



Out of Breath: Respiratory Aesthetics from Ruskin to Vernon Lee

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Abstract This chapter examines the roles played by respiration—as physiological process, and embodied response—in the development of aesthetic theories at the end of the nineteenth century, traced from Ruskin to Vernon Lee. Late nineteenth-century attempts to define aesthetic experience in terms of its attendant physiological reactions still drew on breath's immaterial poetic associations (air, wind and spirit) while being alert to the way respiratory control shifts easily between voluntary and involuntary modes of experience (will/automation). Lee's idea of aesthetic experience envisages a complex, perhaps mystifying, action of involvement with works of art, dependent upon physiological, sensorimotor and respiratory movement. Exploring her understanding of empathetic identification, and relating it to current models of enactive cognition, the chapter recovers an entangled art and science of breath in nineteenth-century aesthetic theory.

Keywords Breath · Aesthetics · Affect · Physiology · Psychology · Empathy · Enactivism

Let me begin with three markings of breath:

Abundant images no more make a poem than any number of swallows make a summer. ... True poetry is as real, as needful, and naturally as common to every man as the blood of his heart and the breath of his nostrils.

(E. S. Dallas, *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry*, 1852)¹

The sea-beach round this isle of ours is the frieze of our Parthenon, every wave that breaks on it thunders with Athena's voice; nay, whenever you throw your window wide open in the morning, you let in Athena, as wisdom and fresh air at the same instant; and whenever you draw a pure, long, full breath of right heaven, you take Athena into your heart, through your blood; and with the blood, into the thoughts of your brain.

(John Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air*, 1869)²

If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe.

(Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," 1884)³

Breath, usually so hard to see or notice, receives here three different encodings in the language of nineteenth-century aesthetics, each one disclosing an intimacy between art and the action of breathing that surpasses the purely figurative.⁴ In the first, by the scientific literary critic E. S. Dallas, whose mid-century *Poetics* channelled the deductive reasoning of Aristotle and Bacon, and also in the third, by Henry James, respiration is used as a sign of naturalness that establishes the imbrication of art in life. In the Dallas and James passages, poetry and aesthetic experience (under the rubric of the "impression") emerge not merely as *analogues* of physiological vitality but as modes of its extension or unfolding. Art, in the broadest sense, aligns with the lived world, partaking of and flourishing within its atmosphere (atmosphere being another pointedly Jamesian term in "The Art of Fiction").⁵ If both wish, in different ways, to naturalise the domain of aesthetics by aligning it with organic rhythms of reciprocation, of which breathing is an exemplary case, then this is organised into two distinct emphases. One of these falls on the significance of nonconscious or reflex action. Notice how insistently Dallas, for one, subordinates poetic image to poetic form, for what embeds "true poetry" in the lived or natural order is not its power of semantic reference—not imagery or theme or other devices of denotation—but the fact of its rhythm and continuity, its way of pushing on, in sympathy

with the persistence of breath. A second emphasis, also on living process, connects breath with consciousness by asserting that impressions (of art and of life) are a kind of oxygenation (James). But in the Ruskin passage, contrastingly, one finds no such naturalisation. Beguilingly, in *The Queen of the Air*, more or less the reverse holds: Ruskin locates Greek myth in the circulating air, and in the body's essential strivings and chemical transformations, as though the goddess Athena might literally be assimilated by the tissues. Ordinary breath, usually beneath awareness, now feels ontologically lithe, a shaping force composed of air, myth and matter, connecting the lungs with a vast transpersonal system of circulation and meaning. Ruskin's breath, then, is exultantly defamiliarised, converting an invisible substance into an aesthetically visible and vital one.

In this chapter, I want to trace the development of these subtle tensions and *topoi*, as a way of understanding breath and breathing in the progressively materialist aesthetics of the late nineteenth century. Styling this as “respiratory aesthetics” is more than a convenience, I hope, and intends to bring into focus the special importance of breath to debates over the province of art, and art's genesis, form and force, as the late-Victorian moment shades into early modernist culture, particularly in the critical thought of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget). The questions I seek to address through Lee—of how and why certain ideas of breath and breathing come to bear upon theories of aesthetic form by the end of the nineteenth century, of how breath matters to the experience of art—relate to a larger field of enquiry, loosely identified as Victorian scientific aesthetics, which has already been influentially mapped by Nicholas Dames and, recently, Benjamin Morgan.⁶ Shifting down an analytical level, such questions also contain narrower subsets, including how understandings of the physiology of respiration influenced nineteenth-century prosody, a topic explored lucidly by Jason Rudy and Jason Hall.⁷ If neither the higher nor the lower level is the target of my argument, what I hope to recover through Vernon Lee and other theoreticians, from Ruskin and Dallas onwards, has much in common with these critics' interest in a Victorian turn to physiological systems for an explanation of art's embodied life.

As a writer and intellectual who straddled literary periods and cut across the diverging “two cultures” of art and science, Lee helps to illuminate particular ways in which breathing gathered meanings within British aesthetic tradition in the era roughly between the highpoint of Ruskin's influence and the 1920s. Prolific as a novelist, critic, essayist,

art historian and author of supernatural stories, as well as an aesthete, she had a close association with Walter Pater and aestheticism, embraced decadence and impressionism, subsequently absorbed Nietzsche's philosophy of tragedy, and in politics held committedly socialist, pacifist and feminist views.⁸ At the same time, she drew on, extended and challenged the scientific naturalism of Darwin and mid-Victorian psychology (Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer), while engaging closely with contemporary German thought, notably the psychology of Theodore Lipps, leading Lee to apply empirical and statistical methods to the study of art.⁹ In other words, various influences flow into, and through, her critical prose and mingle in its expository textures. Those emphases that organise the breathy passages above—on reflex action (Dallas), vitality/flow (Ruskin) and embodied thought (James)—can all be discovered in Lee's writings on visual art, music, and language and literature. Recovering breath's substance and freight in these works may seem to confirm Lee's intellectual singularity, as I say, but it has the further advantage of making visible a wider history of respiratory aesthetics that belongs to late-Victorian modernity.

