

Ethics and Empathy in the Literary Criticism of Vernon Lee

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Vernon Lee's February 1891-January 1892 commonplace book begins with a list of the books that she had read and written that year (Fig. 1). Under the heading "read," she lists Zola's *Nana* (1880), *Pot Bouille* (1882), and *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) as well as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Tolstoy's *The Fruits of Enlightenment* (1891), and Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884) and *Rosmerholm* (1886). Under the heading "written" appear the essay "Of Writers and Readers" (1891), the dialogue "On Friendship" from *Althea* (1894), and the preface to "three stories" (presumably those that appeared in the collection *Vanitas* [1892]). She invites us to read those works "written" as emerging from her contact with those "read," to see the ideas about "frivolous women" and what it is that makes us "thoughtful for our fellows" expressed in *Vanitas* and *Althea* as the outcome of her interaction with Zola's representations of desire and consumerism, Tolstoy's critique of class hierarchy, and Ibsen's treatment of excessive idealism (*Vanitas* vi; *Althea* 113).

Lee began each of her commonplace books in this manner, noting carefully what literature she had consumed and what, in turn, she had produced, demonstrating that her books were made from her contact with other books, that her thinking resulted from the interplay of her own ideas with those of other writers. The essay "Of Writers and Readers," which emerges from this very period, argues that this is, in fact, why we read, so that our experiences might "mingle [...] with something foreign to our own experience" (530). In order, she argues, for our thoughts to be

Read. 2
 Goussier with Compeanti & Virgiles. Bourget Physiologie de l'Homme
 d'Alfred Fouquier de la Roche. Dumas Nouveaux Entrefilets
 Ribot maladies de la Volonté. In Paul Flaubert & Correspondance
 Mercier Santé & Maladie. Zola La Fortune des Rougon. Son Examen
 Loti Roman d'un enfant - Zola La Curée. Mme Borély.
 De Mauriac (Spirit. Exercises of St Ignatius)
 Ribot Histoire Psychologique. Zola Nana. Bjornsen Ingots of Gold
 Zola Les Maîtres d'École. Zola La Lumière. In Mary W. Perkins.
 Zola Les Fruits de la Science. Vachet Science et Conscience
 Zola Les Deux Combats de la Vie. Zola Les Bonheurs des Dames. Futur Caeser
 In Numa Roumestan & l'Amour. In Chartreuse de Parme 340, 44. - Zola La Terre
 Zola Les Bonheurs du Travail. Jean Canard Sauvage & Rosmersholm.
 Goncourt Chère. Heinrich Amter Witten. The Newcomes. In H. G. Wells
 Kingsley Atton Lock. Spencer's Principles of Liberty. Arnold White Tric at War
 Mirimée Venus d'Ulle & Amélie Purgatoire. In Les Maîtres de la Tradition
 Havelock Ellis The Criminals. Zola Le Rêve. Stevenson Les Femmes
 Maistre Les Aveugles l'Enfer. Maupassant Bel Ami.
 Fabre l'Abbé Turgot. Anna Kepting. Meredith Beauchamp
 Morris News from Nowhere. Mill ou the Flop. Zola l'Argent
 Didot Religion. Lavelle Luxe. Mary Marguerite. Spencer Ethics
 Sand La Mare au Diable, la Petite Fadette. Guyau Morale
 Sans Obligation. In Basile. Zola. Pot Bonille. Balzac Paysan
 Sans Obligation. In Basile.

Written. Feb 20 to March 2. 77 writers & Readers 26 p.
 March 16 (having written first pages at Prataccio) to May 2d
 Renaissance Painter p. 120. - A dialogue on friendship. June 5 to 21st
 Oct 20-30 Preface to 3 stories. - Dec 14 to 26. In Praise of old Horatio 31/10

Vernon Lee, Commonplace Book VI, February 1881-January 1892. Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine.

"agreeable and pleasant" "our life must needs be double, interwoven of absent and present," and each experience is typically read through the lens of "[digested]" and "[assimilated]" material that we first encountered in books (532). The "fragments of colour, snatches of melody" that we retain from our reading "lie in our minds and perfume times and places like orris-root and lavender among our linen" (532). The content of the books that we read becomes entwined with our own perception, remaking us and inflecting our vision. Through reading, our subjectivity mingles with another's. Our lives become double.

