

‘Feelings of vivid fellowship’: Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson’s Quest for Collaborative ‘aesthetic sociability’

Kirsty Bunting offers an analysis of the shared life writing of Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, with particular reference to the writing of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’. The essay investigates how the authors’ already precarious subjectivities as women working in the male-dominated scientific and aesthetic fields of the 1890s were brought under further stress by Lee’s compulsive need for increased strength through union with another, her scepticism about her own abilities as ‘motor-type’ aesthete, and the collaborators’ unequal investigative and textual methodology. By analysing Lee’s semi-autobiographical depictions of her work with Anstruther-Thomson in *Althea* and focusing in particular on the pair’s one successful experiment in the search for ‘aesthetic sociability’ in front of Titian’s ‘Sacred and Profane Love’, this essay charts the development of their shared lives and writing from their first meeting, to the ecstatic pinnacle of their joint achievement, before examining the collapse of their collaborative dyad.

Keywords: physiological aesthetics; psychological aesthetics; collaboration; Vernon Lee; Clementina Anstruther-Thomson; life-writing

Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Paget, 1856–1935) and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson’s (1857–1921) co-authored essay ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ first appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in autumn 1897.¹ It expounded the theory that for a rare breed of people especially sensitive to visual stimuli (especially works of art), whom they called ‘motor-types’, the body undergoes a series of involuntary physical and mental responses such as ‘alteration in our respiratory and equilibratory processes, and [...] initiated movements of various parts of the body’ when concentrating the gaze on an object or scene (p. 236). Lee and Anstruther-Thomson describe their practice of ‘anthropomorphic aesthetics’ as at once a ‘projection of our inner experience into the forms which we see’ and a means to ‘make form exist in ourselves’ (p. 236). The result is ‘aesthetic sociability’ or ‘feelings of vivid fellowship’ with the observed object and with one another.² The physical, emotional and intellectual sensations that accompany this art empathy, the collaborators explained, can prove pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent, and this response determines aesthetic appreciation

or revulsion. Thus, they contributed to the burgeoning late-nineteenth-century embodied approach to the study of the beautiful.

Lee and Anstruther-Thomson were unusual in their art response in that they sought to experience simultaneous and identical anthropomorphizing bodily and emotional affects in harmonious accord together. By positing the art object as a point of triangulated interchange between them, they not only attempted to understand the art object's formal qualities in bodily terms, they also tried to achieve a closer knowledge of, and identification with, each other through the shared act of looking. The published and unpublished records of their gallery experiments are not merely descriptions of the objects under observation but manifest intimate portraits of the critics' bodies and feelings, making them curious examples of shared life writings. They not only record the pair's professional endeavours and day-to-day private lives, but also detail the minutiae of their sensory, nervous, postural, respiratory, empathetic and, some critics have argued, erotic, experiences. In their attempts to achieve new modes of being, sharing and communicating, they succeeded in innovating new models of physiological and psychological interiority. Reading 'Beauty and Ugliness', and their other works, as shared life writing highlights the ways in which the pair were modern pioneers exploring new subjectivities in gender and genre at the end of the nineteenth century. Hilary Fraser sums up their art criticism as 'mak[ing] room for multiple versions of spectatorship, and so empower[ing] women's looking', but, Fraser states, 'their insistence on the significance of difference in aesthetic perception is nowhere explicitly identified as sexed or gendered in their formal writing on psychological aesthetics'.³ This essay follows on from Fraser's summation but argues that their collaborative methodology, the ways in which they divided their labour and valued the other's contributions, could be described as 'gendered' in that it conforms to a traditional gendered economy of creativity and exchange, positing Lee as male-identified, cerebral, literary, masterful and professional. Anstruther-Thomson, on the

other hand, is associated with the passive, receptive body, the spoken, the impulsive and the amateur, the ancillary or helpmeet to the dominant Lee. This essay will examine how their shared writing exposes this inequity and how it brought an end to their collaboration.

Although the collaborators published 'Beauty and Ugliness' under both their names, their collaborative methodology and aesthetic theory was driven by a desire to think, feel and write as one, to obliterate the physical and mental barriers between them (and the art work). This resulted in a desire to present themselves as bound in as seamless an aesthetic and textual union as their contemporaries Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper had in the cultivation of their shared literary identity, 'Michael Field'. This essay will examine the ways in which Lee and Anstruther-Thomson attempted this, and their only partial success. The authors of 'Beauty and Ugliness' attracted more attention from critics and a wider readership than 'Michael Field', but unlike Bradley and Cooper their joint collaborative personae, as well as their relationship as lovers, was undermined by the fact that the desire for creative and aesthetic union which characterized their physiological aesthetics was driven largely by *one* of its members only: Vernon Lee. This essay also explores how Lee's compulsion to achieve the heightened fellowship and closeness offered by their principle of 'aesthetic sociability' (even when she was secretly sceptical about the existence of true 'motor type' responsiveness within herself, as this essay explains) saw the collaborators strive, thrive and then fail in their shared work. As Linda H. Peterson has written in her study of the public and private shared life writing of the Howitt family:

