaphors being not expressive, but explanatory' (*Handling*, 167). The writing style reveals something more profound about the writer: his or her capacity to feel. As a consequence, Lee is able to reach conclusions about Landor's nature without using any biographical information. 'I know nothing of Landor's private life', she explains, but 'what unintended, perhaps unapprehended, self-revelations do [sic] authors sometimes consign to paper and print' (*Handling*, 174).

Having established the importance of style for what it reveals about the writer in 'Studies in Literary Psychology', Lee builds on this idea further whilst returning her focus to the relationship between the writer and the reader in her essay 'The Handling



of Words'. In this essay she selects 500 word passages at random from George Meredith's *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1870), Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1891), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cèvennes* (1879), Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1901) and Maurice Hewlett's *The Life of Richard Yea-and-Nay* (1900). Writing on Meredith, she describes the demands he makes on his readers and the effects which these demands have on the success of his writing. She asserts that 'the degree of life in a writer's style depends upon the amount of activity which he imposes upon his reader' (*Handling*, 199). In Meredith's case study she explains that he has 'a habit of shooting out sentences without connection [. . .] [so] the Reader finds himself called upon to synthesize, to judge and decide; more so, very often, than the less intellectual Reader at all cares to do' and concludes that he had a 'delightfully egotistic mind' (*Handling*, 196-7). Lee argues that Meredith's style leaves the reader to draw connections between events and descriptions and ultimately decides that 'there is about Meredith some of the swiftness, unclutchableness [sic], and mystery of reality, just because there is so little of the connection, analysis, synthesis of contemplation' (*Handling*, 197). The material is there for the reader to create his own meaning and this makes Meredith better suited to a more astute, intellectual reader.

She makes a similar claim for Stevenson and James. Both will be considered good writers by intellectual readers, of whom Lee herself is one. On Stevenson she writes,

The whole passage is perfectly clear, it is remarkably complicated: full of turns and superpositions, however frankly and carefully pointed out. So that I can easily imagine that although this degree of logical activity is a pleasure to the intelligent Reader [. . .], it may represent to the stupid or tired Reader an exertion which will make him prefer something “more straight to the point”. (*Handling*, 221)

In the passage selected from *The Ambassadors*, she again explains that the diligent reader is most likely to grasp the quality of James’s writing. ‘The Reader will have to be, spontaneously, at full cock of attention’, she explains, ‘a person accustomed to bear all things in mind, to carry on a meaning from sentence to sentence, to think in abbreviations’. She deduces this from James’s use of pronouns and adds that the right reader for this style ‘will have to be an intellectual, as distinguished from an impulsive or *imageful* [sic] person’ (*Handling*, 244). The ‘splendid variety, co-ordination, and activity of the verbal tenses’, she argues, allows James to deal in metaphors, to express personalities rather than describe them. This, in turn, reflects the writer’s capacity to understand and to feel the characters which he has imbued with life. ‘With what definiteness this man sees his way through the vagueness of personal motives and opinions, and with what directness and vigour he forces our thought along with him’, she writes, and adds that ‘this is activity, movement of the finest sort, although confined to purely psychological items’ (*Handling*, 250).

Whilst Meredith, Stevenson and James are esteemed because of the intellectual demands they make on their readers who are ‘never allowed to sit still and wait to be

told', Kipling, on the other hand, is taken to task for poor sentence structure and grammar, which Lee blames on 'slackness and poverty of thought' (*Handling*, 197, 208). In this case, poor style reveals that the writer does not feel acutely the subject on which he writes. Kipling's problem is not restricted to feeling, however, and Lee asserts that the style also reveals a lazy application of the writer's intellect to the subject. She explains that,

Where ignorance of the habits of a language cannot come into account, I believe that bad syntax, bad grammar, bad rhetoric can be traced to a lapse in the power of feeling and thinking a subject. Literature, more than any other art, is a matter of intellectual and emotional strength and staying power. (*Handling*, 208)

Lee admits that she is 'sorry that accident should have furnished me with so poor a page from what is, in many ways, a great and charming book' (*Handling*, 212). However, in this passage, she concludes that both the artistic *and* the aesthetic are found lacking.

The quality of the feeling experienced by the writer is communicated through his or her style and, for Lee, the ideal style forces the reader to play an active role in the interpretation of the work. If the writer's style is logical and requires the reader to follow the steps which he has set up and to make the connections which he or she has suggested, then the reader is able to make the text his or her own. Lee explains that by engaging with an idea, which requires the reader to create associations between the

writer's expression and his own experience, the idea is internalised by the reader and becomes a part of him. She writes that,

Paradoxical though it may sound, *to think a thing out is to live it out*; we stretch our real attention parallel to those dead facts, we clasp them with our living thoughts, and thereby make them ours, since our *thought* of a situation is a part of ourself; while the mere outer situation itself is – well, no situation at all, a mere bodiless phantom. (*Handling*, 257)

The extent to which literary art can be internalised and absorbed by the reader, meaning the extent to which the reader is made to feel and to live what the writer expresses, is dependent on the quality of the writer's feeling and style. Feeling, thinking and becoming are linked in literary art and 'FORM [Lee's emphasis] is not merely something we perceive; it is something which determines our mode of perception' (*Handling*, 271). She explains that 'Hewlett and Henry James both catch us in the meshes of the Writer's and the various personages' views, which become our own by our effort to follow them' (*Handling*, 257).

To make the reader think, feel and absorb or live the text is the ideal in literary art. This ideal is 'due to the variety and coordination of the verbal tenses, and to the cogency of the logical parts of speech; which means to the degree of activity elicited from the Reader, and the economy and efficacy thereof' (*Handling*, 265-6). Lee asserts that the ideal in literary art is achieved through a process by which the writer's heightened feelings and suggestions are internalised and lived by the reader through

active intellectual and emotional engagement with the writer's words. This process, if it is truly to succeed, requires harmony between subject and style. James achieves this: 'in the case of the *Ambassadors* (and probably much of Henry James's later work) the unity between subject and style was, we found, complete: we got a soul's drama exhibited in the most intellectual and imaginative (e.g. metaphorical terms)' (*Handling*, 272). Here she insists on the necessity of harmony in literary creation and in literary reception. Another successful writer, Hewlett, offers the reader a holistic reading experience in which the reader 'is made to live with his brain, indeed perhaps more literally than psychology as yet ventures to suggest, with his *motor centres*, while dealing with the *creeping belly* of John and the *thick blood* of Montferrat' and, as with all literary art, his emotions (*Handling*, 265).

As I have shown, Lee applied the questions and methodologies of her critical aesthetics to literary art. Her interest in how the writer creates in this art form and in the ways in which the reader perceives, internalises and appreciates the text mirror her interest in the workings of visual and musical art, both of which are generally accepted as being part of her interest in aesthetics. As I have shown, in *The Handling of Words*, particularly the essay 'Studies in Literary Psychology', she also applies the comparative techniques which form the basis of her theories on aesthetics to literary art. By analysing and comparing the written styles of various writers, she hoped to gain a deeper knowledge of the nature of literary art, and of the nature of beauty in literary art. Her empirical studies in this essay are similar to those in which she compared different artworks from the same artistic medium, such as her analysis of different styles of sculpture in her essay 'The Tuscan Sculpture of the Renaissance' (1892) in

*Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, which I discussed in Chapter Two. Lee's study of different styles of sculpture is accepted as belonging to her critical aesthetics. I believe that her similar study of different styles of writing belongs to her critical aesthetics as well.

### **'Modes of Being'**<sup>129</sup>

I shall now summarise some of the main arguments of this chapter before considering the benefits of accepting her work on literary art as a part of her critical aesthetics. My main questions ask how Lee's aesthetic philosophy shaped her literary studies, and how her investigation into the aesthetics of literary art influenced the development of her critical aesthetics. I have addressed the first query by showing that the questions she asked regarding the workings of literary art – what is the relationship between the writer and his or her surroundings? what is the relationship between the writer and his or her art? what is the relationship between the writer and the reader, and between the reader and the text? – are also those which she asked of the visual and musical arts in essays which are generally accepted as belonging to her studies on aesthetics. Furthermore, the method of intelligent and patient comparison with which she approached these questions in relation to literature matches the one used to explore other art forms. I have shown that her explorations into the nature of literary art and its relationship to other art forms

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<sup>129</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Beauty and Sanity', first published in *Fortnightly Review* (August 1895), pp. 252-68) and republished in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (1908), pp. 115-159 (p. 128).

and to everyday life are not restricted to those essays collected in *The Handling of Words*. On the contrary, her engagement with the workings of literary art is evident in a wide range of essays spanning the length of her entire career. This shows that her literary studies were not restricted to a specific period in her life and that, as in her work on psychological aesthetics, she continually returned to, revised, and expanded on her ideas on the subject. Lee's tendency towards interdisciplinarity, as well as the methods she adopted for her enquiries, meant that she continuously tested different applications of a working theory. Ultimately, a successful theory for Lee was one which could be applied widely and which could be altered easily to fit new needs. Accepting Lee's work on literary art as part of her critical aesthetics enables us to trace the ways in which she applied her developing aesthetic theories to understanding an art form only just beginning to be considered as a subject for analysis and aesthetic consideration. I suggest that Lee's literary criticism is an extension of her critical aesthetics and is central to her aesthetic theories.

Now I wish to consider the second question – how do studies of Lee's critical aesthetics benefit from including her literary studies within its domain? As I have argued in Chapter Two, Lee's critical aesthetics advocated a balance between art and life, both in its creation and in its appreciation. To ask what is the value of art, including literary art, in everyday life was, for Lee, a question of aesthetics. The reviewer for *Spectator* recognised the broader application of Lee's literary studies, asserting that the collection

is useful because accuracy of thought and expression is supremely useful to everyone, be he writer or reader. It is the discipline, the physical drill of the mind, and it is only the man of clear, athletic, adventurous mind who can learn to know himself and his fellows. In those two complementary halves of human knowledge lies the beginning of wisdom.<sup>130</sup>

In her essay 'Rosny and the French Analytical Novel', Lee expresses a similar sentiment about the importance of writing in a life lived according to the tenets of aesthetic harmony.<sup>131</sup> Focusing on the novel she explains that the novelist works to 'enlist our sympathies', and adds that,

By interesting us in the unreal creatures, children of his wishes or diagrams of his analysis, he accustoms us to take interest in the living mysteries who walk, act, and suffer all round us. And when he is a great novelist – not analyst, not a copyist of the actual, but a sympathetic artist, a passionate lover of the human creature – he can do infinitely more: he can people our fancy with living phantoms whom we love, he can enrich our life by the strange power called *charm* (*Gospels*, 239).

Literary art is useful because it inspires and challenges us to see those people and things with which we are surrounded. Lee's findings in *The Handling of Words* and in

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<sup>130</sup> 'Words, Words, Words!', *Spectator*, (21 April, 1923), 61.

<sup>131</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Rosny and the French Analytical Novel', in *Gospels of Anarchy*, pp. 233-59 (p. 239).



her other essays dealing with literary art, reveal a belief that literary art inspires and challenges to a greater extent than other art forms, mainly because literary art uses our inner lives – associations, experiences, and emotions – for its completion more than visual and musical art. That the reader re-creates the text for him or herself with every reading and recollection means that it is an art form that is particularly dependent on the perceptive, analytical, and emotional qualities of the aesthetic critic and can therefore impact on the critic in more ways. Thus, the aesthetic theories which Lee developed throughout her career are put to use in a deeper and perhaps more meaningful way with literary art than with the plastic arts.

In her essay ‘Beauty and Sanity’ (1895) Lee defines the moods which art expresses as a ‘vague mixture of feelings and ideas’ (*Laurus Nobilis*, 185). She rejects the idea that art should express only the more noble side of human nature. Taking a more pragmatic approach, she asks

as art is one of mankind’s modes of expressing itself, why in the world should we expect it to be the expression only of mankind’s health and happiness? [. . .] why should mankind be allowed artistic emotions only at those moments, and requested not to express itself or feel artistically during others? (*Laurus Nobilis*, 124)

Her argument is similar to that made in ‘The Moral Teachings of Zola’ in which she detects an important ethical lesson amidst the grim portrait of life offered by the author. Since the good writer is particularly sensitive to his surroundings and lives life in an

enhanced way, it is unreasonable to expect him to select only from good or superficially beautiful impressions. In 'Beauty and Sanity' she asserts the importance of a sense of the ideal which art can offer, an idea expressed also in 'On Novels'. Though she does not limit her argument to literary art in this instance she does explain that because good art appeals to more than one aspect of one's nature, indeed it should bring together one's component parts in a holistic artistic experience; it should not limit one's scope of experience but should rather expand it. This rounded art, rather than 'make us less fit for life and less happy in the long run' will 'make us more fit and happier'. She adds that 'the question is not of what we *are*, but of what *we shall be* (*Laurus Nobilis*, 126). This striving for an ideal is common among all art, but poetry in particular serves to 'create for us another kind of emotion, the emotion of the eternal, unindividual, universal life, in whose contemplation our souls are healed and made whole after the disintegration inflicted by what is personal and fleeting' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 138). Good literary art forces the reader to make connections between associations offered by the writer and between the soul of the writer, the characters he creates and the reader's own soul. For Lee, because literary art depends on the contents of the reader's mind, meaning emotional, intellectual and physical memories, in a way which visual art does not, literary art brings to the surface a sense of the universality of man's internal self. She asks

When, I wonder, I wonder, will the forces *within* us be recognised as natural, in the same sense as those *without*; and our souls as part of the universe, prospering or suffering, according to which of its rhythms they vibrate to: the larger rhythm, which is for ever increasing, and which

means happiness; the smaller, for ever slackening, which means misery?