ART UNTHOUGHT

In "Ruskinism" (1881), her forthright early work of intellectual self-positioning, Vernon Lee magnificently dismantles Ruskin's preachy excesses on the morality of art. Everywhere, she complains, Ruskin equates the good with the beautiful—a fundamental, erroneous conflation, ripe for renunciation—because of a residual puritanism in Ruskin that cannot admit aesthetic pleasure on its own terms and must instead annex it to some higher purpose. Ruskin's whole ethics of criticism comes down to this point: the sensuous wellsprings of beauty remain troublingly diverting, and in need of moral and spiritual rescue, such that sinful gratification must be converted into noblest virtue. "Ruskin has loved art instinctively, fervently, for its own sake," Lee points out, admiringly, "but he has constantly feared lest this love should be sinful or at least base."¹⁰ In consequence, he "must tranquillize his conscience about art; he must persuade himself that he is justified in employing his thoughts about it; and lest it be a snare of the demon, he must make it a service of God."¹¹ At root, as revealed in his most characteristic moments, Ruskin "made the enjoyment of mere beauty a base pleasure, requiring a moral object to purify it, and in so doing he has destroyed its own purifying power."¹²

As “Ruskinism” ends, with Lee now eased into the aesthete’s role, the essay yields an affirmation of startling dexterity, in its own way a kind of inverted Ruskinism, which celebrates pleasure’s intrinsic virtue: “For, though art has no moral meaning, it has a moral value; art is happiness, and to bestow happiness is to create good.”¹³ This is hedonist aesthetics housed in the stately precincts of Victorian high seriousness.

What emerges from Lee’s effort to displace Ruskin—and what matters from the perspective of breath—is an accompanying return to less conceptual and more instinctual modes of relational awareness anchored in the body. When Lee announces in her introduction to *Belcaro* (1881), the book in which “Ruskinism” appeared, that her purpose in discussing art will be to re-engage a mood of childish enjoyment, she describes turning her back decisively on once cherished texts of high aesthetic theory—her well-thumbed and carefully annotated Plato and Hegel, her Ruskin and Taine—in order to establish the possibility of a direct encounter with works of art. Such a gesture of uncluttering (“getting rid of those foreign, extra-artistic, irrelevant interests which aestheticians have since the beginning of time interposed between art and those who are intended to enjoy it”) clears a path for what will become her distinctive approach to understanding objects displayed in galleries, music and poetry, even when less overtly sympathetic to the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement.¹⁴ In *Belcaro*, she recalls discovering the poverty of theory as a primal recognition:

Much as I read, copied, annotated, analysed, imitated [these authorities], I could not really take in any of the things which I read ... As soon as I got back in the presence of art itself, all my carefully acquired artistic philosophy, mystic, romantic, or transcendental, was forgotten: I looked at pictures and statues, and saw in them mere lines and colours, pleasant or unpleasant; I listened to music, and ... I discovered that, during the period of listening, my mind had been a complete blank, and that all I could possibly recollect were notes. My old original prosaic, matter-of-fact feeling about art, as something simple, straightforward, enjoyable, always persisted beneath all the metaphysics and all the lyrisism with which I tried to crush it.¹⁵

Rediscovering the “presence” of art is, in one sense, an abiding purpose in each of *Belcaro*’s layered, meandering essays, and the term surfaces insistently here amidst a crystalline memory of responding to some artistic patterns and forms (“mere” lines and colours, pure sequences of musical notes) with a felt sense of involvement, yet little, if any,

accompanying representational awareness. Music, in the moment, was a “blank”; pictures and sculptures were enjoyable purely as objects comprised of structured visual elements.

Art’s real mode of presence, this suggests, comes before its emergence as an object of knowledge. Preceding categories of knowledge and judgment, its presence is both pre-ethical and grounded on an impressionable yet preconscious body, the body of its percipient subject. As this begins to indicate, art’s way of being present can be framed in terms of *action*, a point emphasised throughout Lee’s writing on aesthetics, right up to her last published work, *Music and Its Lovers* (1932), where she describes the artwork as a “junction between the activities of the artist and those of the beholder or hearer.”¹⁶ Far from signalling the contemplation of an ineffable object whose nature remains wordlessly withdrawn, or pointing towards modernism’s austere poetics of impersonality, presence (understood as action) registers something like a feat of coordination, perhaps better parsed as co-presence or interaction—that is to say, the embodied co-presence of, on the one hand, a beholder, listener or reader and, on the other, a canvas, sonata or poem (say), extended together in time. Put like this, aesthetic experience has discernable features: the quality of duration, the structure of dynamic coupling or interaction, and it constitutes a form of doing.

In outline, Lee’s quarrel with Ruskinism was roughly of a piece with Walter Pater’s inwardly focused “first step” of aesthetic criticism: the creed of knowing one’s own impressions rather than seeking to know the art object in itself.¹⁷ In common with post-Paterian British literary decadence, Lee accorded special importance to the notion of impressionability. The mind of the critic, now exemplary, was defined by how appropriately susceptible it could prove itself. What power does an artwork have to affect me? How does it elicit my impressions of beauty or pleasure? By making fleeting personal impressions the decisive locus of value, instead of treating high art as the intrinsic material instantiation of abstract ideals, as the moralists Ruskin and Arnold had done, late-Victorian critics channelled the “relative spirit” of the final quarter of the century.¹⁸ As Daniel Hannah puts it, “[t]he Paterian impression and Wilde’s and [Henry] James’s adaptations of it shift the focus of aesthetic analysis from the text as embodied meaning to the critic as ecstatic artist.”¹⁹ The same went for Lee, in general terms. But, at a more exacting level of scrutiny, it is clear that she diverged from Paterian subjectivism, in key respects. If the subject of impressionism risked being marooned in

a swirl of fleeting, wispy appearances (i.e. to say, in the realm of mental representation), as Pater had hinted at in his infamous “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*,²⁰ then Lee’s interest after *Belcaro* was increasingly taken up with the role of the responsive body in aesthetic cognition, including sensorimotor movements, reflex actions and the bodily unconscious.²¹ One focus of her later empirical investigations was the background arousal, the affective to-and-fro, of breathing, as I discuss later on. Pre-conceptual knowing would underpin her view of how people succeed in being immersively involved with cultural objects in their proximate environment—an empathy with things seen or heard, by means of a process I am characterising as active coupling—without arriving at the brink of solipsism and disengagement.²²