[C]ollaborative life writing demands that its subjects share ideology in order to share narrative. When ideological positions converge, life writing becomes possible. When they diverge the collaborative narrative breaks down, reaches an impasse or disperses into individual life stories.⁴

This essay examines Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's ideological convergence as they approached the height of their collaborative achievement: the writing of 'Beauty and Ugliness'. I state that *the writing* of 'Beauty and Ugliness' (as opposed to its publication) is their high water mark, both as aesthetic co-investigators and as lovers, because as the essay appeared in print the pair were accused, somewhat unjustly, of plagiarizing their friend Bernard Berenson's work. Horrified, Anstruther-Thomson immediately withdrew from their shared work in aesthetics.⁵ It is at this moment that their joint lives, work and aesthetic ideology began to diverge and disperse into the 'individual life stories' of Peterson's model.

This essay, whilst not centring upon Lee or Anstruther-Thomson's subjectivities as late-nineteenth-century lesbians (already fairly comprehensively discussed elsewhere), begins by charting the development of their shared lives and writings to its zenith with 'Beauty and Ugliness' (and in particular their experiments with Titian's 'Sacred and Profane Love', documented therein), and ends with the demise of their collaboration.⁶ At the heart of this essay is the assertion that the pair's already precarious subjectivities as women working in the male-dominated scientific and aesthetic establishments were brought under further stress from within by Lee's compulsive need for increased strength through union with another, driven by her awareness of this social and intellectual isolation from these communities of professional men. Her need to be taken seriously resulted in Lee assuming the hopelessly dichotomized position of at once relying upon Anstruther-Thomson (as convincing 'motor-type') to provide the evidence they required for their aesthetic experiments, and being embarrassed by what would be received as their amateurish and insufficiently substantiated semi-scientific methods. This fracture in the foundations of their shared lives and writings was evident even in the earliest days of their relationship.

Their relationship spanned 34 years following their initial meeting in the summer of 1887 and their correspondence (now held in the archives of Colby College, Maine and

Somerville College, Oxford) attests that they fell in love that first summer.⁷ Any vestiges of this romantic attachment ended dramatically as ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ appeared in print. Most scholarship cites ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ as their first and only collaborative work. Yet, in 1889 they collaboratively produced ‘Old Italian Gardens’, a *Genus loci* essay combining Lee’s observations on Italian landscapes with Anstruther-Thomson’s sketches. Lee’s unpublished manuscript ‘Statement Concerning the Writing of Beauty and Ugliness’⁸ describes another little-known collaborative work. She writes, ‘[I]n the autumn [of 1892] we went to Bergamo and Venice. At Bergamo Miss A.T. made a number of notes on Lotto which were incorporated textually into my paper on Venetian and Lombard Villas which appeared in *Cosmopolis*.’⁹ This refers to ‘Old Lombard and Venetian Villas’, which remained unpublished until April 1896. Its reader is aware of the presence of a travelling companion accompanying Lee throughout her walk around famous Italian villas, lakes and gardens, because the essay is narrated in the plural first person pronoun, but it is unclear who this other person is until the essay’s end. Lee’s claim that Anstruther-Thomson’s observations were ‘incorporated textually’ into the essay is evinced further when the identity of her companion is finally revealed in the essay’s penultimate paragraph, which begins, “‘Look at this composition,” says my friend K___, taking me up to the enormous altarpiece at San Bartolomeo.’¹⁰ The text continues for some 20 lines with Anstruther-Thomson’s idiosyncratic art-criticism of a Lorenzo Lotto ‘Madonna and Child with Saints’.

‘Old Lombard and Venetian Villas’ deserves to be revisited here as an early work of shared life writing, conveying as it does the exuberance and excitement of the collaborators’ early travels and research. The telling moment in which Anstruther-Thomson is pictured interrupting the text with her demand that Lee turn her gaze towards her and the altarpiece captures the way in which her commanding and assured art-responsiveness impressed and

vivified Lee and her work. Lee would later say that Anstruther-Thomson had converted her to physiological aesthetics in these early days of their relationship:

It was only as a result of intimacy with Kit Anstruther-Thomson that I became aware that, much as I had written about works of art, I did not really know them when they were in front of me: did not know a copy from a masterpiece. I did not know what I liked or disliked; still less why I did either.¹¹

