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'Life is movement': Vernon Lee and sculpture

LENE ØSTERMARK-JOHANSEN

Abstract How do living, breathing human bodies respond to the inert bodies of sculpture? This article examines some of the art-theoretical and psychological writings of Violet Paget ('Vernon Lee') and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson of the 1880s and 1890s in an attempt to map the evolution of their formalist art criticism. Engaging with the eighteenth-century ghosts of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson created their very own exploration of art forms evolving in space and in time. Questioning how our reading of literature affects our reading of sculpture, and observing their own mental and physical responses to the encounter with three-dimensional artworks, their binocular gaze and critical collaboration resulted in innovative theories of empathy and intermediality. This article traces their discussions of the interrelationship between literature and sculpture from Lee's early essays in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1881) to the late collaborative volume *Art and Man* (1924).

Keywords Violet Paget ('Vernon Lee'), Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, empathy, art criticism, formalism, Renaissance sculpture, ancient sculpture, tomb sculpture, *non finito*

In the 1890s, Vernon Lee (1856–1935, a pseudonym of Violet Paget) and her companion Clementina ('Kit') Anstruther-Thomson (1857–1921) spent considerable time in the churches of Florence studying sculpture together. They knew the city and its artworks well; Lee had been living in Florence since her early youth and Anstruther-Thomson had been a frequent visitor ever since she first befriended Lee in 1887. Lee was immediately struck by Kit's sculptural beauty: 'Miss Anstruther Thomson turns out *very* handsome, a sort of Venus of Milo', she noted on their first encounter,¹ and the study of three-dimensional form became a source of mutual enjoyment in the close friendship between the two women, one an established writer of fiction and essays on aesthetics, the other a trained artist. The encounter between language and three-dimensional form engaged their bodies and minds for up to a decade, as they carefully monitored their own and the other's responses to works of art, and subsequently recorded their experiences in writing. Anstruther-Thomson responded to the sculptural works through a series of inhalations and exhalations, and her plastic body often imitated, or realized, rather than merely recognized, the sculptural form being contemplated. Lee's more cerebral responses were of a philosophical and psychological nature. Together the two produced essays on aesthetic perception and empathy which reached the world in the wake of Adolf von Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (1893) and Bernard Berenson's *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896).²

Hildebrand and Berenson were also residents of Florence, and the concern with formalist art criticism and psychoaesthetics was concentrated in the mid-1890s in the hillside villas above the city, as tactile values and Morellian connoisseurship challenged iconographic approaches to art.³ Lee and Berenson were practically neighbours in the hills of Settignano, north of the Arno, whereas Hildebrand resided south of the river, at the foot of the hill leading to Bellosguardo. In their essay 'Beauty and Ugliness' (1897) Lee and Anstruther-Thomson combined

an aesthetic theory of the perception of form with accounts of their experiments at home, in churches and galleries, as they documented Anstruther-Thomson's response to arm chairs, architecture, sculpture and Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*.⁴ Their neighbour Berenson immediately charged them with plagiarizing his own theories of perception, and only several decades later did the friendship between Berenson and Lee recover from the breach.⁵ Anstruther-Thomson and Lee parted company in the late 1890s, and after Anstruther-Thomson's death in 1921 Lee published their essays, together with essays and fragments by her friend, in a volume entitled *Art and Man* in 1924. The volume contains two essays of which they both figure as authors: one on Desiderio da Settignano's tomb for the Florentine humanist Carlo Marsuppini in Santa Croce, the other on Michelangelo's Medici tombs in San Lorenzo.

This article attempts to trace Lee's approaches to sculpture in her critical writings from the early 1880s to c.1900. Her concern with the interrelationship between literature and sculpture in the essays in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1881) serves as an overture to the formalist writings with Anstruther-Thomson in the 1890s, when the encounters between perceiving subject and perceived object, between living bodies and inert material, take notions of language, poetry, and sculpture into new realms. Lee's questioning in the early essays about the ways in which our reading of literature precondition our reading of sculpture paves the way for a new kind of formalist synthesis. My focus is on the encounters between word and image, speech and silence, movement and stasis, as the two female critics addressed the inner dynamics of ornamental patterns as 'verbs', pulling upwards or inwards, or saw Michelangelo's tombs as subjected to an 'architectural syntax', located in a spatial and material hierarchy where volume and texture determined their function. Referring to the 'language of pattern' and the 'poetry of sculpture', Lee and Anstruther-Thomson invite us to stretch our minds and establish connections between art forms separated in the

Renaissance *paragone* and in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766).⁶ Lessing's fundamental distinction between art-forms evolving in space and art-forms evolving in time was challenged increasingly in the nineteenth century,⁷ and Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's exploration of movement, even in static Renaissance tombs, is yet another questioning of Lessing's theories. Together the two women attempted to tackle some of the challenges imposed by sculpture as a three-dimensional art form partaking of the same space as the spectator. They observed perceptively that 'life is movement, our consciousness is seething with impression of motion; and forms which appear inert are therefore alien to our whole way of being'.⁸