Even if Pater’s psychology implicitly recognised the “corporeal mediation of thought,” as Benjamin Morgan has suggested, a consequential feature of Vernon Lee’s way of thinking about impressionability was its strongly physical—its physiological, its neuromuscular—character.²³ Physiological impressions did not necessarily rise to introspective consciousness; she considered them part of cognitive activity, in the sense of being an unthought component of attentive perception, even if they bypassed explicit representational encoding in the mind. Automatic and reflex actions—of the sort exemplified by breathing—thereby came into the orbit of her aesthetic theory. Such an overlap can be found in other critics and writers of the late-Victorian era. We have already seen how Henry James could think of impressions as inhalations—continuous, instinctive, commonplace, like the very air we breathe. Edith Wharton, in 1903, would passingly declare (in a fascinatingly prickly essay about the state of the novel and novel-readers) that “real reading is reflex action; the born reader reads as unconsciously as he breathes.”²⁴ As with James’s decidedly exclusive appeal to a “we” who inhales impressions of life, Wharton’s recourse to respiratory language conveys the opposite of something ordinary or democratic: an aristocratic sense of literacy as effortless, inborn, and inevitable, in contrast to the self-improving exertion of newly educated readers from the expanding middle classes, for whom books were all about consciously invested labour and deferred reward.

Talk of unconscious processes reached back further into the nineteenth century, however. The importance of instinctive actions to mind and body, especially perception, had been established by mid-Victorian psychology and then annexed by peripheral debates in aesthetics and scientific literary

criticism, which helps explain why the phrase “reflex action” came so readily to Wharton’s lips. Wharton, as one can hear, took it to mean something organic and vital, and not a name for compulsive mechanical twitchings of the flesh and muscle. If reading was reflex action, it was so because reflexes had now acceded to cognitive office. The new physiological psychology of the 1850s and 60s, in pioneering this view, had rewritten earlier mechanistic understandings of the physiological body, showing how reflex actions and unconscious processes were tied to the thought and agency of the person as a unified living organism. In fact, Darwin’s “bulldog,” T. H. Huxley, used nothing other than the act of reading to explain the principle of reflex action in his incredibly popular *Lessons of Elementary Physiology* (1866), alongside the example of a soldier perfecting military drill exercises at an officer’s command (that being a learnt or “artificial” reflex, showing how all education might involve, at root, “organizing conscious actions into more or less unconscious, or reflex, operations”).²⁵ When we read a book, Huxley observed, we hold it automatically at an optimal distance from our eyes, adjust our posture suitably and make countless “delicate” movements with our hands and eyes as we read, mostly without noticing that we are doing any of this.²⁶ A similar theory was intended by the physiologist W. B. Carpenter when, in 1854, he coined the influential phrase “unconscious cerebration,” a term which can be parsed as thinking without thinking, as Vanessa Ryan has styled it.²⁷ For the critic E. S. Dallas, unconscious thought and actions were evidence of a “hidden reason” operating outside our awareness, “a power that with the greatest ease reaches spontaneously to results beyond reckoning, beyond understanding.”²⁸

Respiration was, of course, both exemplary and a special category here. If breathing offered a powerful instance of automatic reflex action—as Dallas put it, “the brain keeps guard over the various processes of the body—as the beating of the heart and the breathing of the lungs”—then it had the further characteristic of being able to flit between involuntary regulation and temporary volitional control.²⁹ In this respect, argued George Henry Lewes, the influential man of science and Victorian polymath, respiration had something in common with phenomena like winking and laughter, which in some situations cannot be prevented from occurring, however hard we actively resist, while at other times they obey the influence of the conscious will (as in winking to signal ironic intent, or laughing politely at an unfunny remark). A sneeze, which cannot be willed, would be an example of a purely involuntary action. Breathing, then, dramatised for Lewes

the limits and nature of our embodied agency: “Although breathing is an involuntary act, it can be, and often is, restrained or accelerated by the will; but the controlling power soon come to an end—we cannot voluntarily suspend our breathing for many seconds; the urgency of the sensation at last bears down the control.”³⁰ In other important ways, breathing was a deep puzzle. *Why* we breathe, as opposed to how we do so, remained unclear to science, Lewes noted. It was, patently, a matter of life and death. But why does insufficient fresh air cause death in an organism when the blood in its arteries still holds oxygen? Why does a newborn baby sometimes require external help from a doctor or nurse, who slaps them on the back, to begin to breathe?³¹ “By what influence,” asked the Scottish psychologist Alexander Bain, similarly, “do we draw our first breath?”³² These were more than narrow physical enquiries to be filled out by a more detailed story of ontogeny; they concerned the will of our creaturely being and the scope of subjectivity.

They had a bearing upon aesthetic questions, too. The same hidden power that keeps the lungs expanding and contracting, day and night, and controls a host of other unnoticed vital functions, was doing the work of a “musical conductor,” Dallas said.³³ This was a revealing choice of image, for Dallas was convinced that prized artistic accomplishments, such as the delicate control of a painter’s brush or the compass of a soprano’s voice, were made possible by the same sort of automaticity that governed breath. Conversely, the imagination was ruled only by “the sort of control which we can bring to bear on the essentially involuntary act of breathing.”³⁴ In *The Gay Science* (1866), he marvels at the German opera singer Gertrud Mara, who had been celebrated for her unusual vocal range:

[A]ll the 1500 varieties of musical sounds which Madame Mara could produce came from degrees in the tension of her [throat] muscles which are to be represented by dividing the eighth part of an inch into 1500 subdivisions. Which of us by taking thought can follow such arithmetic? No singer can consciously divide the tension of her vocal chords into 12,000 parts of an inch, and select one of these; nevertheless she may hit with infallible accuracy the precise note which depends upon this minute subdivision of muscular energy.³⁵

Mara’s artistic skill in calculating exact note intervals during an aria did not depend on explicit mental coordination, just the spontaneity of her

musically trained body: a remarkable, beautiful, feat of implicit practical intelligence.