(*Laurus Nobilis*, 122)

Lee's literary criticism aspires to this. By broadening the scope of aesthetics to include work which may predominantly be rational and slip into superficial ugliness, by highlighting the active rather than passive role which the reader plays in the experience of literary art, and by offering her own interpretations of and responses to well-known works alongside that of other well-known critics to show what they reveal about the critic and the writer's natures, she attempts to unveil the intimate relationship between readers and writers and what that reveals about the nature of both. For Lee, literary psychology in particular and psychological aesthetics more generally reveal the ways in which the inner life of an individual becomes, through art, part of what in her essay 'Higher Harmonies' she calls 'the life universal' (*Laurus Nobilis*, 171).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Aesthetics of Literary Art

Vineta Colby has commented that Vernon Lee's use of narrative strategies in her non-fiction prose is more typically associated with fiction. She writes, 'in a sense almost everything that Vernon Lee wrote bore the stamp of fiction. She did not write narrative often, but she made history, biography, and aesthetics accessible to her readers using the techniques of prose fiction'.<sup>132</sup> Having explored Lee's theories on the critical aesthetics of literary art in Chapter Three, this chapter will focus on the literary style she adopts in her historical and biographical writing. I argue that the play between fiction and non-fiction in these writings is both a deliberate stylistic choice and an acceptance of a philosophy of history that is inherently Romantic. As Stephen Bann has explained, history in the Romantic Period shifted from a strictly professional discipline (which strove towards objectivity) to a state of 'historical-mindedness' (which was more inclusive). He writes that, in the Romantic Period,

an irreversible shift had occurred, and history – from being a localized and specific practice within the cultural topology – became a flood that

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<sup>132</sup> Vineta Colby, 'The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee', in *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (London: University of London Press, 1970), pp. 235-303 (pp. 235-6).

overrode all disciplinary barriers and, finally, when the barriers were no longer easy to perceive, became a substratum to almost every type of cultural activity.<sup>133</sup>

It seems fitting that Lee, a writer who, as I explained in chapter two, believed that rigid disciplinary and genre distinctions limit the important connections which enhance intellectual development, would be drawn to a philosophy of history which posits that historical fact and passion are best expressed through a mixture of genres. As she explains in her essay 'On Literary Construction' (1895), republished in *The Handling of Words* (1923), 'there is an immense variety in good work; it appeals to so many sides of the many-sided human creature, since it always, inasmuch as it is good, appeals successfully' (*Handling*, 30).<sup>134</sup>

The historian Peter Gay has stated that 'historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete'.<sup>135</sup> More recently Richard Holmes has expressed a similar sentiment in respect of biography, admitting that

I found in that most English of forms, the biography, everything I wanted from writing. I could combine the scholarly and critical elements of finding things out and getting them right with more writerly and storytelling skills.

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<sup>133</sup> Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 6-7.

<sup>134</sup> The original publication details of the essays collected in *The Handling of Words* are given in Chapter Three, fn. 1.

<sup>135</sup> Peter Gay, *Style in History* (London : J. Cape, 1975), p. 189. Also quoted in Bann, p. 5.

If you are only a scholar your story will be dead, but if you are only a storyteller then it will be ludicrous.<sup>136</sup>

In 1883, in the introduction to her short novel *Ottolie: An Eighteenth Century Idyll*, Lee also admits to a belief that a strong and meaningful historical narrative must allow a degree of interdisciplinarity. She defends the practice of applying imagination to subjects that traditionally claim scientific objectivity. Here she admits that the historical essayist possesses ‘some of the instincts of the superior creature called a novelist: a certain half-imaginative perception of the past, a certain love of character and incident and description, a certain tendency to weave fancies about realities’.<sup>137</sup> The image of weaving is interesting, suggesting the creation of a stronger, more useful object, such as a cloth or web, out of individual threads which are not functional on their own. She asks, ‘when an essayist tells you about this or that Italian or Flemish or German city, about the old houses and belfries and porticoes, about the history of the past, do you think that he has told you all that he might?’ (*Ottolie*, 9). Without weaving together fact and imagination, she argues, the historian’s account is incomplete. For the historical essayist, she explains, the communion between his particular sense of the past and the characters, real or imaginary, which that sense imbues with life, ‘present him with *a more complete notion* of the reality of the men and women of those times than any real, contradictory, imperfectly seen creatures for whose existence history

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<sup>136</sup> Nicholas Wroe, ‘A Life in Writing: Richard Holmes’, *Guardian*, (27 September 2008), section *Review*, 12-13 (p. 13).

<sup>137</sup> Vernon Lee, *Ottolie: An Eighteenth Century Idyll* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1883), p. 8.

will vouch' [my emphasis] (*Ottolie*, 11).<sup>138</sup> It is generally accepted that Lee's accounts of the past both in her historical essays and in her travel essays weave together imagination and fact to create a more personal and powerful account. As Vineta Colby states, Lee 'writes history in terms of the people who lived it' (Colby, 274). Such an approach to history follows in the tradition of Thomas Carlyle and his assertion that 'the History of the world is but the Biography of great men'.<sup>139</sup> The idea of a personal, empathetic history is deeply embedded in the Romantic sensibility.

In 'The Nature of the Writer' (1904), republished in *The Handling of Words*, Lee asserts that the writer's style reveals the quality of his feeling for his chosen subject (*Handling*, 81). It is interesting, then, that her writing style is often described in terms of excess and lack of restraint. In Catherine Anne Wiley's thought-provoking exploration of Lee's use of language and the importance of Associationism, she provides examples from critics who complained about her written style, from Wyndham Lewis's often quoted statement that 'to read Vernon Lee is like watching a person of some intelligence administering electric shocks to herself', to Harriet Waters Preston, Henry James, Virginia Woolf and Peter Gunn.<sup>140</sup> In addition to these claims of a lack of restraint and

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<sup>138</sup> This idea is similar to French historian Prosper de Barante's (1782-1866) notion that 'the fictive heroes of epic, drama or novel, are often more alive in our eyes than the real personages of history'. From *Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne de la Maison de Valois* (1842), quoted in Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, already cited, p. 22.

<sup>139</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: John Wiley, 1859), p.26. On Carlyle in *The Handling of Words*, Lee writes that 'no man's style was ever so organically personal as his, so intimately interwoven with individual habits of thought and feeling; at all events, I think, among English prose Writers' (184).

<sup>140</sup> Catherine Anne Wiley, 'The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee's Aesthetics', in *Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 58-74 (p. 58). The quotation is from Wyndham Lewis's 'A Lady's Response to Machiavelli', in *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the*

an often overwhelming use of imagery in Lee's writing – Wiley notes that the critics complain of a continuous struggle between tension and slackness in her language which they find disconcerting – what these critics have in common is that they write specifically about Lee's short stories, her novel *Miss Brown*, and her collection of essays on the Italian Renaissance, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and Mediæval in the Renaissance* (1884).<sup>141</sup> Narrowing her focus to the essay 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists', Wiley suggests that the disquiet expressed by readers is caused by 'the teetering imbalance she occasionally permits between her ideas and the passionate language with which she pummels them into the reader's mind – a tendency I call "unbridled writing"' (67).<sup>142</sup>

That these assessments of Lee's style correspond to a specific list of texts throws into question whether the criticisms can apply to her writings more generally. If the claims of excess and lack of restraint in her language are not applicable to her writings more generally but are instead traits limited to specific texts, what might this suggest

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*Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Grant Richards, 1927), pp. 111-114 (p. 111). For a study of Lee and nineteenth-century Associationism see Ian Small, 'Vernon Lee, Association and "Impressionist" Criticism', *Journal of British Aesthetics*, 17 (1977), 178-84.

<sup>141</sup> Wiley's essay gives the impression that all were general critiques of Lee's writing, when in reality they refer to specific texts. The exception to this is Virginia Woolf's diary entry, which is not specific and seems to apply to Lee's writing more generally. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I, 1915-19* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 266. Wyndham Lewis's chapter is a review of *Euphorion* which Peter Gunn describes as 'heavy handed and unjust' (95). Harriet Waters Preston's critique is from her review of Lee's story 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', which was first published in *Yellow Book*, 10 (July 1896), 289-344. Henry James's criticism was in response to *Miss Brown* (1884).

<sup>142</sup> This essay is the subject of both Lewis and Gunn's comments on Lee to which Wiley draws attention. 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists was first published as 'The Influence of the Italian Renaissance on the Elizabethan Stage', *British Quarterly*, 75 (1882), 295.



about her writing style? Could it be the case that the style which has been labelled as excessive and unbridled is a device which Lee consciously and deliberately selected for its appropriateness to her subject, rather than an unconscious or unrestrained tendency, as Wiley suggests? In this chapter I shall explore some of Lee's less frequently read historical and travel essays to argue that, rather than being 'unbridled', her writing style was deliberate. As I have argued in the previous chapters, Lee's aesthetics were not limited to the pursuit of beauty and pleasure but rather, as she explains in 'About Leisure' in *Limbo and Other Essays* (1909), she believed in the benefits of a balance in life between pleasure and discomfort, leisure and work, particularly if it heightens one's social conscience and awareness.<sup>143</sup> I will now argue that Lee did not privilege ideas over style, or what I term atmosphere, in her essays but instead aimed for an appropriate equilibrium between the two, a balance that she believed would strengthen her historical narrative. The resulting mood in her essays could not always be pleasurable, but would be in keeping with her critical aesthetics and with the subject of the essay.

In this chapter I shall consider the relationship between subject matter and form in Lee's literary style. Lee believed that the suitability between what the writer wishes to convey or express to his readers and the ways in which he chooses to express it, is vital to the success of a written piece. These means of expression include, most obviously, the decision to write prose or verse, fiction or non-fiction, though as I showed in chapter

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<sup>143</sup> Lee writes, 'And who knows? The realization that Leisure is a good thing, a thing which everyone must have, might, before very long, set many an idle man digging his garden and grooming his horses, many an idle woman cooking her dinner and rubbing her furniture. Not merely because one half of the world (the larger) will have recognized that work from morning till night is not in any sense living; but also because the other half may have learned (perhaps through grumbling experience) that doing nothing all day long, incidentally consuming or spoiling the work of others, is not *living* either' (303). 'About Leisure', in *Limbo and Other Essays*, pp. 133-54.

two Lee does not accept, nor does she fit easily into, such categorical restrictions. Walter Pater also recognised the importance of this relationship and I shall consult his essay 'Style' (1888) in this discussion ultimately to suggest that the overriding sense which Lee aimed to convey to her readers is mood, or to use a Paterian term, 'atmosphere'. The expression of something so vague and fleeting as mood requires a means of expression which brings together fact and fancy, or what Pater calls 'mixed perspectives' (*Appreciations*, 2). I shall then address Lee's conceptualisation of the 'historic habit', a nostalgic craving for an imagined past which is ever-present and which is both a source of pleasure and discomfort, but which eventually, for certain kinds of people, makes the present more interesting and worth living in. I shall argue that this is the mood or atmosphere which Lee aims to create in her writings on history and travel. Next, I shall consider some of her less well-known historical and travel essays to explore the atmosphere which she creates in them and the literary devices she employs in her expression.<sup>144</sup> I shall consider 'Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy' from *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) and 'Out of Venice at Last' from *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (1925) as well as pieces which reveal Lee's philosophy of history from *Limbo and Other Essays*. Having identified the atmosphere and the literary techniques used in these writings I shall compare them to the essay in *Euphorion* which has received the most critical attention, 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists'.

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<sup>144</sup> I agree with Colby's statement that Lee 'writes history in terms of the people who lived it' (274), and so acknowledge that some of her historical essays could also be called biographies. However, I see the biographical component as fitting within her attempt to convey the cultural, intellectual and artistic mood of the period on which she writes and so, bearing this in mind, I shall refer to these essays as histories.

### The Problem with Critics

Before considering Lee's theories on historical writing it is important to reflect on the significance that should be given to contemporary critical reviews of her work. As Christa Zorn has noted, 'modern reevaluations of Vernon [sic] have to take into consideration the complicated roles of women writers and the strictures on them in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (Zorn 2003, 12).<sup>145</sup> Zorn goes on to consider Lee's historical approach, with its emphasis on lesser-known historical accounts and the quotidian – or cultural history – in light of trends in women's historical discourse of the time. My aim in this section will be to highlight some of the contradictions in the reviews of Lee's work in order to challenge the assumptions that have influenced modern evaluations of her style. This is particularly relevant for the second half of the chapter which will focus on some of Lee's less-read historical essays.

There does seem to be a discrepancy between Lee's opinion of her own literary achievements, and the opinions her contemporaries expressed in response to *Euphorion* and some of her fiction. Her self-assurance was well-known but not always welcomed. John Addington Symonds, for example, remarked after the publication of *Euphorion* that 'I feel you imagine yourself to be so clever that every thing you think is either right or valuable' (50-1).<sup>146</sup> Whilst Symonds's intentions may not have been purely

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<sup>145</sup> Zorn does refer to Lee as Vernon in this statement, as does Kathy Psomiades in her essay "'Still Burning From this Strange Embrace": Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). This seems jarring, perhaps because it is a pseudonym but mostly, I think, because one does not see critical essays referring to her male contemporaries in such a familiar way.

<sup>146</sup> Letter from J.A. Symonds to Vernon Lee, 4 April 1884. Quoted in Zorn (2003), p. 73. Vineta Colby has speculated that Symonds had an admiration for Lee's then partner,

professional, and indeed Christa Zorn comments on the arrogant tone of his letter, Lee's personal papers do not exactly contradict his suggestion (Zorn 2003, 73). In a manuscript titled 'Aesthetics, My Confession', which she began in 1902 and which is held at the Vernon Lee Collection at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, she expresses confidence in her own literary impressions. She writes that,

The only category in which, nowadays, the admiration or the reverse of others does not affect me much, is literature. I know what I like, what I don't like, what leaves me indifferent (especially, of course, in prose); I can sufficiently back my decision to myself with reasons, + where I find no reason I have a weighty sense of instinct. People can draw my attention to things I did'nt [sic] sufficiently admire, but my admiration is mine, not theirs. (8-9)<sup>147</sup>

She adds that her confidence did not extend to her impressions of visual art to the same extent because of her inability to create in that art form. She admits that this allowed her impressions of visual art often to take the form of mere description. 'This tendency', she writes,

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Mary Robinson, and that his jealousy made him a particularly harsh critic of her work. See Colby, pp. 50-51.