Despite this acknowledgement of her collaborator as an enlightening, guiding presence in their shared work, 'Old Lombard and Venetian Villas' highlights the ways in which Lee was careful to frame Anstruther-Thomson's unapologetic, dynamic and performative aesthetics. She contains her partner's 'notes' as a short, clearly delineated interlude in *her* work. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that the essay was published as Lee's lone writing, Anstruther-Thomson's involvement marginalized to that of a near-silent onlooker and companion. Here were the early signs of Lee's fear of not being accepted as the intellectual equal of her male contemporaries in physiological aesthetics, and of her awareness that, by following Anstruther-Thomson into the introspective and isolating sphere of empathy and sensory impressions, they risked shutting themselves off from a larger scientific community. This resulted in a tendency on Lee's part to pre-emptively emphasize her own intellectual capabilities whilst, ostensibly unintentionally, reducing Anstruther-Thomson's involvement in their work to performative bodily responsiveness. Despite this imbalance, Lee remained committed to her assertion that aesthetic experience was 'heightened by sharing' the 'enjoyment of beautiful things' with another person.¹² Lee stated that, 'the feeling of one individual is strengthened by the expression of similar feeling in his neighbour [...] and that two efforts, like two horses starting a carriage instead of one, combined give more than double the value of each taken separately'.¹³ In attempting to achieve aesthetic sociability and produce jointly written expressions of shared aesthetic experience, Lee and Anstruther-

Thomson were working against the current of introspective art criticism and the new field of scientific psychological aesthetics. The key psychological aesthete commentators of the age, including, amongst others, George Henry Lewes, Bernard Berenson, William James, Karl Groose, Grant Allen and Theodore Lipps, talk of lone, not shared, aesthetic experience or connoisseurship.

However, just like these, notably all male, investigators in the field, the central concern of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's research was answering the question 'What is the process of perceiving form, and what portions of our organism participate therein?' (p. 161). Their approach was inspired, in part, by Walter Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) which suggested the art-critic make him- or herself the subject of analysis by asking, 'What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book to me? What effect does it really produce on me?'¹⁴ William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and its assertion that all emotion is nothing other than physical response to given stimuli also influenced their approach. James argued that these 'bodily changes' operate by 'a preorganized mechanism' and are so 'infinitely numerous and subtle that the entire organism may be called a sounding board, which every change of consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate'.¹⁵ James conceded, 'there is no real evidence [...] for the assumption that particular perceptions do produce wide-spread bodily effects'.¹⁶ The 'Beauty and Ugliness' experiments were conceived as a way of providing this missing evidence, but Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's quest for shared aesthetic sociability and triangulated merger with the art work and one another developed as a curious offshoot of the late-nineteenth-century shift in aesthetics from a Ruskinian model of utility to a Paterian quest for pleasure, during which aestheticians became less likely to seek moral or spiritual succour in art and the beautiful or to theorize ways of employing appreciation of beauty for the good of all society, tending instead to ask nothing more of the artwork than pleasurable

impressions. This shift resulted in the privatization of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic condition, Pater argued, is one of solitude:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us [...]. Every one of these impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.¹⁷

Bernard Berenson, like Pater, believed that aesthetic connoisseurs were consoled in their isolation by the possibility of achieving the ‘aesthetic moment’ of ‘mystic vision’ in which the art object and observer ‘become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness’.¹⁸

Both Lee and Anstruther-Thomson believed that this ‘mystic’ experience could be expanded to incorporate *two* beholders of the same object in ‘one awareness’. However, it was Vernon Lee who was the driving force behind the pair’s quest for aesthetic sociability as a means of overcoming aesthetic, as well as personal and professional, isolation, and there are numerous contemporaneous accounts by their friends to support this. For instance, Irene Cooper Willis, Lee’s friend and literary executor, offered this insight:

She raged at ‘having no influence’, that being demonstrated, she declared, by the commercial failure of her books. She attributed her lack of influence to her isolated social position, often describing herself as an alien, having no ties of either nation, blood, class or profession. She was just an individual, she said, and to be an individual was a weak status that deprived her of her power as a writer.¹⁹

A 1914 letter to Lee from her (by then estranged) friend Augustine Bulteau echoes Cooper Willis and suggests that even in her later years Lee had failed to overcome this alienation:

I know that you are a waif, a stray, that nothing very lasting, no regular family or friend, binds you to your country. I know that the English refuse to grant any

importance to your adaptation of ideas picked up in Germany. I know that the ‘thinker’ that you regard yourself, is the cause of much laughter among your countrymen.²⁰

Bulbeau’s cruel admonition refers to Lee’s anti-war stance and her association with the German science establishment, a position Bulbeau considered disloyal to Britain and the allied countries, but the idea of Lee as *an intellectual outcast* must have hit home.