One could call it art without thinking. This was certainly Dallas's view, based on the evident conjunction of instinct and imagination, as a secret agency. Indeed, *The Gay Science* categorises some unconscious reflex actions under the term "imagination." Aesthetic and creative feelings could be fully volitional without bearing conscious effort: "The artist can trust to his hand, to his throat, to his eye, to render with unflinching accuracy subtle distinctions of tone and shades of meaning with which reason can have nothing to do – with which no effort of reason can keep pace."³⁶ In other words, hands or voices accomplish artistic work themselves, directly, in real time, without the mediating theatre of conscious decision-making and internal representation, just fluent sensorimotor movement. Put this way, the hypothesis invites parallels with recent enactivist cognitive science, as I shall suggest in the last section below. But a figure who Dallas invoked to corroborate his version of unconscious cerebration was none other than Ruskin: it was Ruskin, he points out, who wrote so eloquently of the "subtle instinct" of Turner's hand and its superiority over the eye when detailing very fine shades of light.³⁷ It was Ruskin who knew about embodied cognition.

DRAWN-IN BREATH AND WIDE-OPENED EYES

While distancing herself from Ruskinism and the rhetoric of mid-Victorian criticism, Vernon Lee absorbed the influence of both. Her own respiratory aesthetics extended the then new reflex theory circulating among the likes of Lewes, Bain, Carpenter, Dallas and others, angling it towards a theory of art as experience. Ruskin himself had spoken of how great painters "do their best work without effort," by applying subtle layers of colour to a canvas in an "apparently careless" or "unconscious" fashion, yet with near-mathematical precision.³⁸ He included this note in an appendix to *The Two Paths* (1859), the same book in which he published "The Work of Iron, In Nature, Art and Policy," a sinuous disquisition containing a startling passage on breath:

[W]e suppose it to be a great defect in iron that it is subject to rust. But not at all. ... Nay, in a certain sense, and almost a literal one, we may say that iron rusted is Living; but when pure or polished, Dead. ... It takes

the oxygen from the atmosphere as eagerly as we do, though it uses it differently. The iron keeps all that it gets; we, and other animals, part with it again; but the metal absolutely keeps what it has once received of this aerial gift [A]ll the substance of which it is made sucks and breathes the brilliancy of the atmosphere; and, as it breathes, softening from its merciless hardness, it falls into fruitful and beneficent dust; gathering itself again into the earths from which we feed, and the stones with which we build; – into the rocks that frame the mountains, and the sands that bind the sea.³⁹

Originally a lecture performed to the people of Tunbridge Wells in 1858, “The Work of Iron” still quavers with the affects of live address. Here, its confounding seriousness is part of a tactic of challenging conventional formations of value: aesthetic, economic and environmental. But underneath its outwardly bizarre moralism, which insists on the nobility of rust and the beauty of decay, Ruskin unfolds a vision of distributed material vitality built around the wondrous ubiquity of oxygenation. Ironwork “breathes” and corrodes, its “dust” replenishing the earth and literally colouring the landscape (the streaks of colour in a pebble, the “violet veinings” of Sicilian marble, the purple warmth of Welsh slate), and also flowing into the human body and lending the blood its crimson: “Is it not strange to find this stern and strong metal mingled so delicately in our human life that we cannot even blush without its help?”⁴⁰ All of this derives from the world’s unconscious breathwork.

In a still wholly humanist way, breath unites us with the non-human, for Ruskin: the living air affords connection, interaction, inter-existence, an idea later emblemised by Athena in *The Queen of the Air* (1869). Whatever else he means by it, breath becomes a basis for feelings of identification with the contingent life of things, and in this sense, it exercises an aesthetic potential. Grasping why intricate vermilion streaks of iron oxide running through a stone are somehow distantly connected to our living bodies—to the physiological energy that beats its rhythm in our veins and lungs—is a very particular kind of aesthetic knowing. It entails an apprehension of form as living and relational, grounded on an affective body. Now, Ruskin, always at once a paradoxically central and eccentric figure in Victorian intellectual culture, did not share obvious affinities with the likes of Bain, Carpenter or Dallas, who were among the leading the scientific lights here (though Dallas remained an admirer his *Modern Painters*).⁴¹ He would, in fact, on occasion, parody those who aspired to explain art or beauty scientifically.⁴² But one way of thinking about Ruskin’s living air is to compare it, albeit

counter-intuitively, with the concept of aesthetic empathy that emerged in the decadent twilight of Victorian modernity, chiefly through the collaborative investigations of Lee and her lover Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, who took their bearings from earlier materialist aesthetics and versions of unconscious cerebration as much as from Paterian idealism.

Empathy (*Einfihlung*) was not a word Ruskin used or knew, of course. Nonetheless, its sense of “feeling-into,” as Vernon Lee would come to think of it, after the German philosopher Robert Vischer, captures something of Ruskin’s sense of the vital attunement of subject and object that he identified with the flow of breathable air. One might notice it, too, in his example of the graceful prospect of a songbird in flight, in *The Queen of the Air*, where the bird “rests upon the air, subdues it, surpasses it, outraces it; – *is* the air, conscious of itself, conquering itself, ruling itself,” and where “into the throat of the bird is given the voice of the air”—a resplendent synchrony.⁴³ Bird and air are ideally attuned, smoothly reciprocating, almost coalescent forces. Empathy, or in-feeling, if more specific, was an explanation of attunement. Lee imported the term in her book *The Beautiful* (1913), where she began by stating that it was a “tendency to merge the activities of the perceiving subject with the qualities of the perceived object.”⁴⁴ Affective investment, as John Frow points out, had been intrinsic to theories of fictional character long before empathy’s ostensible birth, and not simply in the form of obvious readerly “identification” in such narrative genres as the *Bildungsroman*.⁴⁵ Lee, too, thought the “apparent recent discovery” of empathy was only the uncanny recognition of something deeply familiar.⁴⁶ What she did *not* mean by it, however, was the sense of feeling oneself into things, the romantic-idealist identification of the self with the other through conscious egoic projection. Empathetic “mergings,” as opposed to projection, required the “momentary abeyance of all thought of an ego,” a lapsing of self-awareness.⁴⁷ In this respect, empathy rekindled Ruskin’s denunciation of the pathetic fallacy.⁴⁸

