



Artistic Experience: Physiology in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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In *Art and Life*, Vernon Lee declares that the “visible and audible forms of Beauty, the essential power of art” relates to the “chief nervous and vital functions of all sensitive creatures” and so alters “the groundwork of our thoughts and feelings.” In experiments conducted on spontaneous physical reactions to a work of art, noting changes in respiration, circulation, muscular tension, Lee concluded that the body reacted to art by imitating the form, an extension of the theory of empathy, while rejecting the notion that aesthetics could be reduced to a science. In art the physical, psychological, and intellectual converge. We find the inside experience of ourselves through the outside, but bodily sensations are secondary to “formal-dynamic” empathy. While we let art “slowly circulate around us” around our outward self, the emotion “resides in us.” In fact, “All art stands between sensual and emotional [...] and the experiences of the mere reasoning intellect.” Because “art can make our souls more resisting and flexible,” the soul itself seems to have some physicality. In her *Renaissance*, Lee defined art as the “outcome of a surplus of human energy,” and in *Beauty and Ugliness* pointed out that this “outcome” is enmeshed with memory, attention, and connection between thought and motor reaction. Beyond that, “without association there would be no relations to art,” for the unfamiliar enters our impressions and thoughts only through association with the familiar. While the physiological, spiritual, and epistemological artistic experience heightens vitality and so affirms and values life, still, we experience a physical desire of selfish indulgence to possess art, to make it our own, as Lee explains in *Juvenalia* and *Laurus Nobilis*. Perhaps, using her own abundance of words, Vernon Lee expressed the physicality of art, revealing the sensual pleasure in the life of the outward and inward self.

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