The notion of sculpture as negation, as that which is the opposite of human life, goes back to antiquity, where it found expression in such myths as those of the Medusa, Niobe, and Pygmalion, popularized in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁹ In her partly autobiographical essay 'The Child in the Vatican' (1881), Lee constructed her text around the fraught encounter between a vivacious child and the inert classical statues in the Vatican Museum.¹⁰ An experience of alienation sets in the moment the child enters the galleries: the statues are perceived as hostile opposites in an imbalanced relationship where they constitute the majority. With echoes of Charles Baudelaire's mid-nineteenth-century invectives against sculpture as being 'tiresome',¹¹ Lee's child juxtaposes the engaging art of painting with the oppressive art of sculpture:

For they are dull things, in their dirty whiteness: they are doing nothing, these creatures, merely standing or sitting or leaning, they are looking at nothing with their pupilless white eyes, they have no story to tell, no name to be asked. The child does not say to them, as to the people in pictures, the splendid people in strange colours, and holding strange things, 'Who are you? why are you doing that?' It does not even ask or answer itself whether these white things, who seem to be all the same, are dead or alive: they are not ghosts, they are things which, for aught the child knows or cares, have never been born and never will die. A negation, oppressive and depressing, that is all; and in the infinite multitude of statues in such a place as this Vatican, their sense must become actively painful to the child.¹²

By a touch of magic the statues suddenly spring to life and acquire both movement and speech. They claim the child for their own, and the narrative takes a dramatic turn, as the previously self-sufficient child becomes a desiring pubescent individual, in love with sculpture,¹³ with the Vatican, and with Rome. The awakening of the aesthetic sense in the child becomes the equivalent of Winckelmann's 'Gewahrwerden griechischer Kunst', to use Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's term from his essay on the German antiquarian (1805), rendered as his 'finding of Greek art' in Walter Pater's essay on Winckelmann (1867).¹⁴ 'The Child in the Vatican' is an intricate dialogue with more than a century of classical art appreciation, filtered through Pater's 'Winckelmann'. It attempts to capture the erotic and aesthetic

arousal caused by a confrontation with the sensuality of three-dimensional art, an almost sublime experience in the Burkean sense, a rape, or at least a rapture, of the senses.

To many of Lee's readers the title and subject matter of her essay would have recalled Pater's semi-autobiographical imaginary portrait 'The Child in the House', published three years previously.¹⁵ It became one of Pater's most popular short stories, evoking the awakening of the protagonist's aesthetic sense through a series of synaesthetic experiences. The titular house, a receptacle of the past, is almost as much of a protagonist as the child: in chronicling the aesthete's coming of age, both Pater and Lee stress the crucial interplay between perceiving subject and surrounding architecture. The Child in the House and the Child in the Vatican are kindred spirits haunted by the past inhabitants of the architectural structures that enclose them. Pater's world is the painterly world of the French rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau, Lee's that of classical sculpture. The reader of both texts enters a universe of whiteness: the whiteness of dreams, art, and memory.

Lee, however, soon moves out of the Vatican and addresses issues of pain, beauty, and narrativity in sculpture in her discussion of the Hellenistic Niobids, which exist in several copies, one set in the Uffizi, another in the gardens of the Villa Medici in Rome. The story of Niobe is a classic case of hubris: proud of her beautiful fourteen children, Niobe boasted of her offspring to Leto, who had 'only' begotten two, albeit rather splendid, children: Apollo and Artemis. To punish Niobe for her pride, Leto instigated a mass slaughter of her seven boys and seven girls by a rain of arrows shot by the two divine Archers. Niobe turned into stone in her grief, as narrated movingly in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

Now does the childless mother sit down amid the lifeless bodies of her sons, her daughters, and her husband, in stony grief. Her hair stirs not in the breeze; her face is pale and bloodless, and her eyes are fixed and staring in her sad face. There is nothing alive in the picture. Her very tongue is silent, frozen to her mouth's roof, and her veins can move no longer; her neck cannot bend nor her arms move nor her feet go. Within also her vitals are stone. But still she weeps; and, caught up in a strong, whirling wind, she is rapt away to her own native land. There, set on a mountain's peak, she weeps; and even to this day tears trickle from the marble.¹⁶

In Ovid's account Niobe's petrification becomes the reader's petrification in a clever slippage between the fantastic narrative of the myth and bodily sensations linked to aesthetic response. Revolving around our basic fear of death, the story of Niobe and her transformation is an obvious subject for sculpture as it captures the onset of rigor mortis in the human body. Niobe becomes a monument to maternal grief, a natural, public sculpture, set high on a mountain for all to see, gradually worn away by the elements, yet still weeping tears like an animated religious statue.