When, for instance, we use a commonplace expression like *the mountain rises* to describe the outline shape of a landscape, we do not consciously anthropomorphise the inanimate mountain, transferring to it a present subjective experience of rising. Nor (usually) do we mean “rising” to refer to the massive upward geological pressure that originally caused the mountain to form. The action of rising, if not strictly an objective property of its shape, is also more than just a thought prompted in us by the mountain: it is rising *per se*, a generalised

conception of what it is to rise (the infinitive form of the verb, unconstrained by a particular tense or pronoun). Innumerable memories of lifting and raising—in ourselves (of our eyes and head, of our separate muscles and limbs and of our whole body) and experiences of it in other bodies—have fused with anticipations of such movements in the future, to form this infinitive conceptualisation of the action of rising, now separate from ourselves and the immediate unfurling of our subjective agency. Thus, the rising mountain (or the slope that goes up, or the line that drops down) involves the unconscious transfer of feelings of motion, loosed from a subject, into a quality of the static object. These examples cannot be dismissed as figures of speech or staled metaphors. For Lee, empathy (*Einfühlung*) was precisely what made figures of speech possible, a psychological mechanism underpinning meaning itself. Decades before George Lakoff and Mark Johnson identified the “metaphors we live by,” she saw that empathetic identification grounded what the field of cognitive linguistics now calls embodied conceptual metaphor and, as such, it was present throughout mental life, “traced in all modes of speech and thought.”⁴⁹ It was, though, especially powerful for explaining aesthetic pattern and form.

Breathing—a mostly unconscious cycle of diaphragmatic contraction and relaxation—as I enter a cathedral, stand before a landscape painting or statue, read a lyric poem or savour a cantata, plays a decisive part in the integrated suite of background responses that allow me to recognise the force of these definite aesthetic forms. For Lee, the energy of—or the energy seemingly “in”—certain patterns, shapes, lines, words, sounds and rhythms has its origins in my own responsive living breath and breathing body. The mere sight of the word *beautiful*, quite apart from any object of beauty, will often cause affective arousal within the respiratory cycle, in virtue of it “carrying a vague but potent remembrance of our own bodily reaction to the emotion of admiration; nay, even eliciting an incipient rehearsal of the half-parted lips and slightly thrown-back head, the drawn-in breath and wide-opened eyes, with which we are wont to meet opportunities of aesthetic satisfaction.”⁵⁰ This reveals two features of empathetic identification, as Lee thinks about it. First, empathising does not ask of art “What is it?”, having nothing strictly to do with identifications inside the representational plane of works of art, such as a novel’s narrative storyworld and its represented agents and viewpoints, or the treatment of a theme by a painter or sculptor (feeling moved to pity, say, by a scene of human suffering), or the imitative

properties of a heard melody. Only aspects of formal structure matter: in Lee's terminology, *shape* precedes *things*. At this level, empathy might appear peculiarly indifferent to the human context of emotional expression, and consequently easy to regard as a reaction against Victorian sentimentalism. Yet it was Ruskin rather than proponents of evolutionary science (Herbert Spencer, Grant Allen) who, for Lee, had greater authority in making a link between the emergence of aesthetic preference (beauty and ugliness) and primary bodily affects (distinguishing pleasure from pain).⁵¹

A second feature of note in Lee's mention of an "incipient rehearsal of ... the drawn-in breath and wide-opened eyes" is that the empathetic imagination has a temporal structure of its own and tends towards revival and repetition, which Lee labels empathy's "reiterative nature."⁵² Past affects remain stored in the body and contribute to habituation. Experiencing aesthetic empathy involves, at the level of the lived body, looping effects of experience, context, habituation, learning and acculturation. A tourist with limited cultural background knowledge will not respond to art objects with automatic aesthetic empathy, even before celebrated paintings or hallowed architecture.⁵³ This point, not without a whiff of snobbery, shows Lee resisting what she perceived to be a troubling fin de siècle tendency of translating *l'art pour l'art* into the commodification of pleasure. It also shows her resisting theories of biological essentialism: evolution has not made certain forms inherently pleasing; the mind has not been adaptively furnished with innate powers of aesthetic recognition. Instead, as a process of attunement with objects, empathy needs a personal history of embodied practice.

For these reasons, Lee's collaboration with Anstruther-Thomson in the 1880s and 90s, which led to the publication of their 1897 essay "Beauty and Ugliness" (1897), reads like a study of Clementina's visceral, muscular and respiratory life—a jointly authored memoir of the body—focusing on her experience of works of art. When reprinting "Beauty and Ugliness" in 1912, Lee announced that her evolving view of empathy was the "offspring" of its central theory.⁵⁴ Their original method of investigation, using art galleries as experimental spaces, may have appeared "kooky" and even mockable but it was taken seriously by continental psychologists and philosophers, such as Théodule Ribot and Theodor Lipps, as Caroline Burdett has shown.⁵⁵ With its almost dialogic structure, a to-and-fro of passages of each woman's writing coded by initials and typographical marks, "Beauty and Ugliness" manages to

convey a kind of respiratory rhythm in its textual procedures while also fixing directly—forensically—on Clementina’s breathing:

[T]he movements of the eyes seem to have been followed by the breath. The bilateralness of the object seems to have put both lungs into play. There has been a feeling of the two sides of the chest making a sort of pull apart; the breath has begun low down and raised on both sides of the chest; a slight contraction of the chest seems to accompany the eyes as they move along the top of the chair till they got to the middle; then, when the eyes ceased focusing the chair, the breath was exhaled.⁵⁶