Lee's literary theories and critical methodologies altered radically over the course of her long career, but this interest in relationality and contact with otherness remained a constant. In writing about how we read, she is almost always writing about how we encounter and engage with alterity. Her literary criticism is from the beginning a strange compound of aesthetics and ethics, and, for Lee, ethical feeling is intimately bound up with the experience of empathy.¹ The term *empathy* came to mean something very specific to Lee in her psychological aesthetic theory at the turn of the century, in which she theorized the manner in which we "feel into" art objects (*Beauty and Ugliness* 337).² However, she remains at every stage in her work preoccupied with the concept of empathy more broadly conceived. As Kirsty Martin argues, "she struggles throughout her career with conceptualizing empathy, and with considering how to reflect in writing her theories about how people feel for each other" (Martin 31). Much of this struggle occurs in her writing about literature, in which she investigates the possibility that novels might sharpen our capacity to feel our way out of our own concerns and to feel our way into the concerns of others.³ She espoused at different periods a highly aestheticist approach to the arts, a deeply moralistic and utilitarian vision of what reading can do, and a formalist methodology of analysis, but every instantiation of her critical self expressed an interest in how we experience otherness and the manner in which literature reflects upon or alters our capacity to do so. In the early and late stages of her career, she associated herself with two schools of thought, aestheticism and formalism, that are often linked to the

emptying out of ethical concerns from the work of art. However, in both cases, she demonstrated how these approaches preserve a concern for alterity in their approach to beauty and form. At her most aestheticist, she still insisted that novels increase our sensitivity to others, and at her more formalist, she remained interested in reading as a process whereby one subjectivity might integrate itself with another.

In this essay, I read Lee as a “Victorian modern,” and I position her literary criticism as a reflection of the transitional moment during which it was composed.⁴ As critics such as Vineta Colby and Benjamin Morgan have noted, Lee’s literary criticism “anticipated the writings of I.A. Richards, the Russian formalists, Mikhail Bakhtin, Wolfgang Iser, and Roland Barthes,” and attending to her work as a critic “contests our received history of a break between Victorian physiological aesthetics and later literary formalisms, especially the New Criticism” (Colby 200; Morgan 34). Her literary criticism, as a body of work, registers Ruskinian as well as Paterian attitudes in addition to looking forward to the more formalist and objective methods we associate with modernism and New Criticism. However, if her career spans two periods and provides insight into a moment of transition, it also allows us to see the continuities between these two periods and the ethical potential of both the aesthetic theory of the late-nineteenth century and the formalist criticism of the early twentieth. Recent work by Rachel Teukolsky and Mark Janovich has helped us to rethink reductive political characterizations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical schools, allowing us to see that the association of Ruskin’s criticism with “restrictive morality” and New Criticism with “bourgeois individualism” might overlook the “rebellious tendencies” and “anti-bourgeois” elements of these methodologies (Teukolsky 5; Janovich 5; Teukolsky 5; Janovich 18). Lee’s work similarly highlights the political complexities of the traditions for which she speaks and with which she engages, revealing that moralist criticism in the mode of Ruskin can have a highly progressive valence, aestheticist criticism in the Paterian vein can value the sharpening of our sensitivity to others, and systematic, formalist criticism along the lines of I.A. Richards can theorize intersubjectivity.⁵

Critics such as Rene Wellek and Amitabha Sinha have noted the oscillations in Lee's career, from an "'aesthetic' preoccupation, then the rebound from it in the middle-eighties, [...] then the modified return to it" and the manner in which, throughout these oscillations, she "sought to reconcile an interest in life with an aesthetic, not necessarily 'aesthetic' outlook" (Sinha 82). As she moved between and integrated aestheticism, moralism, and formalism, she brought to each of these methodologies a concern with relationality and ethics and a belief in the ennobling effects of reading. Lee's consistent interest in literary criticism as a site for ethical theorizing and her persistent belief in the improving quality of the reading experience allow us to see the connections between the aesthetic theories with which she engages. Lee's thinking shifts and changes in relationship to shifts in aesthetic discourse as the century turns, but her trajectory indicates the points of continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to literary criticism, the extent to which one does not constitute a break with the other. These methodologies, while privileging disparate elements of the literary experience, its potential beauty, its morality, or its form, are often working within the same set of concerns, a shared belief in the ethical relevance of that experience.