The group interests Lee because of its narrativity, which captures the human body at different moments of death and petrification, thus challenging Lessing's notion of the visual arts as existing exclusively in space. It addresses the

aesthetics involved in representing emotions in sculpture. Lessing had argued that the representation of pain in art was unaesthetic, and that painters and sculptors should select a frozen ‘pregnant moment’, which could appeal to the spectator’s imagination. Eighteenth-century art critics eagerly debated the nature of the facial expression of the central figure in the *Laocoön* group: was it an agonized scream or a suppressed sigh? Lessing suggested the latter, preferring to let the spectator finish the narrative:

Thus, if Laocoön sighs, the imagination can hear him cry out; but if he cries out, it can neither go one step higher nor one step lower than this representation without seeing him in a more tolerable and hence less interesting condition.¹⁷

Both Lessing and Lee discussed sculptures with literary counterparts: the *Laocoön* in Sophocles and Virgil and the *Niobids* in Ovid.¹⁸ They were concerned with how text and image relate to one another and with what happens in the reader’s imagination when encountering a visual representation of figures known from literature. In her discussion of the *Niobids*, Lee confronts the reader’s imagination with the sculptures:

with the group before us, let us ask ourselves what plastic form is conceived in our imagination when there comes home to it the mere abstract idea of the sudden massacre of the Niobides, by Apollo and Artemis. Nothing, perhaps, very clear at first, but clearer if we try to draw what we see or to describe it in words. In the first place, we see, more or less vaguely, according to our imaginative endowment, a scene of very great confusion and horror: figures wildly shuffling to and fro, clutching at each other, writhing, grimacing with convulsed agony, shrieking, yelling, howling; we see horrible wounds, rent, raw flesh, arrows sticking in torn muscles, dragging forth hideous entrails, spirting and gushing and trickling of blood; we see the mother, agonised into almost beast-like rage and terror, the fourteen boys and girls, the god and the goddess adjusting their shafts and drawing their bows; we see all, murderous divinities, writhing victims, impotent, anguished mother.¹⁹

Yet, as Lee subsequently points out, one thing is what we see in our imagination, another is what meets us in marble. The realism of the description above clashes with the idealized and aestheticized expressions captured in the stone, as the sculptor has avoided any ugliness or distortion of form. The spectator experiences a cooling of emotions as he or she progresses from literature via the imagination to the encounter with pure sculptural form:

[T]he shrieks and desperate scuffling of feet, which we had heard in our fancy, gradually die into silence; our senses cease to shrink with horror, our sympathies cease to vibrate with pity, as we look upon this visible embodiment of the terrible tragedy. We are no longer feeling emotion; we are merely perceiving beauty.²⁰

This is an almost Niobidic moment, as the spectator experiences a cooling of the emotions and the senses more generally

in the presence of great works of art. The encounter between artwork and spectator becomes one of quiet mirroring. For the Child in the Vatican, the initiation into life among the statues is an initiation into the aesthetic life from which the ugliness of pain has been erased in a celebration of the beauty of form. Lee’s text is itself in curious movement, from static to moving statues, from moving to static spectators, from excessive to controlled and aestheticized expression. Hovering somewhere between art theoretical essay, fairytale and autobiographical fiction,²¹ ‘The Child in the Vatican’ is a tease on art and movement, leaving us in great uncertainty about the exact interrelationship between the two, between the imagination and perception.

The next essay in *Belcaro*, ‘Orpheus and Eurydice: The Lesson of a Bas-Relief’, likewise revolves around the interrelationship between literature and sculpture. From the Vatican, the site of Winckelmann’s librarianship, Lee now moves even further into Winckelmann territory: the rooms of the Villa Albani in Rome where he worked as an antiquarian from 1759 to 1768. Her encounter there with a Roman copy of a Greek bas-relief (figure 1) provokes a lengthy discourse on textual authority, comparison, and association between the arts. She raises the question of how our knowledge of literature preconditions our reading of the visual arts. Her visitor to the Villa Albani (who, like the child, bears a striking resemblance to Lee herself) is a profound admirer of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Virgil’s *Georgics*, a text she celebrates as one of the most poetic of mythical celebrations of dawn.²² She encounters a relief which she instinctively interprets as a rendition of the myth: Eurydice between Hermes and Orpheus, the former taking her hand to conduct her back to Hades, the latter saying a sad and tender ‘goodbye’. Her reading of the relief is conditioned by her reading of Virgil, but disturbed by the label attached to it in the museum. The label relies on



Figure 1. *Hermes, Eurydice, and Orpheus*. Plaster cast of a Roman copy after a classical Greek relief from the Parthenon, Athens. Original: late fifth century BCE (lost); Roman copy: Villa Albani, Rome; plaster cast: Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology. Photo: Zde, Wikimedia Commons.