One might call this physiological introspection, making the breath visible, during the process of perceiving a simple chair. These words of Anstruther-Thomson capture her, quite typically, straining to access knowledge of her own involuntary responses and actions, at the outermost edges of conscious life. This is not perceptual knowledge of an intellectual or representational kind, even if bodily mimicry may result from aesthetic empathy (e.g. unconsciously imitating the facial expression carved in a marble bust). Rather, qualities such as the chair’s height, width and bulk originate in the described adjustments in the breathing apparatus and other fine motor movements. As Lee explains, “breathing and balance are the actual physical mechanism for the reception of Form, the sense of relation having for its counterpart a sense of bodily tension.”⁵⁷ Our eyes and breath trace together the sweep of a rounded arch, its downward movement embodied in the unnoticed, or barely felt, exhalation of the lungs; a forward and backward motion of breath, achieved by involuntary adjustments of the thorax and diaphragm, and ordinarily present when we walk, helps with the realisation of three-dimensional depth and distance in landscape painting.⁵⁸

Colour appreciation, the authors deduce, has a special relation to breath:

[W]e seem *to inhale colour*. For, while stimulating the eye, we find that colour also stimulates the nostrils and the top of the throat; for a colour sensation on the eye is followed quite involuntarily by a strong movement of inspiration, producing thereby a rush of cold air through the nostrils on to the tongue and the top of the throat, and this rush of cold air has a singularly stimulating effect: sometimes the sight of an extremely vivid colour like that of tropical birds, or of vivid local colour strung up by brilliant sunshine, has a curious effect on the top of the throat, amounting to an impulse to give out a voice.⁵⁹

Inviting their reader to experiment in various ways (holding their breath, briefly closing an eye, taking a deep lungful of air and so on), Lee and Anstruther-Thomson persist with empirical proofs of the view that “aesthetic pleasure in art is due to the production of highly vitalising, and therefore agreeable, adjustments of breathing and balance as factors of the perception of form.”⁶⁰ Respiratory empathy underlies, for instance, the quality of “coolness” in Vincenzo Catena’s *Saint Jerome in his Study* (1510), a painting whose colour, “by stimulating certain of our nerves connected with breathing, gives to the air which we inhale a sort of exhilarating power”; in Lee’s own gallery notes, from 1904, on Raphael’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, she reflects that “I certainly seem to see better breathing through nostrils than through mouth. The open mouth is inattention. More and more I suspect all this breathing business is a question of attention.”⁶¹ This last remark is especially suggestive: not only does it say that aesthetic form emerges out of breath, as it were, but it hints that art affords attentional interest by means of an active coupling with the body’s respiratory agency.

RESPIRATORY AESTHETICS AND ENACTIVE COGNITION

To flesh out this final claim in just a little more detail, let me return to the concept of presence, now engaging with it as the contemporary philosopher Alva Noë thinks about that term. Loosely, for Noë, “presence” refers to the way the world shows up for us. In visual perception, that includes more than just retinal information: the reverse side of a tomato, though not directly seen by me, is still part of my perception of the tomato; while strictly invisible, nonetheless it has presence.⁶² And it has presence in virtue of my implicit knowledge that appropriate sensorimotor action (such as rotating it or moving around it) will successfully bring that invisible reverse side of the tomato into view. In *Varieties of Presence* (2012), Noë develops this approach to presence using, as it happens, the example of music:

When you experience the singer’s song, it is the singer herself, as we have noticed, that you hear. ... Perception is an action of sensorimotor coupling *with the environment*. It is not a type of engagement with mere appearances or qualia. When you attend to the sustained note, what you are thus able to establish contact with is the singer’s continuous activity of holding the note. The singer and what she’s doing are available to you thanks to your situation and your skillful access.⁶³

Aesthetic empathy as Vernon Lee presents it similarly involves an “action of sensorimotor coupling with the environment”—though, as I will suggest in a moment, she reaches beyond Noë in an interesting way, too. Musical experience, being usefully direct and immediate for Noë, illustrates something salient about the general way all perception works on his model of enactivist cognitive science: it typically gets accomplished without mental representation (“appearances or qualia”) and can instead be explained through tacit bodily knowledge. We “access” music by coupling with it, in ways that our embodied minds have learned to do. Music itself “entrains” us, in return: listening to it involves the “alignment or coordination of bodily features with recurrent features of the environment,” explains another enactivist philosopher, Joel Krueger.⁶⁴ If enactivism accepts the “premise that self is embedded in world and world in self,” as Katherine Hayles puts it in *Unthought* (2017), her study of the cognitive nonconscious, then one could add that this would not have sounded drastically new to proponents of Victorian psychological aesthetics.⁶⁵ For Lee, as we have seen, art achieves presence because it engages us in modes of *doing*, in sensorimotor action, not least the semi-conscious work of responsive breathing.

Music, an artistic medium especially close to the movement of breath, has a special status in Lee’s writing on aesthetics, from the beginnings of her literary career. Without coincidence, her last book focused solely on music. *Music and Its Lovers* (1932) is also a methodological curiosity, given its proximity to European phenomenology, being a study of data gathered from respondents’ questionnaires.⁶⁶ But already in that early volume *Belcaro* she had complained about aestheticians “not listening to the music” of pictures.⁶⁷ Her later accounts of painting and visual form retain, as Nicholas Dames has rightly noted, an insistence on music as a basic model of formal patterning in general.⁶⁸ In “Chapelmaster Kreisler,” an essay in *Belcaro* (its title a reference to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s fictional half-mad composer Johannes Kreisler), Lee described music as being utterly strange, its existence as sound “issuing from nothing and relapsing into nothing,” at once our own human creation and yet unfathomably alien: “*it lives in our breath*, yet it seems to come from a distant land which we shall never see, and to tell us of things we shall never know.”⁶⁹ In enquiring of the origins of music—and elsewhere rejecting Herbert Spencer’s answer that all aesthetic activity can be traced back, in Lamarckian style, to play—Lee adopts the view that music addresses us with its sonic, yet non-semantic, force. From some impossible place, it entrains us:

We ourselves have constant opportunities of remarking the intense emotional effects due to mere pitch, tone, and rhythm; that is to say, to the merely physical qualities of number, nature, and repetition of musical vibrations. We have all been cheered by the trumpet and depressed by the hautboy; we have felt a wistful melancholy steal over us while listening to the drone of bagpipe and the quaver of the flute of the pifferari at the shrine; *we have felt our heart beat and our breath halt* on catching the first notes of an organ as we lifted the entrance curtain of some great cathedral.⁷⁰

In *Strange Tools* (2015), his book on art, Noë says something wholly compatible with this, if not virtually identical. Why is music entralling? “Because,” he says, “we are rhythmically and melodically and tonally organized; this is a fundamental feature of our embodied living. Music investigates these ways.”⁷¹ As for Noë, Lee’s earlier version of this style of thought takes music and aesthetic experience more widely to be learned, implicit, lived practices, not prizes of evolutionary development, whether Darwinian or Spencerian, thereby enabling us to see art as something that we do.