<sup>147</sup> Vernon Lee, MS. *Aesthetics, My Confession*, 'Subject and Form V., Part of the autobiography of a writer in art', Colby College Special Collections, Miller Library, Waterville, Maine. The manuscript states that it was begun in 1902 but a date of completion is not provided.

was negatively strengthened by a silly fear of being technically incompetent, from my ignorance of drawing, perspective + anatomy; all non-literary criticism being of this kind, I imagined that the “intrinsic” “form value” was largely due to such matters in which I felt incompetent.

(36)

She adds that her partner, Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, helped her to move beyond this ‘silly fear’ and explains that ‘of course my association with Kit a person who [was] thoroughly up [sic] in all technicalities freed me from this preoccupation’ (36). These statements suggest a confidence in her own writing and that, perhaps, she held the writing of others to the standard of her own. She does, after all, admit to being most confident in her impressions of prose writing, her own literary form of choice. In a letter to her mother Matilda Paget dated 7 September, 1891, Lee responds to a negative review by stating that ‘I must say it seems to me idiotic. These English have no more imagination than ink pots’.<sup>148</sup> A few years later, responding to Eugene’s critique of her story ‘Dionea’ she explains, somewhat condescendingly that, ‘As regards obscurity in the narrative, I think that if you read it three months hence that would not strike you; for you will regain a habit of twigging suggestions and of easily following tortuosities of narrative which is the result of the habit of consecutive reading’ (*Letters*, 363).

Nevertheless, she does at times reveal an awareness of her own developing maturity as a writer. As Peter Gunn has shown, in the margin of her entry on the

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<sup>148</sup> Letter to Matilda Paget, 7 September, 1891, Colby College Special Collections.

backlash she experienced after the publication of *Miss Brown*, she added in 1920 ‘What a pity I didn’t put off writing *Miss Brown* thirty years!’ (Gunn, 107). Whilst not expressing regret that such a book should have been written at all, it does hint at a belief that the timing was wrong, perhaps because the real-life characters on which hers were based were still alive at the time of publication or that she felt maturity would have helped her to write the book with greater sensitivity.<sup>149</sup>

Lee herself was often a harsh critic. In *The Handling of Words* she accuses Thomas Hardy of ‘lazy writing’ (230), Walter Savage Landor of ‘melancholy limitations of soul and, therefore, lapses of sense’ (159) and she even re-writes the opening scene of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, explaining that Eliot would have done better to delete the opening scene and replace it with the statement, ‘Now Dorothea happened to be a very ascetic person, with a childishly deliberate aversion to the vanities’ (18). On the other hand, she wrote positively about the writing of Henry James, to whom she dedicated *Miss Brown*.<sup>150</sup> She considered James to be a ‘wonderful writer’ who appeals to the intellectually able reader who, like Lee herself, is willing to take the time and effort needed to appreciate the complexities of his prose (250).<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> As I argued in Chapter One, I see Lee’s collection *Hauntings* as an attempt to deal with the issues in *Miss Brown* with greater sensitivity and tact.

<sup>150</sup> Peter Gunn has suggested that Lee’s dedication to James could be seen as ambiguous. Quoting from a letter to Lee from James before the novel’s publication in which he instructs her to ‘Please hint that you offer *Miss Brown* only to encourage me!’, Gunn explains that ‘the dedication, then, could refer to Vernon Lee’s wishes for the future success of James’s work rather than something in the nature of an emblem to hang on her own’ (99).

<sup>151</sup> This is reminiscent of Lee’s letter of 31 August, 1983, to her brother, the poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton, in which she states that she writes specifically for those to

Lee was confident in her own writing and in her impressions of the writing of others. The critical reception of *Euphorion* in particular, however, was not entirely positive and seems to support Wiley's thesis. Whilst most critics recognise the suggestiveness of the collection, it is true that Lee is more often than not taken to task for excessive descriptions and displays of emotion. The reviewer for *The Saturday Review* resents what he calls the 'wanton riot of needlessly strong language' in *Euphorion* and adds that 'Vernon Lee's great charge against the middle ages is wastefulness; and this word which has haunted her mind ever since she looked into mediæval things, might be applied to her own method'.<sup>152</sup> *The Academy* writes that 'at each single proposition is gently turned on the tap of the vast brain-cistern brimming with Italian reminiscences'.<sup>153</sup> *The Pall Mall Gazette*, reviewing the same title, calls her writing 'audaciously descriptive' and explains that 'her sentences cannot be called invertebrate; rather they have too many vertebræ, which do not always dovetail as well as could be wished'.<sup>154</sup> More recently, Zorn has accepted that Lee's writing in *Euphorion* 'does at times sound overblown' (Zorn 2003, 33). As Wiley explains, 'it is as if, in order to make the reader understand what she means and see what she sees, she must articulate every conceivable possibility and veritably assault her reader with her own vision' (Wiley, 67).

Reviews for Lee's other writings often offer entirely contradictory assessments. This lack of consensus throws into question the appropriateness of using critical

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'whom I can give pleasure or profit, those who stand, naturally, in want of exactly the kind of writer I am' (*Letters*, 364).

<sup>152</sup> 'Vernon Lee's *Euphorion*', *Saturday Review*, (6 September 1884), 317-18 (p. 317).

<sup>153</sup> E. Purcell, 'Literature', *The Academy*, (19 July 1884), 37-38 (p. 37).

<sup>154</sup> 'Euphorion', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, (7 July 1884), 4-5 (p. 4).

reception to gauge the success of her style. For example, the reviewer for *The Nation* concludes, in his review of *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (1894), that the dialogue form is ‘hateful to the multitudes’, whilst the reviewer for *The Critic* extols the virtues of the dialogue form and commends Lee for selecting the literary medium best suited to her subjects.<sup>155</sup> Other reviewers disagree on the effect of her writing style on the reader. On *The Sentimental Traveller: Notes on Places* (1908), the reviewer for *The Academy* states that ‘Vernon Lee writes with a kind of graceful intimacy, and takes you into her confidences with dignity. There is nothing querulous, nothing acid, nothing pompous in what she writes or in her manner of writing’. This reviewer describes a friendly and intimate collaboration between Lee and himself through which the places being described are made to come vividly alive. Yet in a review for *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (1908) another critic complains of Lee’s unreserved use of parentheses and familiar tone, qualities seen also in *The Sentimental Traveller*: ‘The parenthesis, when used to the unconscionable extent of seven or eight bracketed interpolations in a couple of pages, is an irritant to bewilder the most lenient reader [. . .] Again, the recurrent personal phrases – “I hope I have made clear enough” . . . “Let us now proceed to” . . . “I have said that” . . . “I think you will all of you admit that” [. . .] get on the nerves and mar the prose irretrievably’.<sup>156</sup> Whilst the reviewer of *A Sentimental Traveller* commends Lee for the intimacy of her writing and the way in which she speaks directly to and thus engages the reader, the reviewer for *Laurus Nobilis* resents the interruptions.

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<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Carl Markgraf, ‘Vernon Lee: A Commentary and an Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Her’, *English Literature in Transition*, 26:4 (1983), 268-311 (p. 283).

<sup>156</sup> ‘Reviews’, *Academy*, 76 (26 June 1909), 250-1 (p. 250).



Critics disagree also on the validity of weaving personal impressions with historical fact. Percy Lubbock, writing on *The Spirit of Rome: Leaves From a Diary* (1906) and Horatio F. Browne's *In and Around Venice* for the *Times Literary Supplement*, writes that

When Vernon Lee exclaims: – ‘On the other sides the slopes of vineyards and pale blue campagna and faint shining sea-line, blond under a clear sky,’ she produces a less exquisite thrill than Mr Brown does when he writes: – ‘The Theodore Column was less seriously off plumb than its brother of the Lion,’ or even, ‘The Geographical Congress was holding its sittings during September of 1882.’ In the boldest of such remarks a real Venice is presented to us, not somebody else's vision of it.<sup>157</sup>

Yet the reviewer for the *Academy* commends *The Spirit of Rome* for ‘breath[ing] the very essence and spirit of Rome’. He explains that,

the author has done wisely to give these impressions in their unpolished freshness – unset jewels, but masterpieces in little, pictures which for beauty and magic may be likened to Rembrandt etchings. A few words, a few lines, but each word exactly right and the vivid one, little is said, but enough to flash the vision before our eyes, and to light up dim memories of half-forgotten things, as when a light is flashed into a twilight room –

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<sup>157</sup> Percy Lubbock, ‘Rome and Venice’, *TLS*, (13 October 1905), 339.

enough, one would suppose, to enable those who have never known Rome to imagine it.<sup>158</sup>

Interestingly, the same book elicits two completely different responses from each reader.

In light of these contradictions, the claims against *Euphorion* pose a significant problem when considering Lee's own strict sense of what constitutes good writing and her theories on the aesthetics of literary art. It seems important to ask, does this collection validate Lee's own sense of good writing? If not, are the essays collected in *Euphorion*, along with her short stories and *Miss Brown*, which have been criticised for their linguistic excess, simply technically inferior to the rest of her work? Given that Lee was so careful in the construction of her aesthetic theories, and given her life-long preoccupation with the workings and uses of literary art, can it really be assumed that she would have let down her guard when it came to her own writing? In this chapter, by considering her philosophy of history and her theories on the importance of harmony between matter and form in prose, alongside other lesser-read essays that deal with similar themes, I hope to re-evaluate the claims of unbridled excess in Lee's historical writing

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<sup>158</sup> 'Rome in Spring', *The Academy*, (14 October 1905), 1073-4 (p.1073). The poetic style of this review seems to uphold Lee's assertion that she writes specifically for those to 'whom I can give pleasure or profit, those who stand, naturally, in want of exactly the kind of writer I am' (*Letters*, 364).

**‘The literature of the imaginative sense of fact’.**<sup>159</sup>

This section will focus on Pater and Lee’s belief in the importance of bringing together rational fact and poetic imagination in their approaches to the study of history and historical writing. I will argue that they consciously brought these qualities together in their writing with the aim of creating a textual atmosphere that conveys a particular mood to strengthen the overall impression left on the reader. My aim here is also to show Pater’s influence on Lee’s thinking on the construction of literary art, and on the extent to which historical writing can be considered literary art.

Laurel Brake has noted that Lee’s correspondence with Pater is suggestive ‘of free intellectual exchange, of warmth, of acknowledged differences, and of parity between Pater and a woman scholar and writer, whose areas of research and writing were close to his own’.<sup>160</sup> In a letter to Lee after the publication of *Euphorion*, Walter Pater expresses admiration for the type of learning she exhibits in the collection as well as for the prose style through which she expresses it. Her learning, he explains, is ‘characteristic of Browning’ in that it is ‘far more than an extensive knowledge of books and direct personal acquaintance with “Italy’s Self”’.<sup>161</sup> Likewise he declares that her prose style is ‘full of poetic charm’ (‘Style’, p.55). He explains that the collection expresses ‘not merely historical learning dominated by ideas, which is certainly a good thing; but ideas gathering themselves a visible presence out of historic fact, which to me, at least, is a far

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<sup>159</sup> Walter Pater, ‘Style’, in *Appreciations with an Essay On Style* (London: Macmillan, 1924).

<sup>160</sup> Laurel Brake 2006, p. 42.

<sup>161</sup> Walter Pater, *The Letters of Walter Pater* ed. by Lawrence Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 55. Letter to Violet Paget dated 4 June 1884. It should be noted that Pater’s essay ‘Style’, in which he elaborates on many of the ideas he touches upon in his letter to Lee, was not published until four years after the letter.

more interesting thing' (*Letters of Walter Pater*, 54). He admits to a preference for an imaginative way of approaching history, one in which intellectual, but emotionally dry 'historic fact' is made tangible through a poetic sensibility. The bringing together of rational and poetic qualities has a strong appeal for Pater and in his essay 'Style' he discusses the pleasures to be gained from this union:

To find in the poem, amid the flowers, the allusions, the mixed perspectives, of *Lycidas*, for instance, the thought, the logical structure: How wholesome! how delightful! as to identify in prose what we call the poetry, the imaginative power, not treating it as out of place and a kind of vagrant intruder, but by way of an estimate of its rights, that is, of its achieved powers, there. (*Appreciations*, 2-3)

He argues against the kind of intellectual elitism which privileges objectivity over subjectivity in historical writing. As Laurel Brake explains, in 'Style' rather than privileging one approach over the other, he invites readers 'to treat such prose – liberated from fact and the prosaic, and allied with the imagination – on an equal footing with imaginative poetry, which is not necessarily intrinsically distinct from prose or at the apex of cultural value'.<sup>162</sup> Pater's letter to Lee echoes her suggestion in *Ottolie* that to weave 'fancies about realities' results in a more powerful whole. He reveals a preference

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<sup>162</sup> Laurel Brake, 'Aesthetics in Affray: Pater's *Appreciations*, With an Essay on Style', in *Politics of Pleasures: Aesthetics and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Stephan Regan (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), pp. 59-86 (p. 68).

for an acknowledged union between the intellect and the imagination in historical writing. He explains that,

I have always welcomed this evidence of intellectual structure in a poetic or imaginative piece of criticism, as I think it a very rare thing, and it is also an effect I have myself endeavoured after, and so come to know its difficulties. (*Letters of Walter Pater*, 54)

A writer must select, not only from among the interesting points of his subject but also from the various means of expressing them. This act of selection is imaginative and subjective, a fact that Pater believed all writers would do well to remember and accept.<sup>163</sup> In ‘Style’ he explains that,

Your historian, for instance, with absolutely truthful intention, amid the multitude of facts presented to him must needs select, and in selecting assert something of his own humour, something that comes not of the world without but of a vision within. (*Appreciations*, 5)<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> The idea that history involves both the subjective and the objective is Hegelian. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes that ‘In our language the term *History* unites the objective with the subjective side [. . .] it is an internal vital principle common to both that produces them synchronously’. Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans by J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 60.