The collaborators may have been attracted to the Paterian privileging of aesthetic feeling over knowledge, as well as to William James’s embodied model of life as primarily physical feeling, because it allowed them to confer authority upon themselves in the teeth of a culture of university-educated experts and their professional, institutional affiliations which may otherwise deny them authority to profess a working knowledge of science, psychology or architecture. This is evinced in ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, for example, which anticipates criticism over their passages on the appreciation of architecture by stating:

we desire to warn the reader against the criticism which explains the aesthetic qualities of architecture by a reference to the technicalities of building. This view cannot possibly be true, because we take the greatest aesthetic pleasure in architecture without any knowledge of building and because our impressions are often at variance with what a knowledge of building would reveal. (p. 195)

This defensiveness is also seen in Lee’s semi-autobiographical *Baldwin: A Book of Dialogues* (1886). Lee writes herself into this text as the philosopher Baldwin, described as ‘a not very feminine man’ placed to ‘some measure at a woman’s standpoint’ by the ‘exceptional solitude’ of his upbringing and education.²¹ Baldwin is also recognized as a double for Lee by her biographers Christa Zorn and Vineta Colby.²² *Baldwin*’s introduction provides details of the title character’s life which correlate startlingly with Lee’s own.²³ Baldwin, according to Lee, represents ‘a borderland between fact and fancy’, allowing Lee the freedom of self-definition by which she chooses to inhabit the body of a ‘masculine’ male

sensitive to female experience: the perfect guise in which to make love to the young Scottish aristocrat Lady Althea, who doubles for Anstruther-Thomson, when he reappears in *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (1894), a book dedicated ‘To C.A.T’. Colby attributes all of the characters in *Althea* with living doubles from the collaborators’ circle of acquaintances.²⁴ In *Althea*, Baldwin/Lee laments the ‘perfect agony’ of his isolation,²⁵ stating:

I am getting to believe more and more [...] that despite all friendships and all loves, we must rest content to live alone with our own soul [...]. [O]ur veritable intellectual and moral life, like our veritable physical life, takes place in isolation. Sympathy may help, love may help, but what we actually feel and think and do, we feel and think and do alone. There is a point beyond which no soul can come within sight of ours – an inner sanctuary where we are alone with ourselves [...]. [N]ext to the fact of death, there is none so full of awe, I think, as that of such inevitable isolation.²⁶

Lady Althea, however, does not share this Paterian view, believing that it *is* possible to transcend ego boundaries simply by loving someone and sharing their life interests. Baldwin imagines that union with another must result in the violent destruction of both parties, stating that the penetration of another’s ‘inner sanctuary’ would be ‘the destruction of oneself’.²⁷ He continues, ‘you might as well bleed yourself into your friend’s veins; you and he would die, and your lives would have been none the less separate in those last moments. There is something solemn and sad in this knowledge. [...] [I]n reality, we can never be fully united’.²⁸ The 28-year-old Lee had recorded similar anxieties in an unpublished diary many years before this:

The world is overstocked with mixed natures, and one of the great wearinesses, one of the great pains of spiritual life, is the perception that we can never rest satisfied with any individual [...], that we cannot give up our soul to absolute reverence, love,

satisfaction. Hence the poignant desire to obtain from art what we cannot obtain from reality, to create beings whom we can understand without criticising, without sorting good from evil; to create friends whom we can love completely.²⁹

This diary confession, the semi-autobiographical *Althea* and *Baldwin*, as well as contemporaneous accounts by the pair's friends all lend weight to the assertion that Lee's anxiety for closer communion with another insinuated itself into every aspect of the collaborator's work and that their co-authored writing crosses over into revelatory and intimate life-writing, recording their repeated attempts at finding a solution to the impossibility of annihilation of bodily and emotional boundaries.

Lee's dread of isolation was compounded by an anxious secret that, at the time of writing 'Beauty and Ugliness', she was trying to suppress even from herself, and which she did not reveal to Anstruther-Thomson until their relationship's breakdown in 1897. 'Beauty and Ugliness' claims that both collaborators were examples of the 'motor-type', 'specially developed persons' with 'highly aesthetic natures'; but inwardly Lee knew she was not one of them (p. 160). Lee's inability to experience kinaesthetic sensation, as well as the psychological impact of keeping this secret, contributed to the crisis which accompanied the writing of their essay since it meant Lee was isolated from her own experiments, aesthetic theories and, crucially, from Anstruther-Thomson. Years after 'Beauty and Ugliness', Lee would publicly refute her claims to motor-type responsiveness, confessing that throughout the gallery experiments, 'I was indeed [...] quite unable to join in.'³⁰ In fact, of the 20 or so experiments documented in 'Beauty and Ugliness', only *one*, conducted before Titian's 'Sacred and Profane Love', resulted in the sought after moment of aesthetic sociability. It is to their experiences before this artwork and the collaborators' momentary ecstatic merger of body with canvas, emotion with text, that this essay now turns.