Winckelmann's view of the artwork as a depiction of Antiope between her sons Anfione and Zeto, based on epigraphic and iconographic evidence.²³ With her longstanding reverence for Winckelmann, the visitor is torn between the two readings and turns to another textual authority, the museum catalogue, which retains Winckelmann's interpretation. Her inner conflict is played out under the auspices of the large bust of Winckelmann in the villa, paid for by the Bavarian Ludwig I in 1868, and at home she consults Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). Trapped between texts—Virgil versus Winckelmann—with her own tendency towards a poetic, even sentimental, reading, Lee's visitor changes direction. If what we saw in 'The Child in the Vatican' was the birth of the aesthetic critic, what we are taught by the encounter with the relief in the Villa Albani is a lesson in formalism. In the villa the visitor makes the acquaintance of an artist who studies the relief as a piece of sculptural form: draperies, lines, curves in light and shade. The encounter makes her realize the limitations of jumping from text to sculpture: 'What then is the bas-relief?' she asks.

A meaningless thing, to which we have willfully attached a meaning which is not part and parcel of it—a blank sheet of paper on which we write what comes into our head, and which itself can tell us nothing.²⁴

The experience becomes the foundation myth of her transformation into a formalist critic. The essay concludes with a dismissal of conventional word-image comparisons and argues for the superiority of form. The autonomy of the artwork, with respect for its materiality—no matter whether that materiality be language or stone—takes precedence. When eventually in 1923 Lee would write her own treatise on literary stylistics, she would entitle it *The Handling of Words*. In many ways the treatise was a culmination of Lee's formalism begun in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Already in the 'Orpheus and Eurydice' essay she was stressing the notion that words have a materiality, an almost tactile quality, which must be respected and understood before one can master them:

To appreciate a work of art means, therefore, to appreciate that work of art itself, as distinguished from appreciating something outside it, something accidentally or arbitrarily connected with it; to appreciate Virgil's lines means to appreciate his telling of the story of Orpheus, his choice of words and his metre; to appreciate the bas-relief means to appreciate the combination of forms and lights and shades; and a person who cared for Virgil's lines because they suggested the bas-relief or for the bas-relief because it suggested Virgil's lines, would equally be appreciating neither, since his pleasure depended on something separate from the work of art itself.²⁵

Although Lee may be distancing herself from conventional comparison, she is not reluctant to adopt a looser process, which she terms 'association'. Lee's associative technique,

based on formal or thematic parallels between the arts, remains with her throughout her life, but the sobering encounter between ancient sculpture, classical poetry, neoclassical art criticism, and nineteenth-century formalism gives a new balance to her interdisciplinary studies. By engaging more directly with the art object itself, Lee strips off some of the layers of youthful emotion and sentimentality with which she was teasingly toying in the 'Orpheus and Eurydice' essay.

When, in the 1890s, she began her collaboration with Anstruther-Thomson, iconography increasingly gave way to formalism, to a concern with movement, emotion, and empathy. Two sets of eyes and bodies engage with selected works of art, and individual responses are erased. Although the essays link aesthetic response to individual memory of touch and movement, the texts read as one voice.²⁶ In this respect they approach the merging of word and image into one voice which one finds in Michael Field's (also known as Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper's) *Sight and Song* (1892). Field's joint visits to European galleries resulted in thirty-one poems on thirty-one pictures. Hilary Fraser's discussion of Field's working processes may be applied to Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's 'binocular gaze'. Thus, Fraser speaks of *Sight and Song* as 'an exploration of lesbian sexuality in the field of vision', a 'juxtaposition of subjectivities', which

evokes the three-dimensional stereoscopic gaze that had so exercised nineteenth-century optical scientists since the 1830s. The binocular gaze, that comes from almost, but not quite, one viewpoint, enacts a specular proximity that has particular metaphorical resonance for the shared visual experience of same-sex lovers.

This 'decentering of the observing subject' provides for novel voices in poetry and criticism,²⁷ such as those of Field and Lee/Anstruther-Thomson, with the, perhaps not insignificant, difference that where Bradley and Cooper merged into one male persona, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson kept their separate names, even though one of them was a pseudonym with primarily male connotations. Lee was involved in a complex process of double spectatorship, observing the Renaissance monuments while also registering the inhalations and exhalations of her partner. In addition, she was trying to keep track of her own responses. In their two joint essays on tombs by Desiderio da Settignano and Michelangelo, pattern, structure—what one might call the 'language of sculpture'—address new issues in the encounter between word and image. We have moved from Rome to Florence, from ancient to Renaissance sculpture, and enter the quiet realm of wall-tombs, away from the free-standing sculptures of the Vatican. The Medici Chapel—a *Gesamtkunstwerk* with architecture, light, and sculpture designed by Michelangelo—and the Florentine pantheon of Santa Croce form the perfect backdrop for meditations on life in death. Observations on sculpture against a background initiate a study of ornament that takes its starting point in movement.