<sup>164</sup> This idea of artistic selection is echoed by Lee in her essay ‘On Literary Construction’ in *The Handling of Words* when she explains, as I showed in chapter three, that the painter selects ‘all that is most interesting and delightful and vital [. . .] in the visible aspect of things’ and the writer selects ‘all that is most interesting and delightful and vital in the moods and thoughts awakened by all things’. In a nod to Pater,

It is the ‘vision within’ which Pater finds most interesting – the ‘ideas gathering themselves a visible presence’ – which he complimented Lee for achieving. This idea is similar to Lee’s notion in ‘Valedictory’ in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* that what exists in one’s mind is as important as what is external to it (*Fancies*, 239). In so doing, she collapses the separation between internal impression and external object. The ‘inward world of thought and feeling’, to which Pater refers in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, is conveyed to the reader through a process by which the internal vision is made real through the fusion of subject matter and form.<sup>165</sup> Yet the language which Pater uses to explain this – he refers to a ‘vision’ and a ‘visible presence’ – is subtle and vague, ghostly even. It is as if the vision within is an apparition which must be coaxed into remaining or appearing in the first place. In ‘Style’ he explains that the historian who accepts and who works with, rather than against, this knowledge of his own process can ‘pass into the domain of art proper’ (*Appreciations*, 6). This kind of imaginative writing is ‘an appeal to the reader to catch the writer’s *spirit*, to think with him’ [my emphasis] (*Appreciations*, 5). He adds that ‘for just in proportion as the writer’s aim, consciously or unconsciously, comes to be the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of his sense of it, he becomes an artist, his work *fine art*’ (*Appreciations*,

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she concludes that the writer selects ‘the quintessence of experience and emotion’ (pp. 31-2). Pater himself used the word ‘quintessence’ in ‘Style’.

<sup>165</sup> Carolyn Williams refers to the second paragraph of the piece as ‘the discourse of the “inside,” of extreme subjectivity. If paragraph one took the extreme long view, paragraph two takes the extreme close view, in which subject and object are one, as the mind becomes the object of its own self-reflexive regard’. *Transfigured World: Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 20.

6). The distinction which Pater makes here is between ‘mere fact’ and what he calls ‘soul-fact’, the stuff of ‘*fine art*’ (*Appreciations*, 7; 6).

The expression of a ‘soul-fact’ results in the creation of atmosphere in literary prose. Pater explains in ‘Style’ that ‘as the painter in his picture, so the artist in his book aims at the production by honourable artifice of a peculiar atmosphere’ (*Appreciations*, 15). The writer must be ‘alive to the value of an atmosphere in which every term finds its utmost degree of expression’ (*Appreciations*, 7). Each word in the composition is surrounded by a ‘perfume’ of associations and meanings, and the mingling of these perfumes create an overall atmosphere which is influenced by and yet also influences the meaning of the piece. ‘And this too’, he adds,

is a faculty of choosing and rejecting what is congruous or otherwise, with a drift toward unity – unity of atmosphere here as there of design – soul securing colour (or perfume, might we say?) as mind secures form, the latter being essentially finite, the former vague or infinite. (*Appreciations*, 23)

In ‘On Style’ in *The Handling of Words*, Lee uses similar language, referring to ‘the active essence, the taste, perfume, *timbre*, the something provocative of the mood’ (*Handling*, 37).

In ‘On Literary Construction’ she settles on a comparison with music, stating that ‘in every piece of literary composition, from the smallest essay to the largest novel, you are constantly introducing new *themes*, as in a piece of music, and working

all the themes into one another' (*Handling*, 6-7). Each theme, she adds, 'represents, on the part of the Reader, a particular kind of intellectual acting and existing, a particular kind of mood'. These moods 'are thereby altered by the other moods they meet; they can never be quite the same the second time they appear as the first, nor the third or the second' (*Handling*, 7). The mood, like a melody, does not disappear once created but 'continues and unites well or ill with its predecessors' (*Handling*, 6). Pater expresses this sentiment again with reference to a 'brain-wave':

for to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long "brain-wave" behind it of perhaps quite alien associations.  
(*Appreciations*, 15)

Both Pater and Lee refer to an intangible, atmospheric, lingering, almost haunting quality in writing. Lee acknowledges Pater's sensual language – taste, smell ('perfume') and sound ('*timbre*') – and focuses on music, referring to the lingering melody of a piece of music or prose.

The successful expression of atmosphere in what Pater calls 'poetic literature' requires attention to 'the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within' (*Appreciations*, 27). In other words, good writing, like music, as he explains in his essay 'The School



of Giorgione', matches matter and form perfectly so that one cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. The well-known passage states that,

all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. (*Renaissance*, 106)<sup>166</sup>

This idea is echoed in 'Style' when Pater asserts that 'the term is right, and has its essential beauty, when it becomes, in a manner, what it signifies, as with the names of simple sensations' (*Appreciations*, 19). For Pater, writing is successful when there occurs a fusion between language and meaning.

Pater asserts the importance of atmosphere for expressing the working union between intellect and imagination, whilst Lee asserts the importance of weaving fancy and reality for expressing mood. Both believe that fact or external reality alone lack meaning for the reader, and ultimately they seem subtly to be questioning the existence of objective fact or reality in the first place. Despite Pater's call for equality between the two, their writing often seems to privilege imagination and the creation of a literary atmosphere (or fancy and mood, in Lee's case) over conveying objective facts.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Angela Leighton (2007) explains that the first line of the passage 'is often taken out of context as an unequivocal absolute, [when] in fact [it] depends for its meaning on the subsequent play on form and matter which it generates' (p. 83).

<sup>167</sup> From now on I shall refer to atmosphere instead of mood. I prefer atmosphere because it suggests environment in a way that mood does not, and seems better suited to refer to Lee's travel writing as well. The word denotes vapour, gas, in other words, the

Thus, critics have noted the difficulty of summarising the ideas in their writings. G.S. Fraser's analysis of Pater's 'Style' states that 'any summary [. . .] of this famous essay must fail to do justice to its suggestiveness and elusiveness'.<sup>168</sup> Likewise, Angela Leighton, in *On Form*, has stated that 'Lee's writing does not lend itself to summary, partly because it is so prolific and varied, and partly because, like Pater's, it enjoys the dialectic of altering points of view' (Leighton 2007, 101). Both writers are known for the evasive quality of their ideas and for bringing together the rational and the poetic in a single piece of prose.

In her essay 'Faustus and Helena', Lee accepts that subordinating the identification of the subject to the imagination can be beneficial to the reader or viewer. Recalling an artistically inferior but suggestive painting by 'a German smearer of the early sixteenth century' which 'we have never forgotten', she writes,

what is the exact subject of his picture? No one can tell; but its meaning is intense for the imagination, it has the frightful suggestiveness of some old book on witchcraft, prosaic and curt; of a page opened at random of Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum*. (F&H, 308)<sup>169</sup>

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ghostly. The *OED* uses Lee's *Euphorion* as an example of the figurative use of the word atmosphere: 'Their intellectual atmosphere was as clear as our own' (*Euphorion*, 27).

<sup>168</sup> G.S. Fraser, 'Walter Pater: His Theory of Style, His Style in Practice, His Influence', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. by George Levine and William Madden (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 201-223 (p. 201).

<sup>169</sup> According to Maxwell and Pulham, 'the *Malleus Maleficarum* or "Hammer of Witches" is an infamous 1487 textbook designed to help identify witches and advise on their interrogation and torture. It was written by two Dominicans, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, who were operating as members of the Catholic Inquisition in Germany in the 1480s' (*Hauntings* 2006, p. 308, fn. 1). It is interesting that the painting which

Lee posits two types of meaning and privileges one over the other: the first is intellectual, or ideas-based, and the other, preferred one, refers to the effect on the reader. Indeed, in her commonplace book she admits that it is more important to be changed inwardly in some way by a text than to be able to take from it neatly packaged and structured ideas. She writes,

it is not profitable either, my dear friend, to read in such a way as to know what you are reading about. To know the contents of a book, in the sense of what the book is about, is after all not much more useful than being able to describe the book's binding and position on the shelf. A book is intended to make a certain difference in you: sometimes a slight difference for a few seconds only, sometimes a vast difference after considerable time. But a difference it must make, big or small; and unless it has done that, you might as well have read the words separate in the dictionary.<sup>170</sup>

**'Kingdom of Might-have-been'**<sup>171</sup>

How does literary atmosphere work towards creating this kind of change in the reader?

More specifically, how does Lee see literary atmosphere functioning in historical

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Lee uses to describe qualities of the supernatural reminds her of a book which, though certainly evocative, aimed to do away with embodiments of the supernatural – witches.

<sup>170</sup> Vernon Lee, *Commonplace Book IV*, entry dated 30 December 1891, pp. 120-1. Miller Collection, Colby College. A similar idea is found in her essay 'Reading Books' in *Hortus Vitæ*, which I discussed in Chapter Three. In this essay she explains that a successful book leaves a vague emotional imprint on the reader which revisiting the book as a physical object can revivify.

<sup>171</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Limbo', in *Limbo and Other Essays*, p.11.

narrative? Lee explained in *Euphorion* that, ‘history should give us, not merely ideas, but emotions’ (*Euphorion*, 12). In this section I shall reflect on the emotions which Lee aims to convey in her historical essays. In order to understand how atmosphere works in her historical essays it is necessary first to consider her theories on the Romantic ‘historical-mindedness’, to which Bann refers.

In ‘Faustus and Helena’, Lee elaborates on the quality of a ghost:

The abandoned villas on the outskirts of Italian Towns, with the birds flying in and out of the unglazed windows, [that] loom forth white and ghostly; a ghost is the long-closed room of one long dead, the faint smell of withered flowers, the rustle of long-unmoved curtains, the yellow paper and faded ribbons of long-unread letters...each and all of these things, and a hundred others besides, according to our nature, is a ghost. (F&H, 310)

Lee revisits this image of abandonment and the idea that one’s nature makes one more susceptible to certain types of ghosts in her essay ‘Limbo’ (1896). In ‘Limbo’, she articulates the passing of time as both sad and pleasurable. She first paints a melancholy picture of a disused children’s playhouse, called ‘The Rabbits’ Villa’, which is in an abandoned garden.<sup>172</sup> At first sight, she explains, this villa is just a

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<sup>172</sup> Lee never clarifies whether or not she was one of the children who played with this house. ‘Limbo’, first published as ‘On Limbo’, *Living Age*, (28 March 1896), 812-19. There are no differences between the original essay and that published in *Limbo and Other Essays*. Pater evokes a similar image of an old, abandoned house in his essay ‘Charles Lamb’ in *Appreciations*. He writes, ‘a lover of household warmth everywhere. Of that tempered atmosphere which our various habitations get by men’s living within them, he “sticks to his favourite books as he did to his friends,” and loved the “town”

small wooden structure surrounded by overgrown bushes and weeds. ‘But when you look into the thing [. . .] when you look at it spiritually also, it grows oddly pathetic’ (*Limbo*, 5). The playhouse and its contents, ‘the empty plates and cups “for having tea with the rabbits”’ serve as proof of the life with which these objects had been in contact (*Limbo*, 5). Lee’s sentimental response is not tragic. On the contrary, the playhouse is pathetic partly because ‘despite the grown-up folk who may come and say “It was I”’, the playhouse and ‘the surrounding overgrown beds’ are ‘in a way, the graves of children long dead’ (*Limbo*, 5). For Lee, something indefinable remains in that garden; something of the spirit of the children who once possessed it and who once filled it with life. What she describes is a melancholy awareness of the life that was once present, but that one can only guess at. ‘The Rabbits’ Villa is’, she continues, ‘to the eye of the initiate, one of the many little branch establishments of Limbo surrounding us on all sides.’ (*Limbo*, 5). Borrowing from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnet, ‘A Superscription’ (1871), she refers to Limbo as the ‘Kingdom of Might-have-been’ (*Limbo*, 11).<sup>173</sup>

Lee clarifies that Limbo is not concerned with what genius might have created had it lived. Hers is not a practical sadness to do with ‘such solemn public loss as comes of the untimely death of illustrious men’ (*Limbo*, 10). For her Limbo is more

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with a jealous eye for all its characteristics, “old houses,” coming to have souls for him’ (p. 119). Lee’s essay ‘In Praise of Old Houses’ in *Limbo and Other Essays*, continues in a similar vein: ‘How different if we find ourselves in some city, nay village, rendered habitable for our souls by the previous dwelling therein of others, of souls!’ (p. 27). The essay was first published in *Longman’s Magazine*, 20 (July 1892), 287-96.