Their analysis of this painting demonstrates that they overlooked its historical, allegorical or literary significance, preferring instead a strategy of identification, naming the subjects, not 'Venus and the Bride' or 'Sacred and Profane Love', but simply 'the two women'. The experiment, therefore, begins in a model of reflection and recognition reminiscent of a mirror (a model that entirely excludes Titian himself). The collaborators could be said to be reconstructing the painting's contents and meaning, creating a visual economy which celebrates female love and looking, driven by their desire to diffuse their isolating bodily and emotional boundaries. At the end of their experimental gazing at this painting together, the collaborators record that it has the effect of, 'exciting us [...], widening our breathing, of making us feel light-hearted, and of making us feel enclosed' in a loving dyad which mirrors the canvas's merger of the female bodies with Cupid's (p. 232). The following describes this experiment.

Good painting, the collaborators tell us, must demonstrate accomplished 'realisation' of the 'third dimension' (i.e. a skilful rendering of depth of field), creating the sense of a three-dimensional space which beckons the beholder in. They exclaim, '[t]he ground lies flat, and will bear our weight right through the picture into the distance' (p. 232). The effect of perceiving this other, seemingly accessible, world results in a connection which passes 'backwards and forwards with the beholder, so that we enter into the picture' (p. 232). This they describe as a split sense of 'being alive, one might almost say, on both sides, instead of only in front' of the canvas (p. 233). Perhaps these first hints that the pair were feeling themselves drawn into the art work come as no surprise given the idiom in which Titian worked. It is a painting that employs typical Renaissance principles of triangulated composition (most common in devotional art) as a means to interrogate, implicate or involve the viewer. Yet their sense of incorporation develops as they note the ocular motor adjustments they experience as they gaze, not at the work in its entirety, but by tracing its

outlines in a continuous visual flow over what they call its 'ideal lines'. Great art, they claim, possesses a fluidity of 'ideal lines' which the eye can satisfactorily follow without interruption. The cohesion or unification of subjects or patterns within an artwork by these lines is what they call 'tie', and the ocular motor adjustments triggered by good tie are pleasurable (p. 229). However, if the ideal lines are 'vague' or 'haphazard' the eye cannot follow them, form cannot be perceived effectively, tie is not achieved, and the motor adjustments which accompany this disrupted gaze are unpleasant and the object cannot be enjoyed (pp. 228–29). They write, 'in looking at it, we unconsciously *mime* the subtly coordinating complexity of movement' of the painting's outlines (p. 234). They claim to be under the painting's controlling influence, denying they have any power over their bodies' ekphrastic translation of it.

Their physical translation of the ideal lines of the Titian are most clearly expressed by what Anstruther-Thomson's calls her 'skeleton' sketch, which accompanied their essay [see **Figure**]. The lines of the sketch can be followed by the reader as they explain that the gaze follows a distorted circle that begins at the pointed toe of the seated bride figure and moves up her body to where the folds of her sleeves draw the gazers' eyes across her body to the right of the painting, where the line is taken up by the outstretched arm of the naked female figure. This line passes up over her head and across the head of Cupid in the painting's centre, returning again to caress the bride's head and travelling back down to her foot, where the circuit begins again, the gaze circulating between and around the two women's bodies. This enclosing line creates the impression that, 'the two women [...] are not detached individuals, but combine with the little cupid in the middle to form a whole' (p. 233). Following these lines results in the sensation that, '[a]ll the time we look at the picture our balance is swung from left to right, and, after a pause, back from right to left' (p. 234). Therefore, their motor and empathetic responses to the work have the effect of suggesting

another circle which binds Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, and they experience shared and vitalizing, pleasurable motor effects during this enclosure together. At last, they are able to write, ‘we, in beholding it, are not only made happy, but enclosed, forbidden to escape or lapse, and forced to move through every detail of a mood of happiness’ (p. 235). Their final word on the Titian experiment, and indeed the final passages of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, presents an image of the collaborators bound in ecstatic merger, in which ‘[l]ife outside seems obliterated, and the moment of consummate self-sufficing feeling to have come, and, as in the case of Faust, to be fixed’ (p. 235). This notion of fixedness within the ecstatic moment of union was a very real concern for the collaborators. It could be argued that they came to adopt this painting as the symbol of their aesthetic and private bonds. Firstly, they returned to Rome to see the painting ‘several times every year’ (p. 233). Furthermore, they extended their one successful experience of aesthetic sociability through their possession of a charcoal sketch of Anstruther-Thomson in the dress and posture of Titian’s bride figure (made by their friend John Singer Sargent), which Lee included in *Art and Man* in 1924. Thus, these actions underline and draw public attention to the private bond forged before this artwork, whilst prolonging and disseminating the memory of the moment of their shared art-union and emphasizing how closely their lives, their shared writing and their aesthetics had once come.