The full title of the first essay is ‘Desiderio’s Tomb in Santa Croce and Renaissance Pattern-Composition’. It begins in the realm of musical composition, i.e. an art form evolving over time. With their associative technique the authors transfer the notion of musical composition—the juxtaposition and interweaving of different parts into a harmonious whole—into the realm of sculptural design. They may be descending, in a Paterian hierarchy with music as ‘the condition towards which all the arts aspire’,²⁸ into the materiality of sculpture when they speak of the ‘phrases and symphonies of fifteenth-century sculpture’,²⁹ but they are suggesting a new transcendentalism of sculpture which breaks rigid boundaries. From the very beginning Lee and Anstruther-Thomson transfer the quality of movement, so integral to music, to sculpture. They conceive of sculpture as pressure—tension and relief—with an almost musical dynamic:

Ornament was for them [the Florentine sculptors] an essential part of what they wished to express. Patterns, so to speak, were *verbs*, they *did things*, and did all sorts of things; they were made to look energetic, and to live and act in different capacities. Some patterns had the look of shooting up, of holding up the space above them; others had the look of pressing down; some of falling inwards and contracting the form; others of reaching out sideways and expanding it. And being thus apparently full of various activities, patterns were combined in close relations of action and reaction.³⁰

With a touch of elegiac sadness they compare Desiderio da Settignano’s tomb of the Florentine Renaissance humanist Carlo Marsuppini (figure 2) with two other monuments in Santa Croce: Stefano Ricci’s *Cenotaph to Dante* (1829) (figure 3) and the pseudo-Renaissance tomb of Gino Capponi (1890). In the Marsuppini tomb (1453–60) Lee and her companion detect a range of decorative elements—honeysuckle patterns, garlands, *putti*, pilasters—which all contribute towards a carefully balanced harmonious whole. They detect dynamic movement in all the ornaments which surround the gently resting figure of Marsuppini, with the result that the tomb in its entirety is characterized by an unusual inward-looking integrity, a subtle poetry of life in death. Although a great Florentine humanist, famous among his contemporaries, Marsuppini is primarily known to posterity, the two authors argue, because of Desiderio’s beautiful monument to him. The *Dante Cenotaph*, a modern monument to one of Italy’s greatest poets, constitutes a sad contrast. A pyramidal composition, with the seated melancholy poet surrounded by the allegorical figures of Italy and Poetry, the work itself is unsuccessful as a monument to a poet. The rigid carving, the heavy-handed allegory, and the complete absence of dynamic ornamentation produce neither motoric nor emotional movement in the spectator, with the result that the marble remains inert material and never soars into the realm of poetry. Like much nineteenth-century sculpture, the figures in the cenotaph and the Capponi tomb are concerned with engaging the viewer’s gaze and thus seem



Figure 2. Desiderio da Settignano, *Tomb of Carlo Marsuppini*, 1453–60. Marble. Santa Croce, Florence. Photo: Sailko, Wikimedia Commons.

strangely ill at ease. The inertness of modern sculpture constitutes a state of being, whereas the movement of Renaissance sculpture gives the impression of a constant state of becoming, of evolving:

In fact, our acts of seeing are always accompanied by feelings or remembrances, what we call *ideas* of motion and weight and texture; of forces, resistances, pressures and upliftings, all the unseeable facts which make up one-half at least of our knowledge of the outer world. And the interest of visible shapes depends nine-tenths on the vividness with which



Figure 3. Stefano Ricci, *Dante Cenotaph*, 1829. Marble. Alinari Archives, Santa Croce, Florence.

arrangements of lines and curves enable, or rather oblige, us thus to feel the presence of movement while looking at motionless objects [...].³¹

In Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's psychological aesthetics the spectator's recollections of movement, of pressures and upliftings experienced on their own bodies, are vital elements in any appreciation of sculpture as an art form operating in both time and space. Their delight in tracing the lines—horizontal, vertical, diagonal, circular—of the decorative components of Desiderio's tomb takes us into a new understanding of literature as lines that can be transferred from one medium to another. They conclude with an almost self-congratulatory celebration of not having had to call in the assistance of literature for their analysis; no Ovid, no Virgil, just a few references to Robert Browning's poem 'A Grammarian's Funeral' (1855): Marsuppini 'is transfigured by Desiderio even as his brother Grammarian, he of the *Funeral*, is transfigured for ever by Browning'.³²

Now notice that the whole of this composition is rendered by lines and shapes; there is no borrowing from literature in any part of it. Describing this composition in writing, we could only say that the lines were those of such and such an object;

but actually seen with our own eyes, even only in photographs, the things the sculptor had to tell are said in lines of movement. And what great things we should read if we could only see again as Desiderio and his contemporaries were able to see, in the days when movement in art was a familiar thing, which made a direct appeal to people's emotions.³³