I. Beauty

In a chapter "On Novels" in *Baldwin* (1886), Baldwin, "Vernon Lee's persona and spokesman," is referred to as "strangely compounded of a scientific thinker, a moralist, and an aesthete" (Colby 53; *Baldwin* 205). This characterization might apply to Lee throughout her career, but it is particularly applicable when thinking of her early literary criticism. In *Belcaro* (1881), she asserts, "Beauty in itself is neither morally good or morally bad: it is aesthetically good. [...] beauty is pure, complete, egotistic; it has no other value than its being beautiful" (210). This repudiation of Ruskinian moralism in *Belcaro* is often cited as evidence of her early adherence to the aestheticist credo, "art for art's sake," a position she is understood to have rethought and rejected in later works that critique aestheticism, such as *Miss Brown* (1884). However, Lee's thinking on the

topic of literature, as opposed to music and the visual arts, is from the first conflicted and complex, a strange compound of moralism and aestheticism, and, even during her most aestheticist phase, she holds literary works to a different standard, insisting that poems and novels have an ethical valence.

In the work that most clearly reflects Lee in her aestheticist phase, *Belcaro*, the chapter "On Ruskinism," in which Lee refutes Ruskin's moralistic approach to aesthetics, is followed directly by "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality." Here Lee clarifies that the sweeping claims made concerning the aesthetic purity of art in the preceding chapter might not apply to the work of the poet. In this dialogue, Baldwin maintains that art should be "[restricted] to artistic aims" and "moral ideas don't enter into the arts of line, colour, or sound" (247). "With poetry," however, he acknowledges that "the case is different" (249). In poetry, because it deals with the "human element," "one half of beauty and ugliness is purely ethical," and the poet who deals with this half incorrectly, who mishandles questions of right and wrong, fails as a writer (250). The reader is naturally repelled by these failed or immoral works. According to Baldwin, we feel an aversion to immoral literature in much the same way that we might feel an aversion to "badly combined lines, or colours, or sounds," which destroy "our nerves of sight and hearing," because we know that our "moral sense – what I may call our nerves of right and wrong – is being disintegrated by this purely intellectual contact with evil" (250-51). Immoral works of poetry have the capacity to perform far more mischief than the other arts, for "the poet is the artist [...] who deliberately chooses as material for his art the feelings and actions of man," and "he is the artist who, if he blunders, does not merely fatigue a nerve, or paralyze for a moment a physical sense, but injures the whole texture of our sympathies and deafens our conscience" (273-74). Literature, then, is the exception to the aestheticist rule that beauty and ugliness have nothing to do with morality and immorality. The poet must operate with the knowledge that he might, if not careful, undo the moral make-up of the reader and inhibit the reader's capacity to feel for and with others.

As Lee's thinking about literature developed in the 1880s, she articulated more explicitly how the literary arts might not only hinder but also assist in our ethical development. In *Baldwin*, published five years after *Belcaro*, Baldwin continues to recite aestheticist doctrine, insisting that the aim of art is to produce only "the particular kind of pleasure associated with the word *beautiful*" (200). However, according to Baldwin, "the arts which deal with man and his passions, and especially the novel, which does so far more exclusively and completely than poetry or the drama," can only be "half-arts," for they cannot dwell solely in the realm of beauty if they are to be effective (205). They must excite sympathy and deal with psychological problems and thus must engage with sorrow and ugliness. While novels might, however, only be half-art, they perform a crucial role, training us "to feel and comprehend – that is to say, live" (208). Novelists have, "by playing upon our emotions, immensely increased the sensitiveness, the richness of this living keyboard; even as a singing-master, by playing on his pupil's throat, increases the number of the musical intervals which he can intone" (211). What "puts [the novel] above the perfect arts which can attain perfect and unmixed beauty" is that it "artificially increases [those] rare moments when our meaner part is in abeyance, our better in activity," "during which the individual is loosened from the selfish and petty interests and habits of every day, and rises to a state of consciousness, of emotion, of perception and sympathy with higher things" (216-17, 214-15). The human subject is fine-tuned, rendered more sophisticated in its capacity to sympathize and to feel, by its contact with literature.