Years after ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, Lee described their elation in that autumn of 1897, saying, ‘Like, no doubt, many over-hasty discoverers we believed ourselves to have found one of the Keys to the Universe, a key which would instantly turn in the lock and reveal all the mysteries of art-psychology to every observer.’³¹ Lee recorded that both collaborators retired to *Il Palmerino* (Lee’s Italian home), for the purpose of ‘working Kit’s notes into a logical sequence and providing them with their psychological setting’.³² However, Lee felt that this task was made difficult for her collaborator, whom she claimed ‘had least the habit

of literary expression and composition'.³³ Irene Cooper Willis, who was often with the collaborators in Italy during this period, stated that to overcome this, 'Lee did all the writing but Kit was called upon to listen to and approve of every written statements [*sic*] concerning the "experiments" and the conclusions drawn from this process.'³⁴ Again, Lee's anxiety is seen to surface in her description of her main concern during this time being, 'rendering our new-fangled notions less startling by an array of already accepted psychological facts and theories'.³⁵ Looking back at this time, Lee wrote:

Kit may have felt as if her very personal and living impressions were being deadened under what perhaps struck her as philosophical padding [...]. I still sometimes catch myself feeling as if such manipulation of them came between me and my real self.³⁶

Lee's 'real self', therefore, wanted to allow Anstruther-Thomson free reign to explore and communicate her ekphrastic responses, but her fear of being rejected by her peers could not allow it.

Despite Lee's best efforts to disguise any amateurish pretensions and methodological eccentricities, and the collaborators' initial belief that they had 'found one of the keys to the universe', their discoveries were greeted with indifference or contempt by their peers.³⁷

Theodore Lipps, for example, responded to their essay with 'particularly scathing criticism'.³⁸ Berenson's plagiarist accusation was never made public but was common knowledge amongst their friends. Lee described their 'disappointment' as 'the chilly drop from one's own warm excitement over a cherished piece of work into the indifference of other folk'.³⁹ The disappointment prevented Anstruther-Thomson from returning to psychological aesthetics; their collaboration was all but over.

The journey of 'Beauty and Ugliness' as a work of life writing that documents their public and private relationship takes a final, gloomier turn in 1912 when Lee republished it alongside their other jointly-written works in the co-signed collection '*Beauty and Ugliness*'

and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics. In this new version, Lee undid their collaborative cover by splitting their essay into attributed sections framed with brackets initialled 'C.A.T', revealing that Anstruther-Thomson's portions are a series of passages describing her physiological motor responses. In the footnotes to this version, Lee finally communicated her startling *volte-face* upon her 1897 claims to motor-type abilities, stating, 'I no longer consider such sensations as explaining or even necessarily accompanying the activity of form perception.'⁴⁰ This statement, alongside the attributive apportioning of the essay's labour, leaves Anstruther-Thomson to bear the brunt of the negative reception (which, in actuality, had long since faded, their work on the essay by 1912 largely forgotten) of their, once-shared, theories of motor-response. In making these changes to their essay, Lee makes the distinction between the performative, responsive body of her collaborator and her own cerebral, learned theorizing. That Lee felt embarrassed by Anstruther-Thomson's non-scientific, conjectural and ambiguous language is illustrated in her attempts to restrain this rambling style by persisting on enclosing it within her own measured, academic explanations of the experiments, enforcing the distinction between the performative, responsive body of her collaborator and her own rational theorizing.

Let us return now to Lee's semi-autobiographical *Althea* of 1894 (in which Lee appears as the male character, Baldwin) in order to further mine the ways in which Lee's intellectual insecurity and the pair's unequal division of labour could be said to have first become formalized. Lee's introduction to this work celebrates Lady Althea (Anstruther-Thomson) as an exceptional talent in the field of aesthetic introspection:

I have taken as the central figure in these dialogues one of those rare natures so strangely balanced that they recognise truth as soon as they see it [...], natures which know spontaneously what the rest of us learn by experience and reflection; fortunate samples of what we may perhaps all become.⁴¹

This spontaneity, Althea's curious way of knowing, or half-knowing, what others must struggle to know, comes as the result of her affinity with the natural world. All of Althea's pronouncements upon Baldwin's theories are accompanied by her lazily fingering olive branches, gazing upon sunsets and swaying grasses, or making daisy chains, suggesting her thought processes are translations of the beautiful and natural, and that they are unconscious and innately physical as opposed to educated and empirical like Baldwin's. As Lee was writing *Althea* in the early 1890s, 'Beauty and Ugliness' was already under development. It is possible to read Baldwin's denial of Althea's intellection and her need of a master aesthete to help her fully understand her talents as being prescient of the tensions raised by their collaborative methodology, Lee's secret of non-motor responsiveness and their subsequent estrangement. The description continues, 'Althea is naturally the pupil of Baldwin; for being all she is by the mere grace of God, she is, at first inarticulate, unreasoning, ignorant of all why and wherefore, and requires to be taught many things which others know.'⁴² In Baldwin's presence Althea is led to a perfect understanding of her own vague, half-recognized notions. She states, for instance, 'I understand [...]. Do you know I have thought something like that myself, only I wasn't sure whether it mightn't be some of that usual wrong-headedness of mine.'⁴³ Baldwin, on the other hand, in a somewhat narcissistic visual economy, is most aware of his own brilliance and vitality, as well as Althea's beauty, when he sees his own greatness reflected in her. Immediately following the above instance of Althea's enlightenment, 'Baldwin thought, or rather felt, how singularly positive was the healthfulness, the largeness, and beauty of the soul lodged in this [Althea's] large, fair, youthful body'.⁴⁴ In 'Beauty and Ugliness' the collaborators would develop this sense of the body being at its most healthful when in the aesthetic moment of physically exhilarating translation of the beautiful, operating at its optimum level when perfected by merger with the artwork. Yet, in *Althea* the body's ideal state comes as the result of a combination of Althea's