If patterns are verbs for Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, the central research question that they pose for their examination of Michelangelo's Medici figures should come as no surprise: 'What is, so to speak, the emotional meaning, the architectural syntax, the plastic rhythm of this great double poem of Michelangelo's?' (figures 4 and 5). This is dense writing, never entirely resolved in the essay. The juxtaposition of architecture and sculpture with linguistic and musical terms suggests a complete merging of the arts and a reification of language. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson find the structures of language in three-dimensional art, yet without insisting on heavy-handed and very literal parallels. They never mention Michelangelo's own poetry or the rich body of literature inspired by the four allegorical figures of *Night*, *Day*, *Dawn*, and *Dusk*. The poetry of Michelangelo resides in his 'arrangement' of architecture and sculpture in the chapel, and in the surface textures of the four reclining figures, which vary from highly polished marble to coarse *non finito*. Michelangelo's 'architectural syntax' is one of optic equipoise, of triangular compositions where the seated figure in the niche keeps the two reclining figures in place and prevents them from sliding off onto the floor. Marble dematerializes into soaring vapour, and figures are afloat:

What the four figures have in common is that they do not go through their action as human beings would; their movements are not those of getting up and lying down, but rather something akin to the movements of clouds: they would come soaring forwards, waft themselves along overhead, close together with an enveloping gesture, or unfurl; nay, they



Figure 4. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tomb of Lorenzo*, 1530s. Marble. Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence. Photo: Rabe!, Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 5. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tomb of Giuliano*, 1530s. Marble. Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence. Photo: Rabel, Wikimedia Commons.

could turn over, one instinctively feels, and disappear sideways into the distance as clouds disappear.³⁴

Lee and her companion celebrate the absence of myth, literature, and allegory. Their formalist approach rejoices in its own autonomy:

These things are, be it well observed, expressed by purely plastic means, without any loan from literature; and there is barely an attribute among the whole four figures. The symbolism is given by the movements of folding up and opening out, the lifts and pressures, and by those *pace-values*—due to the precise amount of roughness or polish of the various parts; and what emotion we feel and recognize in the statues is expressed solely by these means.³⁵

Michelangelo's double poem moves in plastic rhythms of surface metre; what the authors call 'pace-values' evokes Berenson's tactile values and recalls the speeding up and slowing down of the spectator's gaze as it traverses smooth and rough surfaces, 'passages' of marble texture, which the artist has worked so that it connotes the time of day represented by the allegorical figures. The smooth surface of the *Night* suggests glittering moonlight, while the rugged surface of the *Day* evokes drawn-out labour.

The strange interiority of the Medici Chapel, a space closed upon itself with figures doubling as contorted reflections of one another, is suddenly broken by the two authors' change of direction. From their joint perceiving body they turn to the artist's perceiving body—the piece is, after all, subtitled 'A Study in Artistic Psychology'. With a historical awareness that the *non finito* was not part of mid-sixteenth-century artistic practice, they find the primary source of it in Michelangelo's subconscious mind. They speak of how

the solitary months in the marble mountains gave him, through familiarity with the freshly quarried stone, not merely a new passion for cutting marble, but an insight into the

wonderful forms and surfaces, the infinite suggestiveness of the rough-hewn block.³⁶

Again the echoes of Pater rise to the surface. In his 1871 essay 'The Poetry of Michelangelo', included in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater had employed a very wide definition of 'poetry', which went far beyond Michelangelo's three hundred poems discussed in the essay.³⁷ Intricately connected to his Neo-platonism, the poetry of Michelangelo was associated with his ability to etherealize and dematerialize marble, making it soar towards greater heights. Pater's final image of the Medici figures undoubtedly inspired Lee:

—a passing light, a mere intangible, external effect, over those too-rigid faces; a dream that lingers a moment, retreating in the dawn, incomplete, aimless, helpless; a thing with faint hearing, faint memory, faint power of touch; a breath, a flame in the doorway, a feather in the wind.³⁸

Pater celebrated Michelangelo's delight in rendering the motion of the living form in the stone by means of a deliberate use of the *non finito*, thus leaving it to the spectator 'to complete the half-emergent form'. The *non finito* thus becomes an interesting parallel to Lessing's 'pregnant moment'. Recalling the Florentine term for a sculptor, 'master of live stone', Pater declared that with Michelangelo

the very rocks seem to have life. They have but to cast away the dust and scurf that they may rise and stand on their feet. He loved the very quarries of Carrara, those strange grey peaks which even at mid-day convey into any scene from which they are visible something of the solemnity and stillness of evening, sometimes wandering among them month after month, till at last their pale ashen colours seemed to have passed into his painting [...].³⁹

The subconscious workings of Michelangelo's mind connect with the studies of the spirit of place that Lee was conducting in the late 1890s. Her book *Genius Loci* (1899) contained chapters on both the Carrara quarries and the Apennines, the latter condensed into a black-and-white materiality with the title 'Charcoal and Ice'. She perceived Carrara from the plains of Lucca as 'a group of giants reclining on their elbow at table'.⁴⁰ Lee studies art and nature in similar ways: stone—no matter whether in raw or polished form—is in constant movement; forms furl and unfurl, actively burrow and twist,

And when evening comes they [the mountains] lie down, as in Mr. Watts's magnificent sketch, becoming, as darkness increases and only thin outlines remain, inconceivably quiet, and making us feel, when we too lie down, enwrapped, put to sleep, in their shadowy blue folds.⁴¹

George Frederick Watts's painting *The Carrara Mountains from Pisa* (1845–46) in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, breathes an air of quiet pantheism.⁴² The blue-white mountains in the background are imbued with an atmospheric divinity, suggestive of a mysticism that has almost Leonardesque proportions.

