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Aesthetics in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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Vernon Lee, the pen name of Violet Paget, devoted her life to aesthetics, believing that “our real aesthetic life is in ourselves.” Her definition of aesthetics, which evolved throughout the 1880’s in e.g. her *Belcaro*, her transitional *Miss Brown*, and her *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, proved the term to be less rigid than fluid. The definition “art for art’s sake,” that she had early accepted, she later redefined as art for one’s spiritual health, “sanity and wholesomeness.” In so doing, Lee shifted her theory of aesthetics away from that of, e.g. Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

In her theory, aesthetics resides in form, form being a fluid motion, demonstrated e.g. in the sculpture of Venus de Milo to which the missing arms are to the form as equilibrium and drapery and body as one form (rather than as two: drapery and Venus). Aesthetics is form, form is activity, but as important as aesthetical objects themselves is the viewer’s response to them.

Since both attention and memory are enmeshed in aesthetic phenomenon, delight in it requires the exertion or activity of attention and openness to both serendipitous experience and to learned preparation. In *Art and Life*, Lee claimed that the aesthetic life frees us to “breathe and grow,” its appreciation is more important than its creation. True aesthetic activity teaches us that enjoyment of beautiful things is augmented by sharing; its power for good is that it offers “development of the aesthetic faculties [...] altruistic instincts [...] and nobler growth of the individual.”

An early aesthetic critic, unique, and prescient, Vernon Lee influenced many including Virginia Woolf. Lee’s psychological and physical analysis of aesthetics urged forward modern notions of aesthetic empathy, and so unlike such popular aesthetic critics as Bernard Berenson, she set up aesthetic criticism both for bettering human understanding and for the coming phenomenon of abstract art.

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