During the 1880s, when Lee was most devoted to the concepts of beauty and aesthetic pleasure, she nevertheless turned to literature with an interest in its capacity to render the human subject more ethical. Lee is, however, not alone among aesthetes but representative in her nuanced relationship to the concept of autonomy. As Harold Schweizer notes in his evaluation of the history of the concept of literary autonomy, even Swinburne and Baudelaire conceded that poetry might have a moral purpose, and in Kant's aesthetic theory, radically autonomous art "has

‘nevertheless’ eminent social relevance in ‘advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interest of social communication’” (243). Lee’s careful articulation of the utility of reading, its capacity to cultivate our emotional and our sympathetic powers, highlights the moral complexity of the autonomy tradition and of aestheticism’s thinking about the interplay between literature and ethics.

II. Morality

As the century turned, Lee became less apologetic about turning literature to useful ends. In her literary criticism of the 1890s and 1900s, she continued the arguments concerning literature’s capacity for fine-tuning our sympathies that she began in the 1880s while often bracketing altogether questions of beauty in favor of interrogating the moral or political utility of an author’s thinking. While Colby notes that Lee was “from her early twenties to her death [...] a liberal with socialist leanings,” she became increasingly politicized at the *fin de siècle*, reading actively about economics and class politics, and she came more and more to value literature for its social uses.⁶

During the 1890s, she voiced the hope that contact with difficult content might inform the actions of those “men and women who can be really just and helpful to their fellow creatures” (“Zola” 212). While Colby has described Lee as “an aesthetic puritan” in works such as “The Moral Teachings of Zola” (1893), Lee clarifies that “moral literature” is not necessarily cleansed of all representation of sin (Colby 208). She finds in Zola’s novels, despite their preoccupation with “the miseries of the world,” true “ethical interest” (201, 198). “It is well,” she argues, “to be forced to think on cause and effect while being made to feel other folk’s woes; and still more to feel them as really living, while one is wondering on their cause and effect. It is salutary to be horrified and sickened when the horror and sickening make one look around, pause, and reflect” (212). When it comes to works that might inspire political intervention, her sense of a “moral literature” is, in fact, quite broad, allowing for sickening, horrifying, even licentious content if it allows the reader to reflect on the

sources of horror in the modern world and to experience empathy for the pain of those who suffer.

Many of the critical essays Lee published in the periodical press in the 1890s and 1900s show Lee interrogating the ethical capacity or social utility of the works she encountered, and these socially minded essays were published as a collection, *Gospels of Anarchy*, in 1908. As Colby argues, "The essays in *Gospels of Anarchy* might have been inspired by a sentence in Beatrice Webb's *Diary* of 1884: 'Social questions are the vital questions of today; they have taken the place of religion'" (276). The authors that Lee celebrates in *Gospels of Anarchy* – Emerson, Tolstoy, Ruskin – are attractive to Lee because of their political appeal, and they are politically appealing because their work exhibits deep sympathy and, in turn, enlarges the sympathies of its readers. She locates in modern writers a spirit of "scepticism and revolt," and, while she expresses reservations about the excessive tendency to negation in this body of work, she argues that writers like Tolstoy, Ibsen, and Barrés are "doing good work" in showing that we do not "possess a human mechanism as good as it might be" (15, 26). "*The spirit which denies*," which underwrites the thinking of these authors, arises not "from heartless[ness] or levity," but from "greater sensitiveness to the sufferings of others" and the desire for better laws, formulas, and ideals that might limit that suffering (16). Much as she celebrated the novelist's ability to increase the richness of the living keyboard of human sympathies, in *Gospels of Anarchy* she lauds Emerson's teachings due to his "constant insistence upon the necessity of widening existence by increased contact with reality on all sides" (66). This widening of ourselves engenders unselfishness, the "giving [of] equal rank to the pleasures and rights of others," allowing us to transcend our individual experience and take others into account (66). Ruskin appeals because of his "desire for union with all creatures through gentleness and sharing," his "wrath at the exploitation of human beings by other human beings," and his ability to "[awaken] our imaginative sympathy with the universe" (303, 308). In a chapter devoted to "Rosny and the French Analytical Novel," she extols the novelist's power to teach us to "take

