

A close-up portrait of a young woman with long, dark, wavy hair and light-colored eyes. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. She is holding a white flower, possibly a cherry blossom, near her face on the left side. She is wearing a white top with blue embroidery. The background is softly blurred.

***VERNON
LEE***

***THE BEAUTIFUL:
AN INTRODUCTION
TO PSYCHOLOGICAL
AESTHETICS***

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The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Titlepage](#)

[Text](#)

We seem thus to have got a good way in our explanation; and indeed the older psychology, for instance of the late Grant Allen, did not get any further. But to explain why a shape difficult to perceive should be disliked and called "ugly," by no means amounts to explaining why some other shape should be liked and called "beautiful," particularly as some ugly shapes happen to be far easier to grasp than some beautiful ones. The Reader will indeed remember that there is a special pleasure attached to all overcoming of difficulty, and to all understanding. But this double pleasure is shared with form-perception by every other successful grasping of meaning; and there is no reason why that pleasure should be repeated in the one case more than in the other; nor why we should repeat looking at (which is what we mean by contemplating) a shape once we have grasped it, any more than we continue to dwell on, to reiterate the mental processes by which we have worked out a geometrical proposition or unravelled a metaphysical crux. The sense of victory ends very soon after the sense of the difficulty overcome; the sense of illumination ends with the acquisition of a piece of information; and we pass on to some new obstacle and some new riddle. But it is different in the case of what we call *Beautiful*. *Beautiful* means satisfactory for contemplation, *i.e.* for reiterated perception; and the very essence of contemplative satisfaction is its desire for such reiteration. The older psychology would perhaps have explained this reiterative tendency by the pleasurable nature of the sensory elements, the mere colours and sounds of which the easily perceived shape is made up. But this does not explain why, given that other shapes are made up of equally agreeable sensory elements, we should not pass on from a once perceived shape or combination of shapes to a new one, thus obtaining, in addition to the sensory agreeableness of colour or sound, a constantly new output of that feeling of victory and illumination attendant

on every successful intellectual effort. Or, in other words, seeing that painting and music employ sensory elements already selected as agreeable, we ought never to wish to see the same picture twice, or to continue looking at it; we ought never to wish to repeat the same piece of music or its separate phrases; still less to cherish that picture or piece of music in our memory, going over and over again as much of its shape as had become our permanent possession.

We return therefore to the fact that although balked perception is enough to make us reject a shape as *ugly*, *i.e.* such that we avoid entering into contemplation of it, easy perception is by no means sufficient to make us cherish a shape as *beautiful*, *i.e.* such that the reiteration of our drama of perception becomes desirable. And we shall have to examine whether there may not be some other factor of shape-perception wherewith to account for this preference of reiterated looking at the same to looking at something else.

Meanwhile we may add to our set of formulae: difficulty in shape-perception makes contemplation disagreeable and impossible, and hence earns for aspects the adjective *ugly*. But facility in perception, like agreeableness of sensation by no means suffices for satisfied contemplation, and hence for the use of the adjective Beautiful.

CHAPTER VIII

SUBJECT AND OBJECT

BUT before proceeding to this additional factor in shape-perception, namely that of Empathic Interpretation, I require to forestall an objection which my Reader has doubtless

been making throughout my last chapters; more particularly that in clearing away the ground of this objection I shall be able to lay the foundations of my further edifice of explanation. The objection is this: if the man on the hill was aware of performing any, let alone all, of the various operations described as constituting shape-perception, neither that man nor any other human being would be able to enjoy the shapes thus perceived.

My answer is:

When did I say or imply that he was *aware* of doing any of it? It is not only possible, but extremely common, to perform processes without being aware of performing them. The man was not *aware*, for instance, of making eye adjustments and eye movements, unless indeed his sight was out of order. Yet his eye movements could have been cinematographed, and his eye adjustments have been described minutely in a dozen treatises. He was no more aware of *doing* any measuring or comparing than we are aware of *doing* our digestion or circulation, except when we do them badly. But just as we are aware of our digestive and circulatory processes in the sense of being aware of the animal spirits resulting from their adequate performance, so he was aware of his measuring and comparing, inasmuch as he was aware that the line A—B was longer than the line C—D, or that the point E was half an inch to the left of the point F. For so long as we are neither examining into ourselves, nor called upon to make a choice between two possible proceedings, nor forced to do or suffer something difficult or distressing, in fact so long as we are attending to whatever absorbs our attention and not to our processes of attending, those processes are replaced in our awareness by the very facts—for instance the proportions and relations of lines—resulting from their activity. That these results should not resemble their cause, that mental elements (as they are