



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

Therese Boos Dykeman

In *Beauty and Ugliness...* Vernon Lee maintained that art is initiated in “what is below the clear, the realized, the complete [...] a limbo of fair unborn ghosts [...] distantly heard melodies...vaguely felt emotions of pathos and joy.” She defined art as “the manifestation of any group of faculties, the expression of any instincts, the answer to any needs, which is to any extent qualified [...] in obedience to a desire...” i.e., “the aesthetic desire [...] to avoid the ugly in favor of beauty.”

With her example in *Art and Life* of the driver who to beautify his tram fastened to it a bough of laurel, Lee illustrated her notion that to seek art is a natural instinct. As Lee asserted in *Beauty and Ugliness*, because art arises, is created, and is appreciated or not, it is a fluid affair, a movement. While it is an “all aesthetic activity,” it is not “purely aesthetic” nor purely activity, for in its essence, it is contemplative. For the viewer of art, the mere act of recognition differs from “perception of Form.” Form is both perceived and made to exist in the mind.

In *Renaissance*, Lee defined art also as social and practical, being “not for art’s sake” but “for the sake of life—art as one of the harmonious functions of existence.” Lee revealed in *Art and Life* that what art develops in us are “qualities of patience, attention, reverence” and we feel its “spiritual companionship and comfort,” its “particular caress to our whole being.” Art brings pleasure and freedom but only “proportionate to the activity of the soul.” Like life itself, art is a process. In *Art and Man*, by embracing the intuitive and the empathetic, Lee democratized the responses to art. In essence, art is aesthetic, form, necessary to life itself, and like life is an activity.

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Keywords:

activity, art, aesthetics, beauty, contemplative, form, life, practical, social, spiritual, ugly