beauty and naturalness with Baldwin's insight and intellect: the perfect balance of beauty with brains, instinct with learning, the very embodiment of pedagogic eros, which, when Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's life writing and relationship are taken in the long view, might be a fitting way to describe their bond. Although *Althea* speaks of an unequal dynamic, Baldwin's final product (a philosophy for a model society) cannot be arrived at without shared input.

A similar reciprocal collaborative model was adopted in the writing of 'Beauty and Ugliness', about which, Lee reminisced, 'more and more each of us brought something which could not have been got by the other' as Anstruther-Thomson divulged the secrets of physical aesthetic pleasure or revulsion and Lee translated or explained this physical phenomena, both to her collaborator and to their readership.⁴⁵ This is most clearly seen in Lee's statement:

I put aside all historical, philosophical and 'critical' studies of art, and fell to reading every psychological book and periodical which came within reach [...]. Thus, while in galleries and museums Kit was filling book after book (usually humble account books with ready reckoners and the year's almanack [*sic*] attached) with half-legible pencil jottings, I was wading through mental science, including the physiology of the sense organs, and specialist's treatises like Stumpf's huge volumes on tone-perception [...]. The result of my readings was, however, that when Kit came home after a morning in the galleries, saying with ill-repressed excitement: 'Do you know, I think I've found out something, after all', I was often able to tell her that she had really done so, and even the other things which she must set about discovering. I became, moreover, more and more able to fill up gaps in her notions or set her to filling them up.⁴⁶

In maintaining this skewed collaborative dynamic throughout their lives together they initiated the process by which Anstruther-Thomson's contribution to the collaboration became erased. Critics would come to align her with an ideal of the passive, receptive and mysterious body, merely the subject of scientific experiment whilst Lee presented herself as,

and so has come to be associated with, the active intellection which governed the experiments themselves. And yet, 'Beauty and Ugliness' still demonstrates that for at least one brief moment the collaborators did succeed in obliterating the boundaries between them and between the worlds of reality and fantasy, canvas and flesh, and in so doing they challenged Pater's assertion, and Lee's fear, that each individual must exist as solitary prisoner within their own isolated world of sensation and perception.

Around 1915 or 1916 the two participated in a meeting at the 'Chelsea Union of Democratic Control'. Anstruther-Thomson was the chairperson whilst Lee presented her anti-war text *Satan the Waster*. Lee called this 'Kit's and my last act of collaboration, perhaps the consummation of our original perfect understanding in all the fundamental matters of life'.⁴⁷ Perhaps they had come to this more hopeful stage in their relationship due to Lee's arrival in 1909 at a new way of thinking about aesthetic union, at the time of writing *Laurus Nobilis*. Having mourned that aesthetic sociability and loving union were unattainable, and called the desire for merger 'a great delusion [...] which some insist upon carrying down to their graves, bruising themselves against the impregnable boundaries of another', and having accepted her non-motor responsiveness,⁴⁸ Lee came to accept that complete transcendence of the boundaries between herself and her collaborators was impossible. She states:

Final fulfilment of that dream of absolute union? No; but once more that passing semblance thereof, through which, as the central moment of all great loves, we have all of us lived [...]. We have seen that by one of the most gracious coincidences between beauty and kindliness, the aesthetic emotion is even intensified by the knowledge of co-existence in others: the delight in each person communicating itself, like a musical third, fifth, or octave, to the similar yet different delight in his neighbour, harmonic enriching harmonic by stimulating fresh vibration.⁴⁹