<sup>173</sup> The poem reads, ‘Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been/ I am also called No-more, Too late, Farewell’. Sonnet XCVII ‘A Superscription’, in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence*, ed. by Roger C. Lewis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 216-217 (p. 216).

personal, it is ‘sad, but sad without ignominy’ (*Limbo*, 17). It is ‘but a place of ghosts’ (*Limbo*, 18). The emotion which Lee describes is a kind of yearning, not only to know but to feel the life which has ceased. As an adult, the emotion is partly a yearning to understand the mixture of innocence and potential or hope, what she calls the ‘charm’ of children which, ‘is the undefinable [sic] quality of nearly every child, and of all nice lads and girls; the quality which (though it *can* reach perfection in exceptional old people) usually vanishes, no one knows when exactly, into the Limbo marked by the Rabbits’ Villa, with its plates and teacups, mouldering on its wooden posts in the unweeded garden’ (*Limbo*, 16).<sup>174</sup>

Part of what is interesting in this essay is her repetition of the idea that one has actively to look for Limbo. One must ‘look into’, one must ‘look at it spiritually’, and one must be an ‘initiate’ to the select group of people who are willing and able to appreciate the evocative image and what it represents. The habit of the initiate, to which she refers in ‘Limbo’ is, as she explains in her essay ‘In Praise of Old Houses’, ‘an historical habit of mind’ (*Limbo*, 28). This habit, which is formed in childhood but is so often lost in adulthood – ‘what right-minded child of ten or twelve cares, beyond its tribute of apples, and jam, and cricket, and guinea pigs, for so dull a thing as the present?’ – makes one aware of ‘a peculiar sense, ineffable, indescribable, but which everyone knows again who has once had it [. . .] of being companioned by the Past, of

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<sup>174</sup> Lee also writes of the modern yearning to regain the innocent wonder of childhood in ‘Faustus and Helena’. She writes, ‘we moderns seek in the world of the supernatural a renewal of the delightful semi-obscurity of vision and keenness of fancy of our childhood, when a glimpse into fairyland was still possible, when things appeared in false lights, brighter, more important, more magnificent than now’ (312). She does not, as in Dennis Potter’s play ‘Blue Remembered Hills’ (1979) which casts adults in the roles of children, aim to demystify childhood. For Lee, the innocence and curiosity of childhood are pure and to be sought after in adulthood.

being in a place warmed for our living by the lives of others' (*Limbo*, 25; 29). As she walks through the streets of Paris or Rome,

the whole place (how shall I explain it?) becomes a sort of living something [. . .] [a] very real creature; as if, in the dark, I stretched out my hand and met something (but without any fear), something absolutely indefinable in shape and kind, but warm, alive. This changes solitude in places to the reverse of solitude and strangeness (*Limbo*, 31)

Lee admits to unease about the best means of expressing this sense. She asks, 'how shall I explain it?' (*Limbo*, 31) and 'how convey this sense?' (*Limbo*, 30). As in her essay 'The Lake of Charlemagne', in 'In Praise of Old Houses' Lee provides the reader with an account of a personal experience, a method she often employs in her historical writings. In this episode, the impressions offered by her surroundings and her own sensibility to them help her to rehabilitate after a prolonged illness. In Spain, in wet and dreary weather, she explains that 'it seemed as if the world had quite unlearned every single trick that had ever given me pleasure' (*Limbo*, 33). During a mass in celebration of, 'worse luck to it, of the Conquest of Granada from the Moors', she experiences a 'happiness unknown for so many, many months, that historic emotion' (*Limbo*, 33). This emotion is 'potent and subtle; and like all strong intellectual emotions, it is compounded of many and various elements, and has its origin far down in mysterious depths of our nature' (*Limbo*, 35). She then describes the experience in erotic language: 'it arises overwhelmingly from many springs, filling us with the throb

of vague passions welling from our most vital parts' (*Limbo*, 35). This experience has affected her being in a holistic way – mind, spirit and body. It is described as an 'intellectual emotion' that stems from 'vital parts'. This historic emotion is a craving that must remain unsatisfied. She writes,

there is in it no possession of any definite portion of bygone times; but a yearning expectancy, a sense of the near presence, as it were, of the past; or rather, of a sudden capacity in ourselves of apprehending the past which looms all round. (*Limbo*, 35).

Such an experience compresses time, makes the present seem to 'reel and vanish', and in a nod to the Walter Pater's Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, she explains that the experience caused her 'mind to be swept along the dark and gleaming whirlpools of the past' (*Limbo*, 35).<sup>175</sup> The historic habit enables one always to experience this longing for what can only ever be known partially. 'The past [is] so rich in possibilities', she concludes, it is 'the one free place for our imagination' (*Limbo*, 39). The past offers the emotional intensity needed for the kind of intellectual, imaginative and poetic writing to which both Lee and Pater aspire.

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<sup>175</sup> Pater wrote in his Conclusion that 'if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring' (*Renaissance*, 153).



### **‘Out of Venice at Last’**

In the introduction to *Euphorion* Lee states that ‘like a real landscape it [history] may also be seen from different points of view’ (*Euphorion*, 10). This section is concerned with the ‘different points of view’ from which Lee describes her impressions of Venice. She experiments on the same theme in three different ways, which, for the purposes of my argument, I shall not necessarily treat in chronological or reverse order. ‘Out of Venice at Last’ (1925) is a travel narrative in which she describes the sights, sounds, smells and accompanying associations that overwhelm her senses and emotions. The poetic language she uses in this essay encapsulates the inward tension aroused by an atmosphere that is frustratingly excessive.<sup>176</sup> In her short story ‘A Wicked Voice’ (1887), Lee uses fiction to convey the stifling atmosphere of Venice and its potential effects on the creative process. I shall suggest an alternative reading of this story, one in which the haunting voice of Zaffirino represents the intoxicating atmosphere of Venice.<sup>177</sup> Thirdly, in her essay ‘Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy’ (1881), Lee uses literary biography as a vehicle through which to describe the artistic atmosphere of Venice in the eighteenth century.<sup>178</sup> As is typical of Lee’s writing, there is a clear overlap of genres in these three pieces. What is interesting is the way in which she is seen experimenting with three different literary forms in order

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<sup>176</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Out of Venice at Last’, in *Hauntings* (2006), ed. by Maxwell and Pulham, pp. 339-341.

<sup>177</sup> Catherine Maxwell has examined the influence of Lee’s stay in Venice with the singer Mary Wakefield on her story ‘A Wicked Voice’ in ‘Sappho, Mary Wakefield, and Vernon Lee’s “A Wicked Voice”’, *Modern Language Review*, 102 (October 2007), 160-74.

<sup>178</sup> Subsequent references to ‘Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy’ will appear as ‘Gozzi’ in the text.

to convey the same aesthetic atmosphere.<sup>179</sup> Ultimately I hope to argue that Lee's experiments with form in these three pieces – in which the literary form changes but the expression of the overwhelming atmosphere of Venice remains the same – reflect the care with which she strove to express the overwhelming atmosphere of Italy in her essay 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists'.

Although there is a considerable lapse of time between the publication of 'Out of Venice at Last' and the other two pieces, I am beginning with 'Out of Venice at Last' because the essay offers a clear account of Lee's response to the atmosphere of Venice. She describes a place that overwhelms the senses and the emotions without relief so that she has to declare that 'I cannot cope with it, it submerges me' ('Venice', 340). In 'In Praise of Old Houses' she had argued that man-made objects are made more appealing with time. Nature, she explains, is 'superbly unconscious' of man's careful attempts at symmetry in architecture, for example' (*Limbo*, 23). Nature 'smears weather-stain on weather-stain and lichen on lichen, never stopping to match them' (*Limbo*, 23). But rather than creating an overwhelming effect, nature transforms 'the mangiest hedgerow [...] richer, more subtle, than all the carpets and papers ever designed by Mr. Morris' (*Limbo*, 24). 'Time', she goes on to explain, 'turns the works of man into natural objects' and in so doing, 'gives them infinitely more variety and charm' (*Limbo*, 24). Most importantly, as nature appropriates man-made objects, they become imbued with life: 'in making them natural objects also time gives to man's lifeless productions the chief quality of everything belonging to Nature – life' (*Limbo*, 24). For Lee, however, this does not appear to be the case in Venice. Whereas in other

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<sup>179</sup> By 'aesthetic atmosphere' I mean both the literary atmosphere which she creates in the texts and the emotional atmosphere of the actual place, as it appears to Lee.

places time can smooth and wash away man-made impurities, Venice is a place of decay and stagnation. The ‘shallow and stagnant Venetian waters’ do not wash away the impurities of the past. Instead,

all the dead greatness and happiness which has never really been, and the crumble of endless neglect and the creepy life of obscure baseness, seem all to be in their ooze, never thoroughly rinsed by the storms and the tides and sending up faint miasmas in which the soul fevers and dissolves.

(‘Venice’, 74)

It is as if, in this description, Lee condenses all human pain and misfortune into the image of the stagnant Venetian waters.

In ‘A Wicked Voice’, the Norwegian composer Magnus hopes Venice will offer the inspiration needed to complete his opera *Ogier the Dane*, for which he has already completed the libretto. He discovers instead that the stagnant waters of the city stifle the flow of creativity. He explains that,

I had hoped to find some inspiration in this strange Venice, floating, as it were, in this stagnant lagoon of the past. But Venice had merely put all my ideas into hopeless confusion; it was as if there arose out of its shallow waters a miasma of long-dead melodies, which sickened but intoxicated my soul. (*Hauntings*, 163)

Miasma is a word which occurs in both pieces. The past becomes a vaporous poison in the city because it is never washed away. It cannot be avoided and penetrates the senses through smell. In 'Out of Venice at Last' Lee describes her relief upon her departure from Venice as 'a North breeze after heavy rain' and a sense that 'the mists *and* languor *and* regrets *and* dreams of Venice are swept, are cleansed away, as by rain and wind, out of my soul' [my emphasis] ('Venice', 339). The repetitive 'and' hangs heavily in the sentence and the repetition is a stylistic tool used again to describe 'the enervation of "too much"' ('Venice', 340). Similarly she writes that Venice always reveals '*more* sequences of colour, *more* palaces, *more* canals, *more* romance and *more* magnificence and squalor' [my emphasis] ('Venice', 340). Unlike the healthy layers of the past which she describes in 'In Praise of Old Houses' which allow her to feel 'companioned' by 'a crowd of nameless creatures; the daily life, common joy, suffering, heroism of the past', in Venice this feeling of being 'companioned' becomes a haunting because of its sheer intensity and excess (*Limbo*, 27). Too much is revealed at once, she explains. 'Venice is always too much and too much so' ('Venice', 340).

There is no relief from the past in this city, instead everything accumulates and overwhelms. For Lee, Venice 'brings up, with each dip of the oar, the past, or rather the might-have-been' ('Venice', 341). In her essay 'Limbo', in which she first refers to the 'kingdom of Might-have-been', this emotion is pathetic but pleasurable because it is concentrated in a single image, such as a children's playhouse. In 'Out of Venice at Last', however, she states that it is impossible to 'isolate, if I may use such an expression, *the enough*' ('Venice', 340). In a wonderfully evocative passage, she explains that Venice

dissolves my energies like its own moist and shifting skies; it brings a knot into my throat and almost tears into my eyes, like a languorous waltz or a distant accordion, and into my mind the ignominious sadness of lovers' quarrels, like Musset's and George Sand's, of the going to bits of Byron, and of its own long, shameful crumble, ending in sale of shrines and heirlooms, and dead women's fans and dead babies' shoes at the curiosity dealers. ('Venice', 341)

Having compared the atmosphere of Venice to a foul miasma which penetrates the body, she then likens the atmosphere of Venice to music which penetrates the body through the sense of sound. She writes that 'the things which Venice offers to the eye and the fancy conspire to melt and mar our soul like some music of ungraspable *timbres* and unstable rhythms and modulations' ('Venice', 341). Indeed, after hearing the voice of Zaffirino for the first time, Magnus explains that 'a faintness overcame me, and I felt myself *dissolve*' [my emphasis] (*Hauntings*, 167). Her description of the 'ungraspable timbres' and 'unstable rhythms and modulation' bear a strong resemblance to the ambiguous voice of Zaffirino. Magnus describes the voice as having 'an ineffable quality' (*Hauntings*, 167). When he first hears the voice Magnus describes it as 'a ripple of music, a voice breaking itself in a shower of little scales and cadences and trills' (*Hauntings*, 166). Earlier, in the story he recalls his dream in which Zaffirino's playing is comprised of 'little, sharp, metallic, detached notes, like those of a mandolin' (*Hauntings*, 164). The haunting sound of 'detached notes' and 'trills' is in opposition to

Lee's feeling of calm and order when she leaves Venice in 'Out of Venice at Last'. She writes that 'alert thoughts begin to arise, binding the distant and future and me to them in orderly patterns' ('Venice', 339). In 'A Wicked Voice', Zaffirino's singing and the music of the eighteenth century reflect the unstable and poisonous atmosphere of Venice. The miasma, like the 'sharp' notes and the voice 'like the sharp and glittering blade of a knife', penetrates and overwhelms the senses (*Hauntings*, 180). Worse still, Magnus recognises that the voice is claiming him for Venice, trying to enter and merge him into its liquid elements: 'and I felt my body melt even as wax in the sunshine, and it seemed to me that I too was turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds as the moonbeams mingle with the dew' (*Hauntings*, 179). Magnus's sense of being swamped by the voice and the stagnant waters of Venice is not dissimilar to Lee's statement in 'Out of Venice at Last' that Venice 'submerges me' ('Venice', 340).

The music of the eighteenth century in this story is likened to the excesses of Venice. Magnus explains that,

Venice seemed to swelter in the middle of the water, exhaling, like some great lily, mysterious influences, which make the brain swim and the heart faint – a moral malaria, distilled, as I thought, from those languishing melodies, those cooing vocalisations which I had found in those musty music-books of a century ago. (*Hauntings*, 156)

Indeed before the haunting begins, he assumes that Zaffirino's 'voice must have had the same sort of beauty and expression of wickedness' as his image (*Hauntings*, 162). In

‘Out of Venice at Last’ Lee returns to the idea of beautiful but dangerous music, asserting that ‘Venice, taken all in all, has the effect rather of music when music is [. . .] most viciously itself’ (‘Venice’, 341).

