



Affective Memory in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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The notion of affective memory was first introduced by Théodule Ribot (1894), giving rise to a debate about its existence at the beginning of the 20th century. Although Vernon Lee did not directly take part in this discussion, she conceptualized this notion in a quite precise way, mainly in her book *Music and Its Lovers* (1932), clarifying the sometimes obscure formulations made by previous authors.

Because memory is not one and indivisible faculty (1932: 174), our emotional states and feelings can leave traces that are distinct and independent of the perceptual memory-images (visual, auditory, tactile and olfactive ones) left by persons, places and circumstances associated with the past emotional state (1923). Affective memory refers to this capacity of retaining and reviving traces of past emotions and feelings (1932: 185). According to Lee, this faculty of “re-living” emotions whose cause has ceased to exist must be distinguished (a) not only from remembering the circumstances and places connected with a past emotion without feeling that emotion again (1932: 175), that is, from remembering “all concrete *whos, wheres, and whens*” (1932: 187); (b) but also from « knowing in a historical way” that at a given moment one has felt a certain kind of feeling or emotion (1932: 175-176). Emotions can then be remembered in two different ways: through an historical recollection or “description” (1923) of the past feelings in question, and this corresponds to a past that is “dead” to us (*Passé Mort*); or through the actual reviviscence of those past feelings, and in this sense the past feels alive (*Passé Vivant*) (1932: 176-177).

Furthermore, Lee distinguishes two ways in which affective memory can manifest itself. Affective memories that are concrete and personal manifest themselves “surrounded” by the remembrance of the past individual circumstances associated with the emotion relived. They have a personal reference: they correspond to the evocation of one’s own past (1932: 196). Nonetheless, this “subterranean reservoir” of our past emotional experiences (1932: 190) do not simply remain individual and concrete; affective memories

tend to associate with each other, and thus become general and abstract (1932: 222), divorced from the first person singular (1932: 205), forming thus engram groups (1932: 222) or emotional engram complexes (1923) that can be considered as Affective Schemata (1932: 180). These affective schemata are a condition of possibility not only of aesthetic contemplation (1932: 222), but also of the feeling of sympathy with fellow creatures (1932: 185). The recognition of someone else's emotion through her facial expression and gesture would remain purely intellectual if it did not evoke a reviviscence of something that we have ourselves experienced (1923).

In fact, the feeling of sympathy is one of the reasons that Lee invokes to explain the natural selection of affective memory: whereas affective memory (probably in more concrete forms) subserves the life of the individual by avoidance of pain and attraction of pleasure, in its abstract and schematic form it also subserves the higher, social life, by giving rise to sympathetic feelings (1932: 185).

Primary Sources:

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