Does this suggest Lee finally arrived at a more realistic and workable solution to her deep-seated sense of social, intellectual and emotional isolation from her peers and collaborators by finally accepting that harmony *can* be achieved by accepting the other's 'other-ness'? If indeed *Laurus Nobilis* does suggest she came to terms with, and was satisfied by, accepting the experience of others as 'similar yet different' to her own, this new formulation of shared sociability came too late to allow a resumption of her collaborative endeavours with Anstruther-Thomson in any significant way. The pair remained friends until Anstruther-Thomson's death, yet they never lived or travelled together as they had done before 'Beauty and Ugliness'. The inequality of their collaborative methodology, Lee's reductive idealization of her collaborator in Platonizing terms as her neophyte in a model which recreated a Socratic bond (as expressed in *Althea*), as well as Lee's scepticism over Anstruther-Thomson's claims to motor-type responsiveness, all heralded the collaborative crisis from which they would never fully recover and which ensured that Anstruther-Thomson's contribution to British aestheticism would remain overlooked for nearly a century. However, one short-lived moment in their work gives a glimpse of the possibilities for collaborative life writing. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's tenacious quest for (and, albeit brief, ecstatic achievement of) shared 'aesthetic sociability' demonstrates the potential fluidity and permeability of authorial and creative subjectivity and how Vernon Lee and Anstruther-Thomson pioneered new, experimental ways of writing feeling together.

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NOTES

¹ Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and Ugliness', *Contemporary Review*, 72 (October 1897), 544–69, and (November 1897), 669–88. All quotations are taken from the collected edition: Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and

Ugliness’, in *‘Beauty and Ugliness’ and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), pp. 153–239. Hereafter, cited parenthetically.

² Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), p. 51, and ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, p. 231.

³ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 97.

⁴ Linda H. Peterson, ‘The Auto/biographies of Mary Howitt and Her Family’, in *Women’s Life Writing and Imagined Communities*, ed. by Cynthia Huff (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 176–93 (p. 178).

⁵ Richard Cary, ‘A Slight Case of Plagiarism, Part 1: Berenson, Paget and Anstruther-Thomson’, *Colby Library Quarterly*, 10th series, 5 (1974), 303–24, and Mandy Gagel, ‘1897, A Discussion of Plagiarism: Letters between Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, and Mary Costelloe’, *Literary Imagination*, 2.2 (2012), 154–79.

⁶ Titian’s ‘Sacred and Profane Love’, oil on canvas, painted c. 1514. Villa Borghese, Rome.

⁷ Vernon Lee Archive (VLA), Special Collections, Colby College, Waterville, Maine. Papers of Vernon Lee, Special Collections, Somerville College Library, University of Oxford.

⁸ VLA, MS ‘Statements Describing Events in the Writing of “Beauty and Ugliness”’. The Colby College archive contains two unpublished handwritten MSS with this title. The other is written by Anstruther-Thomson. Both describe their research and work methods.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Vernon Lee, ‘Old Lombard and Venetian Villas’, *Cosmopolis*, 2 (1896), 49–59 (p. 57).

¹¹ Vernon Lee, ‘Introduction’, in Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (London: John Lane/Bodley Head, 1924), p. 29.

¹² Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), p. 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ Walter Pater, ‘Preface’, in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. vii.

¹⁵ William James, *Principles of Psychology* (London: Constable, 1890), p. 743.

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- 16 Ibid., p. 747.
- 17 Walter Pater, 'Conclusion', in *The Renaissance*, ed. Phillips, p. 151.
- 18 Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History* (London: Constable and Company, 1950), p. 80.
- 19 Irene Cooper Willis, VLA, MS 'Unpublished Biography of Vernon Lee', p. 5.
- 20 As quoted by Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 205.
- 21 Vernon Lee, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886), p. 5.
- 22 Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003), p. 3. See also, Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 59.
- 23 Lee, *Baldwin*, pp. 5–7.
- 24 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 145.
- 25 Vernon Lee, *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1894), p. 128.
- 26 Lee, *Althea*, p. 116.
- 27 Ibid., p. 125.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 125–26.
- 29 Vernon Lee, VLA, MS 'Autobiographical Notes' (19 January 1884), p. 173.
- 30 'Introduction' to *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments*, p. 34.
- 31 Lee, 'Introduction', in *Art and Man*, p. 49.
- 32 Ibid., p. 53.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Irene Cooper Willis, VLA, MS 'Unpublished Biography of Vernon Lee', p. 20.
- 35 Lee, 'Introduction', in *Art and Man*, p. 53.
- 36 Ibid., p. 54.
- 37 Ibid., p. 49.
- 38 'Beauty and Ugliness', p. 184 n.

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- 39 Lee, 'Introduction', in *Art and Man*, p. 55.
- 40 'Beauty and Ugliness', p. 159 n.
- 41 Lee, 'Introduction', in *Althea*, p. xvii.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Lee, *Althea*, p. 20.
- 44 Ibid., p. 23.
- 45 Lee, 'Introduction', in *Art and Man*, p. 34.
- 46 Ibid., pp. 46–47.
- 47 Ibid., p. 62. The UDC Archive Papers (held at the University of Hull) contain no details of this meeting.
- 48 Lee, *Althea*, p. 127.
- 49 Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, pp. 54–55.

[Caption for Figure:

Diagram of Titian's 'Sacred and Profane Love' by Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, accompanying the essay 'Beauty and Ugliness'