In ‘A Wicked Voice’, Lee creates an episode in which a fictional character is confronted by the past in a city that offers him no protection. In her chapter ‘Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy’ she takes a real figure from the past and imagines the atmosphere of Venice that initially inspires but eventually thwarts his art. In the introduction to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, Lee explains that she aims to approach her study of the art of the time through the characters who created it. Yet she admits that these figures ‘cannot be well understood unless we previously reconstruct the society in which they lived’ (*Studies*, 6). Here Lee puts into practice her theoretical interest in the relationship between the artist, the artistic atmosphere with which he is surrounded, and the art itself.<sup>180</sup> It is the way in which Lee expresses the relationship between man, atmosphere and art in this piece and in her chapter ‘Goldoni and the Realistic Comedy’ that I wish to address in this section.

In *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* Lee describes the effects of Venice on two different personalities. The first, Carlo Goldoni (1707-1795), which she discusses in her chapter ‘Goldoni and the Realistic Comedy’, was according to Lee, ‘for ever falling on his feet, or, if falling elsewhere, up in a trice and with no bruises on him’ (*Studies*, 250). The combination of Goldoni’s whimsical personality and comedic genius inured him to the excesses of Venice. She adds that he was

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<sup>180</sup> Lee revisits this relationship in her essay ‘Symmetria Prisca’ in *Euphorion*.

amiable, honest, superficial though perfectly sincere in all his attachments, never once, as he himself tells us, lets any misfortune interfere with his supper [. . .] he is for ever flitting about, skimming over the surface of life with a little reproachful shake of the head for the unfortunates who stick in its mire, and a little nod of approbation for heroes who trudge manfully up its rough and dangerous paths. (*Studies*, 250)

Thus, he was able to delight in the absurdities of the city and create his realistic comedies by eschewing the traditional Venetian masked characters in favour of comically flawed gondoliers, merchants, fishermen and their wives. Lee explains that ‘this democratic, domestic Goldoni naturally refused to show the effeminate, corrupt Venice of nobles, and spies, and courtesans, which [sic] shameful adventurers like Casanova, heaping up all the ordure of their town and times’ (*Studies*, 265). His portrayals of the innocent, quotidian life of the city, Lee adds, ‘have made some of us believe to have been the sole, the real Venice of the eighteenth century’ (*Studies*, 265).

Despite Goldoni’s humorous portrayals of everyday Venetian life, Lee associates his plays more with Italy and the eighteenth century than with Venice. She explains that, ‘Goldoni was much less a Venetian than an Italian, and less an Italian than a man of the eighteenth century’, and adds that ‘to him Venice was merely a state rather older and more eccentric than any other’ (*Studies*, 268). This is in contrast to the dark, mysterious Venice experienced by Goldoni’s successor to the Venetian stage, the ill-fated Carlo Gozzi. In the chapter ‘Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedies’, Lee describes his experience of life in Venice in ways that prefigures her own in ‘Out of



Venice at Last' and Magnus's in 'A Wicked Voice'. For Lee, everything about Gozzi's life is suggestive of a man trying and failing to regain control of his senses and his artistic talent in this excessive and overwhelming place. As in 'A Wicked Voice', where the voice can be said to represent the haunting quality of Venice which infiltrates and overwhelms the senses, the recurring image of taunting and teasing Venetian goblins in Lee's account of Goldoni's life carries a sense of the ghostly and of danger and unpredictability throughout the piece.

From the beginning, Lee sets up the goblins as haunting revenants, explaining that Goldoni 'had been destined from his birth to be the familiar, the crony, and the butt of all the fairies and goblins who still haunted Venice in the first half of the eighteenth century' (*Studies*, 278). His familial home has been overwhelmed by these revenants:

the ancestral Gozzi palace at S. Canziano, at Venice was the chosen abode of all the hobgoblins of the lagoons: the doors were off their hinges, the windowpanes broken, immense spiders dangled from the rafters. Of the magnificent furniture of former days, long since gone to the pawnbrokers, there remained only a couple of senatorial portraits by Titian and Tintoret, looking down grimly in their purple and ermine and cobweb upon the miserable disorderly household. (*Studies*, 278)

The grotesque demons of Venice do not release their hold on Gozzi, and it is suggested that his personality was particularly susceptible to such influences. Lee explains that Gozzi was 'always silent, self-absorbed, his eyes fixed on an unseen world, his lips

smiling at unspoken jests' and that he was 'full of poetic aspirations and humorous fancy' (*Studies*, 275; 281). The prosaic comedies of Goldoni could not satisfy such a personality and Lee describes Gozzi's reanimation of the old masks in terms that evoke the Faustian, which, as I explained in Chapter One, would play a critical role in the stories collected in *Hauntings*. Approaching Goldoni in a bookshop one day, Gozzi called out, 'I wager that with the masks of the old comedy I will draw a greater audience to hear the story of the *Love of the Three Oranges* than you can with all your *Ircanas* and *Bettinas* and *Pamelas*!' (*Studies*, 276). Gozzi's pride in the fanciful Venetian tradition of comedy masks led him to 'artistically manipulate' the old masked comedies to suit a contemporary audience (*Studies*, 281).

According to Lee he 'had created a new style, and he who creates a style becomes its slave; he had, unconsciously, evoked the weird grotesque world of the supernatural, and the supernatural would not let its wizard go' (*Studies*, 277). It seems as if Venice expelled the old masks from its waters specifically for Carlo Gozzi.

The hobgoblins, the fairies, the enchanters, and their earthly representatives, the fantastic Pantaloons and Harlequins of the *Commedia dell' Arte* – unearthly, swarthy, gibbose,[sic] imp-like creatures, two thousand years old – this world of the supernatural and the grotesque, in which Carlo Gozzi had been born and bred, completely enslaved him immediately on the appearance of the *Love of the Three Oranges*. (*Studies*, 279).

Lee explains that this ‘world of the supernatural and the grotesque’ is distinctly Venetian. The mysterious world which Gozzi unleashed was born from

one strange, weird, beautiful, half oriental, half Mediæval thing, one city of gorgeous colour and mysterious shadow, in which the creole wizard of Fonthill felt as if he were moving in his own magic world of Vathek; and that city was Venice. (*Studies*, 279)

This ‘grotesque and fanciful mixture of the comic and the supernatural’ came from the grotesque and fanciful atmosphere of Venice. Lee explains that she finds Venice evocative of Gozzi’s comedies. ‘Even now-a-days’, she writes,

when we return to Venice after an interval of years, melancholy with the first impression of the livid green canals, the dilapidated discoloured palaces, the black and brown stains and shadows on stone and water, lugubrious beneath the grey twilight, our first sight of the squares of St. Mark’s in the summer evening is like the transition from the world of *Childe Harold* to the world of the *Love of the Three Oranges*. (*Studies*, 279)

Poor luck forced Gozzi’s company to disband, thus ending the reign of the Venetian masked comedies. In a poignant and sympathetic passage, Lee bids farewell to Carlo Gozzi, whose talent was born of Venice and was destined to be reclaimed by Venice. She writes,

We have one last glimpse of him, seated solitary and silent on a certain bench on the quay of the Slavonians at Venice [. . .] How often may poor old Carlo Gozzi have returned and sat upon that bench? When did the boatmen and coffee-house loungers of the Quay of the Slavonians miss that familiar grey, bent old man, with the wistful, fanciful face? We know not, for in the total oblivion into which Carlo Gozzi has fallen, no one has even recorded the exact year of his death; he and all he did is forgotten. (*Studies*, 288).

Whilst to track down the plays of the light-hearted Goldoni, who was ‘much less a Venetian than an Italian’ and who did not trouble himself with dark thoughts ‘we need only enter the first best bookseller’s, and we shall be offered our choice of twenty different editions’, the improvised masked comedies of the ‘fanciful, the suggestive, the romantic’ Carlo Gozzi have, according to Lee, ‘been forgotten’ (*Studies*, 277; 288). In the end, the Venetian waters by which Lee envisages him sitting seemed to have reclaimed Gozzi’s thwarted artistic talent and legacy. In ‘Carlo Gozzi and the Venetian Fairy Comedy’, Lee describes the effects of Venice on Carlo Gozzi as a man and as an artist. By conjuring the atmosphere of Venice at the time she shows how Gozzi’s art responded and then contributed to this atmosphere. In ‘A Wicked Voice’ she expands on the supernatural quality of Venice at which she hints in ‘Carlo Gozzi’. She deals with the limitations of the historian by using literary devices in order to paint a picture of the imperfect but heroic Gozzi and his world as she imagines it. In ‘A Wicked Voice’, she releases herself from these constraints entirely by creating a character that embodies all

of the qualities that make him particularly susceptible to the powers of Venice. By giving Venice a voice through the ghost of Zaffirino, she leaves behind the comic goblins of Carlo Gozzi's Venice and is able instead to focus on the city's destructive powers. In 'Out of Venice at Last' she describes the ways in which she herself has been affected by the overwhelming and oppressive atmosphere of the city. As I have shown, the imaginative prose of her biography of Carlo Gozzi and her story 'A Wicked Voice' share many characteristics with the prose and resultant literary atmosphere in her travel essay, 'Out of Venice at Last'.

She accomplishes in 'Carlo Goldoni' and 'Carlo Gozzi' what she asks of her readers in 'Symmetrica Prisca' in which she describes the scene of an excavation. She writes, 'we can scarcely realize all this; but let us look and reflect, and even we may *feel* as must have felt the man of the Renaissance in the presence of that mutilated, stained, battered torso' [my emphasis] (*Studies*, 192). Lee is aware how wholly unrealistic this goal is, but in the introduction to *Euphorion* she writes that, 'we can console ourselves' by seeking to see and feel and understand from 'the height of an individual interest of our own' (*Euphorion*, 12). In 'In Praise of Old Houses' she accepts that the inhabitants of the past could not really have been more interesting or more worthy of attention than the people of the present. 'Indeed, in sundry ways', she writes, 'and owing to the narrowness of life and thought, the calmer acceptance of coarse and cruel things, I incline to think that they were less interesting' (*Limbo*, 39). She adds, "'Tis their clothes' ghosts that haunt us, not their own' (*Limbo*, 39). She admits, however, that to a certain type of person, the 'initiate' to whom she refers in 'Limbo', the gulf which separates the world of the past from that of the present adds charm to the old world. She writes, 'their

dresses, should they hang for a century or so, will emit a perfume as frail, and sad, and heady; their wardrobe filled with such dust as makes tears come into one's eyes, from no mechanical reason' (*Limbo*, 34). This melancholy charm, what she likens to 'home-sickness', is atmospheric. It is a heady perfume and a cloud of dust that elicit a physical response.<sup>181</sup> Having discussed Lee's emphasis on matching the literary atmosphere of a text to the atmosphere of the chosen subject, I now wish to explore the ways in which she aims to elicit a matching response from the reader in her essay 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists'.

### **'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists'**

In the introduction to *Euphorion*, Lee explains that her fascination with the Italian Renaissance stems from an interest in the ways in which cultural forces react to one another, 'in concord or antagonism; forming, like the gasses of the chemist, new things, sometimes like, and sometimes unlike themselves and each other' (*Euphorion*, 8). Later in the introduction, she refers to the 'Renaissance's horrible anomaly of improvement and degradation' (*Euphorion*, 15). This tension between seemingly opposing forces is the focus of 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists'. On the one hand, this essay is an impressive piece of literary criticism in which she considers the style and content of

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<sup>181</sup> Alice Oke's 'yellow room' in Lee's story 'Oke of Okehurst' is described by the narrator as 'more of an Italian room than an English one', had a 'shelf of old books, mainly English and Italian poets of the Elizabethan times'. He adds that 'the air seemed heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume, not that of any growing flower, but like old stuff that should have lain for years among spices' (126). This is another example of Lee's practice of incorporating her own impressions of Italy and sense of nostalgia for the past in her supernatural fiction. The narrator in this story admits, 'I am susceptible to these impressions', making him one of the initiates to which Lee refers in her essay 'Limbo' (112).

Elizabethan drama as a response to the English experience in Renaissance Italy. On the other, it is an epic in two parts which enacts the tension between opposing representations of the same period: the Elizabethans and their depictions of decay, evil and hopelessness, and the Italians and their poetry and improvisational plays of gaiety, nonchalance and light. Part one belongs to the Elizabethans. Here Lee uses alliteration, repetition, and lengthy sentences to make the reader feel the oppression and the weight of Italy which seem to drown and consume the Elizabethans. These techniques work together to produce a similar effect on the reader. While she makes no detailed reference to the art of Renaissance Italy in this section, she nevertheless allows the reader to sink deeper and deeper into the compost heap. In part two, the miasma dissipates, Lee shortens her sentences, and the image of decaying compost becomes life-giving fertilizer for the artistic Renaissance as experienced by the Italians.

The essay begins with a grotesque image of an encamped army in occupied Italy. This army is being entertained by a 'rude mystery play' put on by the French soldiers of Charles VIII. The play is performed,

before this motley invading army: before the feudal cavalry of Burgandy, strange steel monsters, half bird, half reptile, with steel beaked and winged helmets and claw-like steel shoes, and jointed steel corselet and rustling steel mail coat; before the infantry of Gascony, rapid and rapacious with tattered doublets and rag bound feet; before the over-fed, immensely plumed, and slashed and furbelowed giants of Brittany and the Marches; before this multifaced, many-speached army, gathered from the rich cities

of the North and the devastated fields of the South, and the wilds and rocks of the West and the East, alike in nothing save in its wonder and dread and delight and horror at this strange invaded Italy – the play performed for the entertainment of this encamped army was no ordinary play. (*Euphorion*, 57-8)

One does not doubt that this was no ordinary play, for this clearly is not an ordinary army. And in a place such as this, what is ordinary? From the beginning, Lee lets it be known that the world she describes is entirely unlike that of the present. As in the introduction to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, she disrupts the reader's sense of normality and challenges expectations. This is not a conventional historical account. Despite differences in this 'multi-faced, many-speched army', they are all entertained by one play. This play, which took the reign of Pope Borgia as its subject, 'is the first manifestation of that strong tragic impulse due to the sudden sight, by rude and imaginative young nations, of the splendid and triumphant wickedness of Italy' (*Euphorion*, 58). That this army perceived Renaissance Italy as a wicked and corrupt place adds credence to Lee's account of the response of the Elizabethans. The reader does not yet know that the first half of the essay will be one-sided. The wickedness of Italy already is presented as a given.