interest in the living mysteries who walk, act, and suffer all round us,” and she forgives Rosny’s tendency to cause the reader pain, for “is it not fair that we should be pained sometimes, in order to learn what pain others are feeling?” (239, 243). Throughout this collection, Lee asserts that literature performs a political service and that reading makes us finer, kinder, more empathetic and ethically keen.

While developing her arguments about the social utility of literary works in *Gospels of Anarchy*, Lee also models a method of reading as collaborative process that would become central to the formalist methodology articulated in *The Handling of Words* (1923). Rather than treating reading as a passive process whereby the reader absorbs and accepts content, she engages in an analytic practice that mimics her habit of heavily marking and “correcting” the texts in her library. As Lee wrote around the printed page in circles, expressing her enthusiasm and contempt for an author’s ideas in the margins, she generated a new artifact, born of the relationship between two minds, that is a reflection of her negotiation with the author in question. She, in fact, describes the essays in *Gospels of Anarchy* as “*marginalia*, mere puttings into shape of the notes taken, often with a pencil on the poor defaced books themselves, in the course of my readings” (359). Those marginal notes, and the essays that evolved from them, “reveal the need of saving that part of my teachers’ teachings which I could subscribe to from the mass of illogical or exaggerated notions in which it is embedded” (359). In her analysis of Emerson, for example, she notes that he has had an enormous influence on her thinking. Nevertheless, it has been necessary for her to “alter some of his main ideas in a way such as to render them more fruitful” (44). She expects her reader, in turn, to “alter and prune and graft” her alterations (44). She posits the interaction between reader and writer as active and ongoing, an interplay between two subjectivities in which the reader both garners insight from and rebuts an author’s arguments, altering, pruning, and grafting the material encountered into a more pleasing and agreeable shape. This interest in reading as active, as a form of relationality, plays a central role in her formalist literary criticism.

III. Form

During the 1890s and 1900s, Lee began developing a formalist approach to literary study, a statistically based and systematic methodology for analyzing style, which resembled later twentieth-century critical methodologies, such as New Criticism and structuralism, in its promise of "more positive insights into the logic by which textual artifacts function" (Menand and Rainey 2). Her work on "literary construction" was published as a volume, *The Handling of Words*, in 1923, but the essays it contains were written over the course of three decades, with the first being published in 1894 and the final chapters composed in the 1920s.⁷ Lee's initial formulation of her approach to formalist criticism, then, emerges from the same period as the politicized criticism collected in *Gospels of Anarchy* (*Handling of Words* 1). It might appear strange that the same Lee who, in *Gospels of Anarchy*, assessed literature according to its capacity to initiate social change, would be interested in conducting "statistical tests" concerning authors' word usage (*Handling of Words* 187). However, while Lee's transition to a more formalist and systematic method of analyzing literary works seems to indicate a move away from the ethical concerns of her late-Victorian criticism, her interest in empathy and relationality does persist, simply with a difference. The essays in *The Handling of Words*, which consider authors' "treatment of the verb" and list the number of adjectives and adjectival participles deployed in a given passage, also contain moving descriptions of the intimacy that exists between a writer and a reader and the manner in which form impacts the soul (174). Continuing the thinking about readerly collaboration that she began in *Gospels of Anarchy*, Lee makes the relationship between reader and writer central to her formalist criticism. She argues that "literature takes effect solely by the co-operation, the interaction of him who reads with him who writes" (189-90). Nicholas Dames asserts that Lee's work on literary construction was "the only Formalist approach to the novel at the end of the nineteenth century that took communication between author and reader as a fact to be described" (522). In describing this communication, Lee rhapsodizes about the contact between two subjectivities that constitutes the literary experience, the grafting of the

portion of the life of one person into the life of another. Much as she celebrated literature's ability to widen our existence and bring us into greater sympathy with others in *Gospels of Anarchy*, in *The Handling of Words*, Lee locates in literature the possibility for empathetic union with another subject.

