



Artistic experience: Psychology in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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Vernon Lee's 1912 *Beauty and Ugliness* was her first attempt at a psychological aesthetics. Having read William James and Théodore Lipps and corresponded with Karl Gross and other German psychologists in the late 1880's, Lee first broached the notion of psychological aesthetics in 1897, making her one of the earliest to recognize psychology in relation to art. Lee experimented by recording her own psychological feelings as she experienced individual works of art and surveyed others' experiences. In her vision of "aesthetic activity" as psychological, Lee reasoned that because art arises from the inner self, art is disclosed as psychological as well as cerebral: "The past can give us and should give us, not merely ideas but emotion."

In *Baldwin* Lee had recognized the importance of personality and freedom. But in examining the psychology of artistic experience, in *Beauty and Ugliness*, Lee focused on empathy. One of the first to "mobilize a concept of empathy" in the early 20th century, the word originating from the German term *Einfühlung* by which was meant "feeling ourselves into." Empathy as "activity of the soul" emanates from one's mental rather than sensational activity. A movement, empathy inhabits a space that recognizes separation or boundaries of resistance involving, e.g. aesthetic form and psychic conditions. Form is also movement, a line moves. The process of formal-dynamic empathy engages the interplay of forces suggested by e.g. shape. A physical reaction to artistic experience is not necessary, but may be a means of elucidating aesthetic empathy. This physical-psychical connection between man and art is also spiritual, and so the whole self must be prepared for appreciation of artistic experience of seeing, understanding, and enjoying. A self "sees and remembers what he sees" and so must understand and experience in a reflexive process both art and life.

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