For Lee the perceiving body is also the creative body, and she both looks and writes as, some four centuries before her, Michelangelo was looking and carving.⁴³ The anthropomorphic ‘marble mountains’

seemed to have haunted Michelangelo’s imagination. And if he never put real mountains into his backgrounds, he caught, nevertheless, their attitude and, so to speak, their gesture: the weary repose of some, the uneasy leaning on elbow and shoulder of others, the twisting of neck and straining of back and loins, the whole primeval tragedy of effort, and triumph, and failure of the marble giants [...].⁴⁴

Lee’s essay approaches a classical myth of creation and takes us back to primeval Greek times when the relation between man, stone, and poetry was in close synthesis. The hauntings of memory produce striking works of art, and the boundaries between nature and art are hard to detect, even in such mannerist sculpture as the Medici figures. Lee emphasizes the materiality of sculpture by linking mountain and work of art, at the same time as she also toys with form as a mental image which travels with the artist from one side of the mountain range to the other, from the great outdoors to the quiet of the private funerary chapel. To Lee, Michelangelo’s ‘double poem’ is great precisely because of its vagueness of reference, its absence of attributes and immediately decipherable symbolism. Etymologically, the poet is a maker, a craftsman, and the interrelationship between the eye, the mind, and the hand celebrated in Michelangelo’s own poetry in such phrases as ‘la man che ubbidisce all’intelletto’⁴⁵ is equally strong, yet with a different twist, in late nineteenth-century formalist psychological aesthetics. By focusing on the transcendence of the arts and dismissing all recent archival and iconographic research, Lee and her companion were returning to the works themselves and bringing out the full integration of sculpture, architecture, poetry, and music so characteristic of Pater’s ‘movement of the Renaissance’.⁴⁶ The celebration of life—*rinascita* as resurrection—fundamental to the nineteenth-century construct of the Renaissance,⁴⁷ resides in Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s binocular examination of the Florentine tombs. ‘Life is movement,’ and both Baudelaire’s tiresome sculpture and Lessing’s spatially confined visual arts had been successfully challenged.

NOTES

- 1– Vernon Lee to her mother, 24 July 1887, in *Vernon Lee’s Letters*, ed. Irene Cooper Willis (London: privately printed, 1937), 261. The comparison to the *Venus de Milo* would appear to have been a generally accepted one; Lee referred to it again in her introduction to Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments*, ed. Vernon Lee (London: John Lane, 1924), 3–112, at 7–8.
- 2– For Lee’s theories of empathy, see René Wellek, ‘Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, and Aesthetics’, in *Friendship’s Garland: Essays Presented to M. Praz*, ed. Vittorio Gabrieli, 2 vols (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1966), 2: 232–51; Susan Lanzoni, ‘Practicing Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics of Empathy’, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45,

no. 4 (2009): 330–54; and Carolyn Burdett, ‘“The Subjective Inside Us Can Turn Into the Objective Outside”: Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics’, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (Spring 2011), DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.610>.

3– Giovanni Morelli (1816–91) was a trained doctor who developed a highly influential method of connoisseurship enabling him to identify the characteristic ‘hands’ of painters through scrutiny of diagnostic minor details that revealed artists’ scarcely conscious shorthand and conventions for portraying, for example, ears. His ideas had a great influence on Berenson, whom he met in 1890 and who founded much of his own connoisseurship on Morelli’s techniques.

4– ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ [Part I], *Contemporary Review* 72 (October 1897): 544–69; ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ [Part II], *Contemporary Review* 72 (November 1897): 669–88.

5– Alison Brown, ‘Vernon Lee and the Renaissance: From Burckhardt to Berenson’, in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. John Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 185–209.

6– Leatrice Mendelsohn, *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi’s Due Lezzioni and Cinquecento Art Theory* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982); Claire Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci’s Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbino* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

7– Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 71–82.

8– Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, ‘Desiderio’s Tomb in Santa Croce’, in Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man*, 165–79, at 170.

9– The story of Medusa can be found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 753–803; that of Niobe in *ibid.*, VI, 146–312; and Pygmalion in *ibid.*, X, 243–97.

10– ‘The Child in the Vatican’ was published in Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell & Co., 1881), 17–48. It has not been much discussed, with the exception of Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 56–65; and Jonah Siegel, ‘The Material of Form: Vernon Lee at the Vatican and Out of It’, *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 2 (2013): 189–201. See also Lene Østermark-Johansen, ‘In the Footsteps of Winckelmann: Vernon Lee in the Roman Art Galleries at the Fin de Siècle’, *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici* 40–41 (2015–16): 91–104.