In investigating the "soul-compelling quality of form," the manner in which style brings the reader into contact with the mind of the writer, Lee discovers a "connection between the structure of a man's sentences and his more human characteristics" (136). She finds that "style, in so far as it is individual, is but a kind of gesture or gait, revealing, with the faithfulness of an unconscious habit, the essential peculiarities of the Writer's temperament and modes of being" (136). In order to assess the style of individual writers, she counts the verbs, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives in their writing. Implementing this method, she finds in De Quincey, for example, a deficiency in the use of verbs that allows her to diagnose him with an "incapacity for duly appreciating actions" and "a will-less and indiscriminating mode of being" (153). More effective writers, however, who deploy verbs effectively, are able to command our souls and usher us into their experience. Carlyle, for example, uses the present tense to "transport us perpetually, to hustle us unceasingly" into his presence (181). In the course of her studies,

with the gradual recognition of the pattern in which an individual author sets his words, connecting and coordinating them in a way peculiar to himself, there also became evident that every such pattern of words exerts its own special power over the Reader, because it has elicited in that Reader's mind conditions, or rather activities, similar to those which have produced that pattern in the mind of the Writer. (189)

The arrangement of words, the construction of the text, brings the reader into intimate contact with the "mental attitudes" and "movements" of the writer, forcing the reader to think alongside and in the manner of the writer (190). Words are the vehicle, she argues, "through which some of the small clarified portions and moments of the Writer's soul can be transmitted to

that of the Reader, helping him to see and feel if not the same thing, at least his own share of things in the same serene and lucid manner" (315).

While Lee's formalist criticism, with its emphasis on the intimacy between reader and writer, has much in common with Lee's earlier Victorian criticism, *The Handling of Words* does reflect a more modernist Lee. As Douglas Mao notes, T.S. Eliot and the critics associated with New Criticism shared a "devotion to art of high complexity" (298). As Lee's thinking about form developed, she came increasingly to exhibit a similar interest in challenging or difficult works, works that keep the reader "awake," because they require more intense engagement and collaboration on the part of the reader (42).⁸ She argues that the "virility" of an author's style arises from "the degree of activity elicited from the Reader" (266). The use of pronouns in Henry James' work, for example, "implies a demand on the Reader's attention" and indicates that the reader will have to be "a person accustomed to bear things in mind" and "an intellectual" (244). By positing collaboration on the part of the reader as particularly crucial when encountering difficult works, Lee indicates how we might understand an ethics of relationality as central to the modernist aesthetic. The modernist aesthetic of difficulty is often mischaracterized as marked by élitism and withdrawal, but Lee makes it clear that challenging works, in fact, invite, or even require, relation and cooperation.

Over four decades, Lee associated herself with multiple movements and methodologies and remained engaged with the most recent developments in aesthetic thinking, but the Lee of the 1880s who considered the manner in which poets manipulate the "textures of our sympathies" remains present in the more modernist Lee who theorized how form appeals to "the rest of that invisible totality which, in a merely psychological sense, we may as well call our *Soul*" (*Belcaro* 274; *Handling of Words* 271). Much as Lee's aestheticism deployed its contrary, exhibiting a deep investment in the ethical uses of literature, her formalism displays a commitment to empathy and relationality. She closes *The Handling of Words* with a discussion of language as an "instrument of lucid truthful vision, of healing joy" that "does not deal with the self at all except as part of the great

otherness of contemplation and understanding” (315). In reading we are brought out of the self and into the concerns of another, which engenders greater lucidity and comprehension of the world outside of our own subjectivity. Literature allows us “to take up position to what is not ourself” (315). According to her formalist criticism, it is style, literary construction, that draws us out of our self and into the mind of another, “[catching] us in the meshes of the Writer’s and the various personages’ views, which become our own by our effort to follow them” (257). Effective form engenders empathy. At the earliest and latest stages of her career, she is drawn to critical practices that seem to bracket ethics, but, in every case, she demonstrates the malleability of critical methodologies, their capacity to open into concern for and engagement with alterity.