The French, who recognised the moral atmosphere of Italy enough to perform their version of it in the play, were eventually swallowed whole by it. Lee explains that the 'simony and poison', 'lust', 'violence', 'mysterious death and abominable love', which they dramatised, eventually '*circulated around them*' [my emphasis](*Euphorion*,



58). Soon they found themselves ‘*surrounded* by Italian minions and poison distillers, and buffoons and money-lenders’ [my emphasis]. Italy here is like a shark which threatens to consume all who dare to enter its waters. Thus far the sentences and the paragraphs are noticeably long. They are fast and breathless, falling down the page, separated by commas and semi-colons. In a comparatively shorter sentence, she explains that the Spanish and the Germans followed, ‘with the creative power of the Middle Ages still in them, refreshed by the long rest of the dull fifteenth century’ (*Euphorion*, 59-60). The sentence is refreshing in itself for its comparative brevity – note, for example the length of the sentence describing the ‘motley army’ – but is followed by this weighty sentence, made heavier by her use of alliteration and sibilance:

But Spaniards and Germans came as mere greedy and besotten [sic] and savage mercenaries: the scum of their countries, careless of Italian sights and deeds, thinking only of torturing for hidden treasure, or swilling southern wines; and they returned to Spain and to Germany, to persecutions of Moriscos, and plundering of abbeys, as savage and well-nigh as dull as they had arrived. (*Euphorion*, 60)

The next group to advance is the English with their ‘greed of intellectual gain’ (*Euphorion*, 61). In one long sentence, Lee describes and enacts the Elizabethan state of mind as they struggle to understand their new artistic muse:

With an infinitely powerful and passionate imagination, and an exquisitely subtle faculty of mental analysis; only lately freed from the dogma of the Middle Ages; unsettled in their philosophy; inclined by wholesale classical reading to a sort of negative atheism, a fatalistic and half-melancholy mixture of epicurism and stoicism; yet keenly alive, from the study of the Bible and of religious controversies, to all questions of right and wrong; thus highly wrought and deeply perplexed, the minds of the Elizabethan poets were impressed by the wickedness of Italy as by the horrible deeds of one whom we are accustomed to venerate as our guide, whom we cannot but love as our benefactor, whom we cannot but admire as our superior: it was a sense of frightful anomaly, of putrescence in beauty and splendour, of death in life and life in death, which made the English psychologist-poets savage and sombre, cynical and wrathful and hopeless. (*Euphorion*, 74)

The first half of this sentence lists the intellectual and moral characteristics of the Elizabethans. That she does this in one sentence allows each new characteristic to build on the previous ones. There is no completion here, just a continuation. Each new characteristic seems to carry the weight of added baggage. This all leads to the 'highly wrought and deeply perplexed state' in which they encounter their long-awaited muse. The second half of the sentence only continues the sense of accumulation. To the already 'wrought' and 'perplexed' Elizabethans are added the new impressions of the long-awaited and, as they discover, corrupt and wicked muse.

Lee was aware of how progression works in literary art. As she explains in ‘On Literary Construction’, each theme – and by theme she means ‘a description, a line of argument, a whole personage’ – contributes to the ‘atmosphere’ (she uses the word ‘mood’) of the whole piece, ‘as in a piece of music’ (*Euphorion*, 7). These moods ‘ought to have been strengthened or made more subtle by the company they have kept’ (*Euphorion*, 7). She later refers to the reader’s satisfaction as one of the aims of this progression, but in ‘The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists’, she seems to manipulate this notion of progression and uses it to express and discursively perform the ‘highly wrought and deeply perplexed state’ of the Elizabethans.

In her analysis of Elizabethan writings, it becomes clear that Lee adopts the written style of the dramas she examines. The language in the poetry quotations she selects from the dramas is not at variance with her own prose style. Her long and lurid sentences seem to rehearse the language of, for example, John Marston’s ‘Antonio and Melinda, an Historical Play’ (1600).<sup>182</sup> In the following sentence, Lee’s language is separated from Marston’s only by a fluid em dash:

At the most there issues out of the blood-reeking depth a mighty yell of pain, a tremendous imprecation not only at sinful man but at unsympathizing nature, like that of Marston’s old Doge, dethroned, hunted down, crying aloud into the grey dawn-mists of the desolate marsh by the lagoon –

O thou all-bearing earth  
Which men do gape for till thou cram’st their mouths

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<sup>182</sup>This play was performed in 1600 and printed in 1602.

And choak'st their throats for dust: O charme thy breast  
 And let me sinke into thee. Look who knocks;  
 Andruggio calls. But O, she's deafe and blinde.  
 A wretch but leane relief on earth can finde. (*Euphorion*,  
 77)

Marston's language here reminds us of Lee's earlier account of the English pirating intellectual wealth of Italy.

To Italy they flocked and through Italy they rambled, prying greedily into each cranny and mound of the half-broken civilization, upturning with avid curiosity all the rubbish and filth; seeking with aching eyes and itching fingers for the precious fragments of intellectual splendour; lingering with fascinated glance over the broken remnants and deep, mysterious gulfs of crumbling and devastated civilization. (*Euphorion*, 63)

Marston writes of hopelessness and death; Lee writes of 'putrescence in beauty and splendour, of death in life and life in death' (*Euphorion*, 74).

The sexual tension in this essay cannot be denied, and Catherine Wiley offers a useful reading of Lee's account of the plundering of the intellectual wealth of Italy as a sexual awakening in which England is transformed into a masculine rapist and Italy becomes the feminised civilisation whose 'cranny and mound' are, according to Wiley, 'penetrated and excavated' (Wiley, 69). Wiley writes, 'the suggestion of polymorphous sexuality in this scene is almost unbearably intense; the power of the language is in conflict with Lee's failed attempt to control it' (Wiley, 70). Reading Lee's language

alongside that of the dramatists, however, reveals similarities in syntax, imagery and tone, which suggest that she was partly emulating their example. While I agree with Wiley about the power of Lee's language and its sexual connotations, I do not think it should be assumed that this should be attributed to a failure of control. Taking into consideration Lee and Pater's belief in the importance of unity of subject and form, it seems more likely that Lee's choice of language was deliberate and not, as Wiley suggests, indicative of 'a failed attempt to control it'. It is true that the use of long sentences, the lists, repetitions and use of alliteration and sibilance creates a sense of oppression in the text. And rightly so. For in so doing, Lee unites and fuses together subject and form so that the one is inextricable from the other. It is not coincidence that Lee writes of the tension between seemingly opposing forces in an essay in which a sense of tension is maintained throughout.

In part two Lee lifts the veil between the opposing accounts of Italy in the Renaissance. Having described what she imagines the response of the English must have been based on the art which they created, she now reveals the nature of Italian art at the time. She describes the comedies, the fairies, the masks, the sweet poetry and festivals. The sentences in part two are distinctly shorter and lighter than in the first half of the essay. They are calm and offer a respite after the maelstrom of part one. However, when she describes the contradiction between the two artistic accounts, she does so in a long sentence which seems to enact the tug-of-war between the two. She asks,

Where, then, in the midst of these spotless virgins, these noble saints, these brilliant pseudo-chivalric joustings and revels, these sweet and

sonneteering pastorals, these scurrilous adventures and loose buffooneries; where in this Italian Renaissance are the horrors which fascinated so strangely our English playwrights: the fratricides and incests, the frightful crimes of lust and blood which haunted and half crazed the genius of Tourneur and Marston? (*Euphorion*, 86)

Her aim in this section is to answer the question, ‘does the art of Italy tell an impossible, universal lie? or is the art of England the victim of an impossible, universal hallucination?’ (*Euphorion*, 86). Her answer is that the two accounts are not mutually exclusive. As I showed in Chapter Two, Lee did not see the intellectual value of allowing categories or ideas to remain diametrically opposed. Instead, she was interested in the ways in which seemingly opposing forces or categories can be made to work together.

In this essay Lee’s theory is that both the Italians and the English strove for an odd balance. ‘The nation which was chaste and true wrote tales of incest and treachery’, she writes, ‘while the nation which was foul and false wrote poetry of shepherds and knights-errant’ (*Euphorion*, 87). Understanding this enables one to recognise the ‘strange and dreadful peace with each other’ (*Euphorion*, 89). In the end, both versions of the Italian Renaissance can exist in a single intoxicating atmosphere, as they are made to do by the end of the essay. Neither is to be seen as a whole truth and neither is to be seen as wholly false. For ‘art can neither tell lies nor be the victim of hallucination’ (*Euphorion*, 87).

**‘Our verse-inspired acquiescence’<sup>183</sup>**

This section will focus on Lee’s essay *The Poet’s Eye* (1926) in which she sets out her views on the differences between prose and verse. These differences help to clarify the nature of the break between Lee’s theoretical literary ideal and the reality of genre constrictions, and I shall explore the ways in which this problem manifests itself in ‘The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists’. First, however, I shall summarise briefly some of the main points discussed in this chapter before suggesting a connection between Lee’s literary form of choice, the essay, and her critical aesthetics.

I have shown how Lee manipulated the relationship between historical ‘fact’ and poetic imagination in order to create a textual atmosphere that appeals holistically to the reader’s intellect, emotions and senses. Both Pater and Lee believed in the lingering power of atmosphere and its role in making historical accounts meaningful to the reader. Despite the combination of stylistic perspectives required for the successful creation of atmosphere, these writers recognised that a text’s atmosphere gains strength from symmetry – and ideally fusion – between matter and form.

Lee and Pater believed that what passes for historical fact taken in its raw state lacks the power of an imaginative account that accepts and works with its inherent subjectivity. Such imaginative accounts of history, seen through the intellectual, emotional and sensual lens of the historian/poet, allow history to ‘pass into the domain of art proper’ (*Appreciations*, 6). Both writers recognised the role of textual atmosphere in achieving this. The textual hybridity required for the creation of a literary atmosphere represents the working relationship between parts that Lee so valued in her critical

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<sup>183</sup> In Vernon Lee, *The Poet’s Eye* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926), p. 12.

aesthetics. Here, the body parts of the essay must work together harmoniously to create a stronger and more successful whole, much like harmony between one's component parts – intellect, senses, emotions – makes one better suited to aesthetic appreciation. Bearing in mind also Lee's work on the relationship between readers and writers and on the psychology of reading in *The Handing of Words*, it makes sense that Lee would strive for a style of writing that enables, and indeed requires, the reader to utilise his or her own component parts in the aesthetic reading experience.

Lee's essays can be seen as performative, self-contained opportunities to practise and participate in an aesthetic experience. In her essay 'The Use of Beauty' she explains that books act as 'the training-place of our soul' and can 'train us to open our eyes, ears and souls, instead of shutting them, to the wider modes of universal life' (*Laurus*, 131). As I have shown, consideration of the ways in which Lee's theories on literary art, and her critical aesthetics more generally, function in her historical essays reveals that her writing style in these essays was deliberate and carefully crafted. Indeed, one can go further and say that, because Lee's essays put into practice her aesthetic theories and allow readers the materials with which to have aesthetic experiences, the essays can be themselves read as performative attempts to bring together theory and practice and ultimately, as she explained in 'Valedictory', aesthetics and life.<sup>184</sup> Despite her belief that Lee's writing has a tendency more towards the unconscious than the deliberate,

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<sup>184</sup> Pater wrote, 'what is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects' (*Renaissance*, 2). On Pater, Lee writes in 'Valedictory', in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, that 'his conception of art, being the outcome of his whole personal mode of existence, was inevitably one of art, not for art's sake, but of art for the sake of life – art as one of the harmonious functions of existence' (p. 259). It is clear from this essay, and from her work on aesthetics more generally, that Lee's critical aesthetics subscribe to this idea.



Wiley does recognise that ‘the intimacy of her use of the essay form breaks down barriers between writer and reader, paving the way for her to encourage a breakdown of the mind/body split, a merging of the internal and the external’ (Wiley, 59). As I have shown, all these are important components of Lee’s critical aesthetics.

Lee wrote in her commonplace book that ‘a book is intended to make a certain difference in you’.<sup>185</sup> She expresses a belief in the importance of literary art’s ability to linger in the mind of the reader. I have suggested that understanding the way in which matter and form come together in ‘The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists’ allows for a richer and more enjoyable reading and aesthetic experience. If one reads the essay like a poem, then it is a remarkable epic, made more remarkable by the way in which Lee effectively performs her argument. Arguing that the image of the Italian Renaissance held by most of her contemporaries was drawn almost entirely from Elizabethan dramas, the essay draws attention to a generally accepted but entirely fictitious version of history that is, in fact, rooted in fiction. What she then does is to revise the Elizabethan version of the Renaissance using the full power of poetic technique and imagination. She responds to fiction with fiction and, as Zorn explains, ‘it takes a rhetorician like Vernon Lee all of fifty pages to transform ruthlessness and corruption into its opposite’ (Zorn 2003, 33).

It is true, however, that on the surface, taken as an academic subject – the influence of the Italian Renaissance on English dramatists of the Elizabethan era – the essay seems to be at odds with the non-academic intensity of the sensuous and emotional language used. Though her argument is compelling, the artistic quality of the

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<sup>185</sup> Vernon Lee, *Commonplace Book IV*, entry dated 30 December 1891, p 120. Miller Collection, Colby College.

essay complicates its intellectual merit. As Zorn points out, in this essay ‘Lee assumes an extreme standpoint which has to be understood as a rhetorical position rather than a claim for truth’ and adds that ‘we may not agree with the extreme stretches of her theory’ (Zorn 2003, 33). However, the essay should not be judged on the academic strength of her arguments alone, but rather on the artful way in which Lee draws attention to the hypocrisy of historical accounts that make claims to truth and objectivity by bringing together intellectual argument and sensual and emotional language. In other words, the hybridity of styles in the ‘The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists’ marks it as a piece of literary art without wholly taking away the label of historical account. The way this essay is written reflects and puts into practice her ideas on the subjectivity of historical accounts whilst simultaneously positioning itself as a potential source of aesthetic pleasure. Nevertheless, the conventions of genre have left this essay open to critique and, in *The Poet’s Eye*, Lee explains what she sees as the limits of prose. The essay is interesting partly because of what it reveals about critiques of ‘The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists’.