If one suspects, in places, that Noë’s enactivist account of aesthetic forms is prone to arrive at tautology—something along the lines of (though this is unfairly reductive) “art is a tool that affords art experiences”—then Lee’s detailed ideas of empathetic identification might come to its aid, even perhaps adding a more nuanced and radical flavour to the sensorimotor enactivist position. For the likes of Noë and Krueger, art is an external resource, an entity with certain intrinsic qualities that we can do things with, or that afford action. To stay with the example of music, it has timbre, pitch, rhythm, variation and so forth. Krueger speaks of “sonic invariants,” those “structural features of the music that specify an array of possible perceptual interactions.”⁷² Empathy, on the other hand, as Lee develops it, puts in question the extent to which these features are “in” the musical structure itself or rather unnoticed habitual attributions of initially unconscious bodily affects. The “fast tempo” of a musical piece is an evaluative phrase, not a value-neutral one, conventionally attributing motion to an inanimate series of individual sound units. “Fast” denotes the empathetic transfer of a primary physiological arousal, now no longer identified with the body and instead discovered as intrinsic to the music. In other words, the external acoustic structure, supposedly made up of invariants, *already* bears the imprint of interaction, one occurring at the automatic and sub-personal level of the breath and motor balance.⁷³

In suggesting this, I am neither labelling Vernon Lee a sensorimotor enactivist nor staking a claim on her extraordinary prescience, both of which would be historically self-serving gestures. Pursuing Lee's relation to these present debates has value, to my mind, only to the extent that it brings into sharper focus something of her own way of thinking about art and embodiment. What this chapter has tried to do is establish the ways in which Lee's ideas of breathing and artistic creaturely flourishing established a framework of respiratory aesthetics that emerged from various sources in mid- and late-Victorian culture and yet also overspilled the containers of period boundaries, categories of art and science and different critical and artistic movements. It gave physical meaning to Walter Pater's admiring gloss of Plato: "It is not so much the *matter* of the work of art, what is conveyed in and by colour and form and sound, that tells upon us educationally ... as the *form*, and its qualities, concision, simplicity, rhythm, or, contrariwise, abundance, variety, discord."⁷⁴ A sense of unconscious embodied empathy with things and persons is there in Pater's reading of Platonic mimicry, too ("we imitate unconsciously the line and colour of the walls around us").⁷⁵ Meanwhile, a language of unconscious cerebration and unfelt feelings, derived from Victorian psychology and theories of reflex action, were picked up by aesthetic debates in the 1860s and flowed on through the rhetoric of literary and critical impressionism and its decadent afterlife, as in those highlighted breathy moments in Henry James and Edith Wharton. And there was, of course, Ruskin, too. "There is, in all art," Lee affirmed as late as 1912, "what Ruskin called the Lamp of Life; and it is with it that my aesthetics deal."⁷⁶ If disentangling art from Ruskin's dubious moralism and mystification meant returning, as if pre-reflectively, to the nature of its presence, as Lee had announced in 1881, then this did not end up dispelling Ruskinism altogether. Far from it: the Ruskin who spoke of vital breath remained compatible with the world-involving action of empathy she collaboratively formulated. Like Ruskin, acculturating the instinctual will was a laudable thing. And, in broad strokes, that point locates both writers in a larger story of respiratory aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century, a story which is now, like breath itself, only just becoming visible.

NOTES

1. Dallas (1852, 270–271).
2. Ruskin (1903–1912, 19: 328–329).

3. James (1963, 86).
4. The research for this chapter came about through happy association with Durham's "Life of Breath" project, funded by the Wellcome Trust, and I wish to thank Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton for inviting me to contribute to its launch event on 15 September 2015.
5. Only moments before making this connection between subjective impressions and the breath, James famously describes experience as always unlimited and incomplete, "the very atmosphere of the mind" (James 1963, 85). This section of "The Art of Fiction" flits suggestively between signifiers of solidity (tissue, particles and pulses) and airiness (breath and atmosphere), ultimately overlaying or blending these seemingly distinct registers.
6. See Dames (2007) and Morgan (2017).
7. See Rudy (2009) and Hall (2017).
8. The best recent literary biography of Vernon Lee is Colby (2003).
9. A very helpful account of Lee's relation to these psychological traditions is given in Burdett (2011).
10. Lee (1881, 225).
11. *Ibid.*, 226.
12. *Ibid.*, 227.
13. *Ibid.*, 229.
14. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
15. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
16. Lee (1933, 23). Music, Lee acknowledges, is the exemplary art form here, and the "clue to the study of all other branches of art," since its material "evanescence" establishes mostly clearly that art is definable as the "special group of responses which it is susceptible of awakening in the mind of its audience."
17. The relevant well-known passage from Pater's "Preface" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* reads: "in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (Pater 1873, viii). Pater's stress on knowing and defining one's impressions (suggesting an inner representational theatre) should, I suggest, be distinguished from Vernon Lee's emphasis on sensorimotor movements and reflex action (like respiration) which may occur either unconsciously or as conscious feeling, and this matters to her view of aesthetic experience as a mode of action rather than (I claim) representation.
18. The phrase is Pater's, from an essay on Coleridge originally published in 1866, in which he defines modern thought by its "relative spirit" and declares Coleridge, in contrast, to have been enslaved by the absolute. See Pater (1889, 65–67). For an exploration, and a defence, of relativism in nineteenth-century culture and ideas, see Herbert (2001).