11– In his *Salon of 1846*, ch. XVI, with the provocative title ‘Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse’ (Why sculpture is tiresome), Baudelaire had accused sculpture of being expressionless, primitive and too close to nature. In the *Salon of 1859* he had gone on to speak of ‘all these great dolls, exact in all their proportions of height and thickness’ seen in the modern Salon; Charles Baudelaire, *Art in Paris 1845–1862. Salons and other Exhibitions*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965), 111–13, 205.

12– Vernon Lee, ‘The Child in the Vatican’, in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions. A New Edition* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), 17–48, at 21.

13– George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

14– Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. The 1893 Text, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: Press, 1980), 141–85, at 147. The translation ‘finding of Greek art’ is Pater’s.

15– ‘The Child in the House’ first appeared in *Macmillan’s Magazine* 38, no. 226 (August 1878): 313–21.

16– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 301–12, trans. Frank Justus Miller. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 309.

17– Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. and ed. E. A. McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 20.

18– Sophocles had written a tragedy on Laocoön, now lost; his struggle against the serpents is recounted in Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 199–227.

19– ‘The Child in the Vatican’, 41–42.

20– *Ibid.*, 34.

21– Max Saunders traces the term back to its early modernist origins in his monograph, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

22– Virgil, *Georgics*, IV, 453–527.

23– There are three references to the relief in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave, intro. Alex Potts (Los Angeles: Getty Publ., 2006): an insignificant one on p. 162; ‘in the Villa Borghese and the Villa Albani are two similar reliefs depicting Amphion and Zethos with their mother, Antiope, in which Zethos wears his hat hanging on his shoulders, to indicate the life of a herdsman that he has embraced’ (291–92); and ‘On the facade of the palace at the Villa Borghese, there is a rare and still seldom-noticed relief depicting Amphion and Zethos flanking their mother, Antiope, as the names inscribed above the figures indicate. Amphion has a lyre, and Zethos, dressed as a shepherd, wears his circular hat thrown back on his shoulders, in the manner of a traveler. Their mother seems to be entreating her sons to take revenge on Dirke. A work showing the same scene, entirely similar but without the names, is to be found in the Villa Albani’ (316).

24– Vernon Lee, ‘Orpheus and Eurydice: The Lesson of a Bas-Relief’, in Lee, *Belcaro* (1887), 49–69, at 60.

25– Ibid., 62.

26– In a note to the Desiderio essay, Lee comments, ‘This essay is a joint production, like that, later on, on Michelangelo. The psychological passages and general arrangement only are by me.—V.L.’; Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man*, 165. In a note to the essay on Michelangelo’s Medici tombs, she claims, ‘This historical introduction is by me; also a passage further on. I mention this lest any C.A.-T.’s work be credited to me.—V.L.’; *ibid.*, 300n. We never get to know what the other passage is, and the texts as such seem homogeneous.

27– All quotations are from Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 84. See also Diana Maltz, ‘Engaging “Delicate Brains”: From Working-Class Enculturation to Upper-Class Lesbian Education in Vernon Lee’s and Kit Anstruther-Thomson’s Psychological Aesthetics’, in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), 211–29.

28– The phrase first appeared in Pater’s essay ‘The School of Giorgione’, published in *Fortnightly Review* 22, n.s. (October 1877): 526–38, at 528. While

essentially springing from a Hegelian dialectic, the notion of music as a transcendental art form containing all the other arts became very influential in symbolist writing.

29– Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man*, 166.

30– Ibid., 166–67.

31– Ibid., 169–70.

32– Ibid., 176.

33– Ibid., 179.

34– Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, ‘Michelangelo’s Medicean Tombs (A Study in Artistic Psychology)’, in Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man*, 297–312, at 304–05.

35– Ibid., 309.

36– Ibid., 311.

37– For Pater’s discussion of Michelangelo’s poetry, and nineteenth-century responses to the artist’s poems, see Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Sweetness and Strength: The Reception of Michelangelo in Late Victorian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 21–63.

38– Pater/Hill, *Renaissance*, 76.

39– Ibid., 60.

40– Vernon Lee, ‘Among the Marble Mountains’, in *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (London: Grant Richards, 1899), 61–73, at 63.

41– Vernon Lee, ‘Charcoal and Ice’, in *ibid.*, 117–29, at 121.

42– Ashmolean, WA1915.63.

43– For a modern account of Michelangelo and Carrara, see Eric Scigliano, *Michelangelo’s Mountain: The Quest for Perfection in the Marble Quarries of Carrara* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

44– Lee, ‘Among the Marble Mountains’, 69.

45– Translation: ‘the hand which obeys the intellect’. Line 4 in Michelangelo’s famous sonnet ‘Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto’, poem G151 in *Michelangelo Buonarroti: Rime*, ed. Enzo Noé Girardi (Bari: Laterza, 1960).

46– Lene Østermark-Johansen, ‘On the Motion of Great Waters: Walter Pater, Leonardo and Heraclitus’, in Law and Østermark-Johansen, *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, 87–103.

47– Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), esp. ch. 1: ‘The Resurrection of the Dead’, 12–42.