In *The Poet’s Eye*, Lee argues that the poet ‘certainly permits himself to do things forbidden to other folk’ (*Poet*, 13). She explains what she believes to be the fundamental difference between verse and prose. Verse is an immortal art form whereas prose is merely mortal:

Poetry may doubtless be more boring than prose, but it bores me as I might be bored in a sanctuary. It is godlike, immortal. Godlike, methinks, because it *is* immortal. And *immortal* (such is the contention of the present

essay), because one *remembers* it; because it survives in the memory, dwells, thrones there, in state. Whereas prose just comes and goes; does its honest (or dishonest) work of altering something in our mind, and, having done that, fades away. So that, however great and enduring its effects, prose is, itself, no better than mortal' (*Poet*, 6).<sup>186</sup>

Poetry lends itself to being remembered as a whole, and to being recited, but prose which tends to be more utilitarian and ends-oriented is not easily remembered as a whole. Lee translates a passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into prose to show how the words lose the power of their meaning.<sup>187</sup> Despite the fact that prose writers often make the 'vision within' visible to their readers, to use a Paterian phrase, in Lee's experimental translation, the matter simply does not coincide with the form. 'It is

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<sup>186</sup> Lee's idea of the immortality of poetry is reminiscent of Swinburne's 'Anactoria' (1866) in which Sappho asserts the immortality of her voice and of her love through her poetry:

I Sappho shall be one with all these things,  
With all high things for ever; and my face  
Seen once, my songs once heard in a strange place,  
Cleave to men's lives, waste the days thereof  
With gladness and much sadness and long love.  
Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die.

In *Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell (London: Orion, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>187</sup> In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus's speech reads as follows:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (V. 1. 12-17).

Lee's translation is as follows: 'The prose-writer's eye, rolling in a fine frenzy, glances from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven, in such a manner that when he sees in his mind's eye forms which he has never seen elsewhere, his pen can turn them into bona-fide shapes, giving to airy nothingness a place and name' (p. 7).

therefore the way in which the thing is said which makes it shocking', she explains (*Poet*, 7). Shakespeare's 'in a fine frenzy rolling' is enchanting, but translated into prose it is meaningless and Lee explains that 'the use of verse means, on the part of the reader, readiness for a special kind of enjoyment involving a maximum of sympathy and goodwill, a minimum of the critical activity with its perpetual stop: what does that mean?' (*Poet*, 10). Lee accepts that, not being a poet herself, her position on poetry is entirely on the side of the reader. From this perspective, she explains that verse has the power to lull the reader into a less critical state,

because, among other reasons, rhythm, and in a lesser degree every other kind of verbal symmetry, makes us expect repetition of a given effect and thereby prepare ourselves for ourselves for making a given response [sic]; expectation and preparation, if repeated, eliciting a degree of imitative activity on our part, we set to marching at that particular pace, and metaphorically, if not literally, dancing that particular step. (*Poet*, 11).

For this reason, Lee calls the reading of poetry a 'docile activity' (*Poet*, 12). This is even more the case with rhyming verse and she uses the rhyme

'Early to bed and early to rise  
Makes men healthy, wealthy and wise'

as an example of this (*Poet*, 12). Translated into prose, she writes, the reader would instantly question the rhyme's faulty logic – 'where is its former profundity, its imperative?', she asks, 'gone, alas, with the metre and the rhyme, gone with our verse-inspired acquiescence' (*Poet*, 12). Because 'the world of verse is one of intrinsic values and its relations are directly to our feelings' the rational questioning of the message, or the matter, is glossed over because of the form. She adds, 'our feelings get enclosed by the symmetrical recurrence of stress and sound in a charmed circle wherein all becomes important in its own right' (*Poet*, 13). In verse, unlike in prose, '*all that is is right*' (*Poet*, 15). Both 'The Poet's Eye' and her introduction to *Ottilie* reveal Lee's understanding of the traps and pitfalls to which the essayist is exposed.

Lee's essays provide the opportunity to hone one's skills in aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, in essays such as 'The Lake of Charlemagne', 'Out of Venice at Last' and 'In Praise of Old Houses', she adds to the atmosphere of the piece by describing an episode in which she undergoes an aesthetic experience. This serves as a way of manipulating textual atmosphere. However, this can also be seen as having an instructive dimension, suggesting that we not only seek such aesthetic moments out in our own lives but also to suggest that we should treat the reading of the essay as an aesthetic experience in itself. As I showed in Chapter Two, Lee's critical aesthetics emphasised the importance of harmony in all aspects of life. In literary art this manifests itself in a desire to attain to harmony between the text's component parts. But the differences between poetry and prose which Lee describes in *The Poet's Eye*, as well as the problem of the critical reception of 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists', suggests that the kind of prose that Lee practices in 'The Italy

of the Elizabethan Dramatists' has an awkward imbalance. The poetic techniques used in this essay are techniques we would accept more readily in poetry, which makes its status seem uncertain and unsure. Objectivity and subjectivity, fact and fiction continue to vie for top place. Pater and Lee were aware of this potential problem and hoped that their writing would pave the way for a loosening of such a polarised view of writing. The essay 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists' finds itself, like so much of Lee's work and life, in an in-between position. The essay form demands hierarchy in a way that poetry does not. Recognising Lee's deliberate attempts to revise this assuages this problem somewhat. Yet ultimately the problem, as Lee explains, is to do with the idea that the literary ideal is dependent on the fusion between matter and form. Poetry does not require a hierarchy between matter and form, it allows for a perfect fusion between the two that prose can only aspire to but never reach. Yet by striving for the condition of poetry in prose, Lee aims for a compromise. Lee's language in 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists' makes the reader feel the atmosphere she describes. She describes the Elizabethans drowning in the Renaissance and the language subsumes the reader also. The reader is forced into an emotional, intellectual and physical empathy with the Elizabethans, and later, with the Italians of the Renaissance. As she explains in 'The Poet's Eye', 'the world of verse is one of intrinsic values and its relations are directly to our feelings' (*Poet*, 12). By trying to bring verse and prose together, Lee, however imperfectly, strives for a balance between thinking and feeling.

## CONCLUSION

In her essay 'Limbo' (1896), Lee admits to writing for the 'initiate', a group of likeminded individuals who understand what it is to be affected deeply by their surroundings (*Limbo*, 28). Her use of the characteristic 'we' in her writings has the effect of making the reader feel themselves a companion to Lee. In *Belcaro* she explains that this is 'not the oracular *we* of the printed book, it is the *we* of myself and those with whom, for whom, I am speaking; it is the constantly felt dualism of myself and my companion' (*Belcaro*, 8). Whilst she often directly addresses her dedicatees in her collections, readers are left to feel that Lee is addressing them also. Indeed, she understood and wrote about the power of feeling oneself in company with the past and with figures from the past for whom one feels a special affinity. In her essay 'In Praise of Old Houses' she describes this feeling of being in company with the past:

how different if we find ourselves in some city, nay village, rendered habitable for our soul by the previous dwelling therein of others, of souls! Here the streets are never empty; and, surrounded by that faceless crowd of ghosts one feels a right to walk about, being invited by them, instead of rushing along on one's errands'. (*Limbo*, 30)

Lee's writings on the nature of literary art reveal a belief that the art form is particularly well-suited to encouraging the union of one soul (the writer's) with another (the reader's). In 'The Nature of the Writer', she explained that literature 'makes the Reader give, and thereby possess his own soul through the illusion of having for a moment possessed that of the

Writer' (*Handling*, 108). She referred to this union as 'the community of experience of the Reader and the Writer' (*Handling*, 131).

Modern critics have expressed sentiments that seem to resemble the 'community of experience' to which Lee referred. Recently, Hilary Fraser has described feeling a connection with Lee through her writing. Writing on Lee's marginalia, Fraser describes a reaction to seeing Lee's handwriting that is reminiscent of Spridion Trepka, in *Amour Dure*:

But as I sat in the heat by the tall windows onto the river, and watched the breeze fill the billowing white curtains, it was as if the ghost of Vernon Lee herself, aficionado of hauntings as she was, has come to sit with me there and go through her old books again. Her presence was palpable, those feisty marginal notes like her own ghostly imprint on the books that she read with such passion and still haunts like an importunate shade. (Fraser 2005, 231-2)

This idea of a connection between Lee and the present through her writing is expressed also by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham in the introduction to their edition of *Hauntings: Fantastic Tales* (2006), in which they write that 'like the revenants who people her stories, Vernon Lee has returned once more: let us make our time, and the future her own' (*Hauntings*, 27). Maxwell and Pulham's collection of essays on Lee, *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, is dedicated to Lee. This dedication is followed by a quotation from Lee's novel *Louis Norbert: A Two-fold Romance* (1914)



in which Lady Venetia describes feeling an affinity with her seventeenth-century ancestor Louis Norbert that is based on his portrait: ‘and he’s a *friend*, and it doesn’t matter, does it, how long ago friends may have been born and died, they always know and love each other when they meet!’ (vi). What this all suggests is that there is something extra-textual that Lee seems to convey to her readers. We can call it her mind, as Vineta Colby does when she explains that ‘because it is her mind that first attracted me, I have read Vernon Lee to discover what she read and what influences, personal and intellectual, shaped that mind’ (Colby 2003, xii). It may also be considered a personality. Her biographer Peter Gunn has linked her writing style to her personality, explaining that ‘the many sides of her complex character may raise difficulties for the reader, since her style reflects these facets of her own very uncommon personality’ (Gunn, 4).

Lee herself offered some guidelines for handling this dangerous but potentially rewarding relationship. She was, after all, interested in the illusion, or what she called the ‘metaphysic fiction’ of establishing an understanding with a kindred spirit from the past (*Euphorion*, 115). In the stories collected in *Hauntings* she warned against the obsession to which such a powerful illusion can lead. Yet if kept in perspective and enjoyed in a balanced way that is aware of the dangers, such an illusion can be deeply rewarding, for it contributes to what Lee called ‘the life universal’, where the past, present and future can coexist. By suggesting such connections with the past, art contributes to the ideal whereby each individual feels a part of an important whole. In ‘Higher Harmonies’ she explains that the life universal gives the individual a sense of responsibility for his or her surroundings and for

the future. 'But we need not trouble about dignity and beauty coming to our life so long as we veritably *live*', she writes, and adds,

that is to say, so long as we try not to put anything into our life, but to put our life into the life universal. The true, expanding, multiplying life of the spirit will bring us in contact, we need not fear, with beauty and dignity enough, for there is plenty such in creation, in things around us, and in other people's souls; nay, if we but live to our utmost power the life of all things and all men, seeing, feeling, understanding for the mere joy thereof, even our individual life will be interested with dignity and beauty in our own eyes. (*Laurus*, 103-4)

Lee's critical aesthetics explored the ways in which one experiences art and beauty. Her aesthetic philosophy aimed to make one aware of the ways in which art contributes to a feeling of commonality with mankind that spans across the ages.

Whilst I have argued that Lee's writing style was more deliberate than she has been given credit for, I do not wish to suggest that she was necessarily aware of the extent to which her critical aesthetics shaped the content of her writings. Instead I have argued that approaching her body of work through critical aesthetics can be rewarding and revealing. In 'The Book and its Title' in *Belcaro* (1881), she expresses a wish not to be constricted by a particular system. She writes that,

if a system they appear, it is because the same individual mind, in its attempt to solve a series of closely allied problems, must solve them in a self-consistent

way. Hence, while dreading beyond all things to cramp by still growing, and therefore altering, ideas in the limits of a system, I find that I have, nevertheless evolved for myself a series of answers to separate questions which constitute a sort of art-philosophy, an art-philosophy entirely unabstract, unsystematic, essentially personal, because evolved unconsciously, under the pressure of personal tendencies. (*Belcaro*, 9).

Far from being unconscious, however, this statement reveals an awareness that cannot be ignored. I have argued that the wish not to be constricted by a specific system is a feature of her aesthetic methodology. And so, in my readings of the development of Lee's aesthetic theories I have tried to highlight this sense of intellectual freedom and fluidity of thought to which she was so committed.

I believe that Lee's aesthetic philosophy was born out of necessity, which perhaps contributed to her emphasis on experience, practicality, and empiricism. Lee's theories and writings were profoundly affected by place. 'Oh yes,' she admits, 'a setting they have had, these ideas' (*Belcaro*, 6). I wish to suggest that Lee's life in Italy – which she often described as a place where the layers of the past are made visible on the landscape and threaten to overwhelm the senses – necessitated a practical aesthetic philosophy that would enable one to cope with and even benefit from the wealth of impressions on offer in a socially responsible way, always taking into account 'the life universal'. This may be a reason why her critical aesthetics emphasised lived experience and empirical methods in a way that was not necessary for Walter Pater, who wrote from the relative safety of his North Oxford home. Pater's aesthetics could remain contemplative whilst Lee's was an aesthetic

philosophy to be lived. Thus, in *The Sentimental Traveller*, addressing Irene Forbes-Mosse, 'fellow traveller' and dedicatee of the collection, and perhaps, us as well, Lee writes,

we have met at a stage of Life's journey when there remains little to distract us from its sentimental and humorous contemplation; and we may, therefore, hope to continue it together to the end of the volume which is not written and printed, but lived.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller* (London: The Bodley Head, 1907), p. xi.

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