19. Hannah (2013, 54).
20. Pater speaks of “that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without [i.e. outside us]” (Pater 1873, 209).
21. Unless otherwise stated, I intend the term “cognition” to encompass more than rational behavior, knowing, reasoning, reflecting, problem-solving and so forth, and for it to be applied in the flexible fashion of many leading philosophers and cognitive theorists, particularly those interested in embodied cognition; for a helpful discussion of the “open-door policy” on what counts as cognition, see Wheeler (2005, 3–5).
22. For responses to the charge of solipsism levelled against Pater’s aestheticism, see Levine (2000) and Morgan (2010), both of whom discuss Pater’s interests in Victorian science and materialism. Vernon Lee’s concept of aesthetic empathy, informed by the notion of feeling-into (*Einfühlung*) developed by the German philosopher Robert Vischer, is discussed in the following section of the chapter. My claim about active coupling, which draws on approaches to the mind labelled as “4E” theories of cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive and extended), is developed in the third section.
23. Morgan (2017, 153).
24. Wharton (1903, 513).
25. Huxley (1866, 285–286). See also Winter (1998, 327–328).
26. Huxley (1866, 285).
27. Carpenter first used unconscious cerebration in his *Principles of Human Physiology* (1854), though it tends to be associated with his popular book, *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874). The idea was widely adopted. For a wide-ranging discussion of it under the rubric of “thinking without thinking,” in Victorian intellectual life and in the novel, see Ryan (2012). Ryan, interestingly, does not mention Vernon Lee in this connection.
28. Dallas (1866, 243).
29. *Ibid.*, 243.
30. Lewes (1859–1860, 2: 198).
31. Lewes (1859–1860, 1: 403–404).
32. Bain (1872, 15).
33. Dallas (1866, 245).
34. *Ibid.*, 259.
35. *Ibid.*, 242–243. Gertrud Mara (1749–1833) had been a court singer for Frederick the Great before making her London debut in 1784 and was widely praised for the brilliance of her vocal technique.
36. *Ibid.*, 242.
37. *Ibid.*, 243. Dallas quotes a lengthy corroborating passage from Ruskin’s *The Two Paths* (1859) at the end of this part of *The Gay Science*.

38. Ruskin (1903–1912, 16: 419).
39. Ruskin (1903–1912, 16: 376–378).
40. Ruskin (1903–1912, 16: 383, 384).
41. If not quite gushing, Dallas makes no effort to disguise his high estimation of Ruskin’s rhetorical style and “clear-seeing mind” in *Modern Painters* (1843–60) and his “magnificent” theory of the imagination (Dallas 1866, 192–193).
42. See Morgan (2017, 28–29).
43. Ruskin (1903–1912, 19: 360), my emphasis.
44. Lee (1913, 63). See also Keen (2007, 55–56).
45. Identification, Frow suggests, has been inflected by historical discourses of sympathy (and empathy), since the eighteenth century, whereas “affective investment may be positive or negative, and indeed encompasses a range of possible relations to characters, including dislike and indifference” (Frow 2014, 37–38).
46. Lee (1913, 69).
47. *Ibid.*, 65–66.
48. As David M. Craig has argued, Ruskin’s corrective for the pathetic fallacy—that is, for the failings of pathos manifested in bending objects to the perceiver’s will—was reverence, and my own contention is that Vernon Lee’s understanding of aesthetic empathy in 1913 retains an important sense of reverential self-abnegation, if in a different rhetorical register (see Craig 2006, 136).
49. Lee (1913, 68). See Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
50. Lee (1913, 139–140).
51. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson make this clear quite early on in their essay “Beauty and Ugliness,” originally published in 1897 in the *Contemporary Review* (see Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912, 170–171). Here, they are making an implicit reference to Grant Allen, who had opened his *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877) by attacking Ruskin’s failure in volume one of *Modern Painters* (1843) to say why certain visual forms bring pleasure. Lee and her collaborator, it should be noted, are choosing not to side not with Allen, who used evolutionary theory to explain this, but rather with Ruskin. They quote Ruskin’s dictum that “beauty and ugliness are as positive in their nature as pleasure and pain,” from *Modern Painters* III (Ruskin 1903–1912, 5: 45). On Lee and Allen, see also Burdett (2011).
52. Lee (1913, 109).
53. *The Beautiful* contains this moment of mild, if sincere, anti-bourgeois snobbery: “The very worst attitude towards art is that of the holiday-maker who comes into its presence with no ulterior interest or business, and nothing but the hope of an aesthetic emotion which is most often denied him” (Lee 1913, 138).
54. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson (1912, 154).

55. See Burdett (2011).
56. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson (1912, 163–164).
57. Ibid., 168–169.
58. How this occurs remains unclear, in virtue of its inaccessibility to introspection: “This realisation of distance is greatly reinforced by the adjustments taking place in the diaphragm. We do not pretend to explain what is really taking place in our body” (ibid., 213–214).
59. Ibid., 204.
60. Ibid., 224–225.
61. Ibid., 230–231, 280.
62. This example is discussed at length in Noë (2012).
63. Noë (2012, 80).
64. Krueger (2011, 9).
65. Hayles (2017, 62).
66. The opening section of the book, on “Aims and Methods,” sets itself against Bertrand Russell and any other “Improbable Reader” who doubts such introspective methods (Lee 1933, 18–20).
67. Lee (1881, 11).
68. Dames (2007, 49).
69. Lee (1881, 106), my emphasis.
70. Ibid., 119 (emphasis added).
71. Noë (2015, 188).
72. Krueger (2011, 13).
73. This is not, I think, to beg the question by reducing musical sound to something in the head, a view that Noë in *Strange Tools* calls “subjective, interior, neurological,” identifying it with neuroscientists like Daniel Levitin who insist, for example, that *pitch* refers to mental representation since sound waves do not themselves possess pitch (Noë 2015, 183).
74. Pater (1893, 245).
75. Ibid.
76. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson (1912, 80).

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