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Icons of Desire: The Classical Statue in Later Victorian Literature

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In James Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Daedalus enlightens his friend Lynch on the difference between a pure and an impure aesthetic:

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire or loathing.

To which Lynch replies: 'You say that art must not excite desire [. . .]. I told you that one day I wrote my name in pencil on the backside of Venus of Praxiteles in the Museum. Was that not desire?' A purely physical reflex, Stephen explains, is not an aesthetic emotion.¹

Stephen is mistaken in dismissing Lynch's appreciation of Venus's buttocks, which many thought the most admirable aspect of this Greek wonder. Indeed, a special temple was built at Knidos, with a back door to allow viewers to approach and admire the statue from behind. As Valérie Bénéjam suggests, 'Lynch's appreciation of the statue is [. . .] as utterly valid as, if not even more cultured and refined than, Stephen's complete refusal of bodily drives in aesthetic judgement [. . .]. Stephen's art refuses the body, but not Joyce's.'²

This vexed conception of sculpture as an art that refuses the body is my focus here, and my literary references are three short stories from the later nineteenth century: Henry James's 'The Last of the Valerii' (1874 [1875]), Vernon Lee's 'Dionea' (1890), and Thomas Hardy's 'Barbara of the House of Grebe' (1891).³ I also dwell briefly on Lee's anti-Aesthetic, proto-feminist novel *Miss Brown* (1884).⁴ In each text the sculptural figure becomes an icon of desire that mediates

¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 204–5.

² Valérie Bénéjam, 'Innards and Titbits: Joyce's Digestive Revolution in the Novel', *Interval(le)s*, 1.2 (Spring 2007), 25–37 (p. 30), at <<http://www.cipa.ulg.ac.be/intervalles2/benejam.pdf>> (accessed 18 December 2009).

³ Henry James, 'The Last of the Valerii', in *Selected Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 13–42. James first published the tale in *Atlantic Monthly*, 33 (January 1874), 69–85. All quotations are taken from the Penguin Modern Classics edition, which uses the first book form of the tale collected in *A Passionate Pilgrim* (Boston: Osgood, 1875). Vernon Lee, 'Dionea', in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Fulham (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2006), pp. 77–104. Thomas Hardy, 'Barbara of the House of Grebe', in *A Group of Noble Dames* (London: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 53–93.

⁴ Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1884; repr. New York: Garland, 1978).

between a transcendental and a kinetic aesthetic engagement with the body and with bodily drives. At the same time, it situates both physical and transcendental aesthetic desire firmly in the arena of didacticism and gender politics.

Stephen's distinction between the kinesis of desire and the stasis of the pure aesthetic response ignores the broader understanding of desire, which encompasses erotic or sexual longing and what the critic Paul Gifford calls 'the higher "spiritual" forms of amorous realisation, including artistic creation and the aesthetic response'.⁵ In the Neoplatonic revival of the nineteenth century the 'pure' aesthetic response is seen as a manifestation of desire in which the work of art offers artist and viewer access to a lost Absolute or Ideal Form of Beauty or the Divine Ideal, stimulating a perverse longing for what can never be wholly realized in material form. This was clearly recognized in the case of poetry and painting. In Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont' (1806), the speaker expatiates on the power of the poet and the painter to communicate a 'truth' that goes beyond accurate material representation:

Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet's dream;
I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile!
Amid a world how different from this! (ll 13–18)⁶

Both painter and poet seek to give permanent, immutable form to the fleeting moment: to make the immaterial palpable by adding the 'gleam' or irradiation of the imagination which 'consecrates' the material object. The resulting art work is an attempt to represent or articulate that which eludes definition, which is beyond language, shape, or tone. The successful art work both disturbs and entrances the viewer by evoking a response rooted in the uncanny and the nostalgic. Ruskin believed that through 'intuition and intensity of gaze' the artist may reach 'a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things'.⁷ For him this facility was most clearly demonstrated in the work of Turner, who, like other great inventive landscape painters, gives 'the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of physical fact'.⁸ For Ruskin, the changes Turner introduces into his landscapes — into etchings such as the *Pass of Faido* — 'come

⁵ Paul Gifford, *Love, Desire and Transcendence in French Literature: Deciphering Eros* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 1.