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Notes

¹ For Lee, the term *ethics* has less to do with establishing moral values and guidelines for conduct and more to do with theorizing intersubjectivity and the relationship to the other. As Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim have recently argued, the term *empathy* has a complex history, but, by the latter half of the twentieth century, “the idea that to sympathize meant ‘to feel for’ or ‘to pity,’ whereas to empathize meant ‘to feel with’ or to experience the thoughts and feelings of another, was becoming dominant” (7). *Sympathy*, however, during the period under discussion here, often meant something very similar to what the term *empathy* has come to mean in contemporary critical discourse. Lee often uses the term *sympathy* in her earlier work to describe fellow-feeling or the experience of feeling with another subject, while *empathy* comes to designate a very specific set of physical responses to works of art in her psychological aesthetics. In this essay, I will be using *empathy* in a broader sense to refer to what Lee terms “being made to feel other folk’s woes” as well as the experience of the transmission of “portions and moments of the Writer’s soul” to the reader in her formalist criticism (“Zola” 212; *Handling of Words* 315).

² Lauren Wispé notes that "the process implied by *Einfühlung* was described for the first time in English by [...] Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) in a lecture given in London in 1895. [...] She translated *Einfühlung* as sympathy, explaining that 'the word *sympathy*, with-feeling – (*empfinden*, "feeling into," the Germans happily put it) – as the word *sympathy* is intended to suggest, this enlivening [...] is exercised when our feelings enter, and are absorbed into, the form we perceive" (18). In later works, such as *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912), she began translating *Einfühlung* as *empathy*.

³ While there is an extensive body of work on Lee's theories of empathy as expressed in her works of psychological aesthetics, which focus on bodily responses to works of art, not as much has been said about the manner in which the concept of empathy inflects her literary criticism. Benjamin Morgan's "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading" represents an exception. Morgan, however, is less interested in empathy "as an ethical mode related to sympathy" and instead focuses in his work on the "physiological version of empathy" and the interest in the relationship between bodies and texts in Lee's work (33).

⁴ I borrow this term from Richard Dellamora, who has argued that, "If Lee's moment is finally to arrive, I believe that the case needs to be made for her importance as a Victorian modern."

⁵ It should be noted that, while Lee, like Richards, worked toward a "systematic, autonomous method of literary criticism," as Morgan notes, Richards dismissed Lee's work and "[rejected] the body as a site of linguistic meaning," whereas Lee "[retained] corporeal experience as central to her theory of meaning" (49).

⁶ As Christa Zorn argues, "From the mid-1880s on, her aesthetic philosophy became inflected with a sympathy for deprived social groups," and "she felt urged to address the great social questions brought to her attention, for instance, by her activist friend Isabella Ford and the Fabian Society" (8-9). Lee's increasing interest in political issues and economic theory is reflected in her reading during this period, including Marx's *Capital* (1867) (which Lee finished reading, according to commonplace

book X in the collection at Colby, in 1893), Henry Fawcett's *Manual of Political Economy* (1888), and Margaret L. Davies' *The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1883-1904* (1904), as well as her publication of essays such as "The Economic Dependence of Women" (1902) and "'Fiscal Reform': The Superman and the Man in the Street. How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1906). With the onset of World War I, she became even more politicized, publishing critiques of nationalism, jingoism, and wartime violence in the periodical press. (For further information concerning Lee's reading, see her commonplace books in the Vernon Lee Collection at Colby College Library as well as the books from her library in the Vernon Lee Collection at the British Institute of Florence.)

⁷ The second chapter of *The Handling of Words* was published in the *New Review* as "The Craft of Words" in 1894, and the first chapter was published in the *Contemporary* in 1895. Amitabha Sinha argues that "the sense of immediacy in the innumerable references to aestheticism" in the third and fourth chapters places them in the nineties, while the fifth and sixth chapters, that deal closely with works published in the 1900s, are probably twentieth-century pieces (83). Sinha dates the seventh and eighth chapters as circa 1922, and Lee herself dates the final chapter the same year.

⁸ This interest begins to emerge in the chapter entitled "The Handling of Words," which Sinha argues was probably composed in the early-twentieth century, due to its focus on *Kim* (1901) and *The Ambassadors* (1903).

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