⁶ William Wordsworth, 'Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont', in *William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill and Duncan Wu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 148–150.

⁷ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols, Library Edition (London: George Allen, 1903–12), vi: *Modern Painters*, vol. 4 (1904), p. 284.

⁸ John Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Topography', in *Works*, vi, 38. For a sustained and engaging examination of the role of the visionary imagination in late Victorian poetry and prose see Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

into his head involuntarily; an entirely imperative dream, crying, "This must be," has taken possession of him; he can see, and do, no otherwise than as the dream directs.⁹

Convinced as he was that the sole purpose of art was 'to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake,¹⁰ Walter Pater also recognized in 1874 Wordsworth's marked 'perception of a soul, in inanimate things, [which] came of an exceptional susceptibility to the impressions of eye and ear, and was, in its essence a kind of sensuousness'.¹¹ The notion of nostalgic desire is at the heart of the aesthetic practice of Edward Burne-Jones, who echoes Wordsworth's ekphrastic poem in 1899 in formulating his ideas on the transcendental nature of art and the artist's unassuageable yearning to see beyond the material world and communicate that vision: 'I mean by a picture a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be — in a light better than any light that ever shone — in a land no-one can define, or remember, only desire.'¹² Both poet and painter 'consecrate' the material world through the medium of the imagination, which penetrates the surface to the 'dream' of reality beneath and then strives to bring that dream into a material existence on the page, on the canvas, and in the studio.

The work of art, then, does indeed excite desire, a desire that is at once aesthetic and sensuous and, in the case of sculpture, sometimes sensual and troublingly erotic. This was particularly true of the sculptural figure, in which these apparently competing forms of desire cohere. As Patricia Pulham has noted, the resurgence of interest in the art of sculpture initiated by Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, and Goethe in the eighteenth century continued into the nineteenth, re-energized by the discovery of the *Venus de Milo* and its arrival in Paris in 1820, which, according to Theodore Ziolkowski, 'touched off a veritable cult of Venus that lasted for several decades'.¹³ My aim here is to examine some of the ways in which desire — aesthetic, erotic, and profane — is embodied in and incited by the statue; and also how, like Greek poetry, the classical statue offers access to what Pater calls a 'transfigured world' projected 'above the realities of its time' whilst it also comments didactically upon those realities.¹⁴ In these texts by James, Lee, and Hardy, both the classical and the neoclassical sculptural

⁹ Ruskin, *Works*, vi, 91.

¹⁰ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 190.

¹¹ Walter Pater, 'Wordsworth' (1874), in *Appreciations*, in *The New Library Edition of the Works of Walter Pater*, 10 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910), v, 39–64 (p. 48).

¹² Edward Burne-Jones, quoted in David Latham, *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 5.

¹³ Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 53–54; Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), quoted in Pulham, p. 54.

¹⁴ Walter Pater, 'Aesthetic Poetry', in *Essays on Literature and Art*, ed. by Jennifer Uglow (London: Dent, 1990), pp. 108–16 (p. 108). This essay does not appear in the *Library Edition*.

forms are used to comment on the petrifying effect of prevailing notions of sexuality and femininity.

Lynch's Praxitelean Venus is probably the *Cnidian Aphrodite* sculpted by Praxiteles and famous, some art historians claim, for being the first naked statue of the goddess and marking the aestheticization of the female as well as the male body (see Figure 1). A plaster copy of the statue was exhibited in the National Museum



FIGURE 1 *Aphrodite of Cnidus* (marble copy of Praxiteles, 4th Century). Restorer: Ippolito Buzzi (Italian, 1562-1634); original elements: torso and thighs; restored elements: head, arms, legs and support (drapery and jug). Ludovisi Collection (Palazzo Altemps, National Museum of Rome), photographer Marie-Lan Nguyen (September 2009).

on Kildare Street, Dublin, at the time of the publication of *Portrait of the Artist*. Praxiteles is said to have taken the inspiration for his Aphrodite not from an idealized conception of beauty, but from the courtesan Phryne, who was acquitted of the capital crime of impiety by the intervention of her defending lawyer Hyperides and his revelation of her beautiful breasts to the court. Phryne's role as the sculptor's model and muse is suggested in Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting of *Phryne before the Areopagus* (1861), in which her naked body, startlingly white in contrast to the darkness of the coffered ceiling of the court, the scarlet robes, and the olive skin of the judges, takes on a sculptural quality as if carved from marble (see Figure 2). Her pose suggests that of Galatea stirring into life in Gérôme's *Pygmalion and Galatea*, where a small marble study of a woman shyly disrobing — a study for Phryne perhaps — can be seen at the back of Pygmalion's studio (see Figure 3). If *Phryne before the Areopagus* emphasizes the sculptural nature of the female body, *Pygmalion and Galatea* draws attention to the sensual, even the erotic potential of the sculptured female nude. Praxiteles is credited with contributing to the rapid development in sculptural style, captured by Gérôme in his pictures, away from classical idealism and towards Hellenic realism. On a visit to the Capitoline Museum in 1876, Thomas Hardy's wife Emma saw a Hellenistic copy of the *Cnidian Venus* and was impressed not by her buttocks but by her feet, noting that she had 'both little toes crumpled under as if she had worn boots'.¹⁵

Praxiteles' *Venus* is a useful starting point here because the increasingly realistic portrayal of the female figure in statues of the goddesses blurs the distinction between a 'pure' aesthetic emotion and an 'impure' physical reflex. In Section 15 of the *Erotas*, the pseudo-Lucian records his response to the statue as respectful wonder. In addition he notes the more earthy appreciation displayed by his hitherto impassive Athenian companion, who exclaims ecstatically on seeing Venus's back and especially her buttocks, which remind him of a boy's. Lucian also describes how the 'intense strain of [one man's] longing' led him to give way to desire and contrive to get himself locked into the goddess's temple for an 'unspeakable night of bravado' with the statue, evidence of which is left in the form of a stain on Venus's thigh — proof, writes Lucian, of 'the traumas she had been through'.¹⁶ The same story is also told by Pliny the Elder. The chief excavator in Henry James's 'The Last of the Valerii', whom the narrator calls 'a subterranean genius [. . .] an earthly gnome of the underworld', observes that "when a beautiful woman is in stone, all one can do is look at her".¹⁷

¹⁵ *Emma Hardy Diaries*, ed. by Richard H. Taylor (Ashington: Mid Northumberland Arts Group; Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1985), p. 149.

¹⁶ Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classical Art from Greece to Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 129.

¹⁷ James, 'The Last of the Valerii', p. 22.



FIGURE 2 *Phryne Before the Areopagus* (oil on canvas) 1861, by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). Hamburg, Kunsthalle {{PD-Art}}.



FIGURE 3 *Pygmalion and Galatea* (oil on canvas) 1865–70, by Jean-Léon Gérôme. Private Collection © Whitford & Hughes, London, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library.

But his malicious smile suggests a certain understanding of the power of beauty to awaken a far more active engagement with the sculptural figure, for both sexes, than aesthetic appreciation normally implies. The association of the erotic with the transcendental that James captures is a curious and compelling feature of the texts under discussion here.

Michael Hatt reminds us that, although painting was more discussed and more practised during the Victorian period, for many artists and critics sculpture remained the greatest of the arts: 'the most elevated, moral and beautiful'.¹⁸ In addition to the fashionable trips to the museums of Italy such as those undertaken by Thomas Hardy and his wife, which were regarded as indispensable to the education of a gentleman, the presence of the sculptural nude in the private and the public domain suggests that, if 'correctly shaped and posed', it was considered 'decent, normative and the very model of decorum'.¹⁹ Ideally, the sculptural nude represented the body 'transformed into an allegory of virtue or morality' or, as the sculptor protagonist of Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* (1897) Jocelyn Pierston puts it, 'flesh rarefied and refined to its highest attar'.²⁰ Though a representation of the body, the sculptural nude seeks to perfect and transcend the flesh rather than simply imitate it. However, the statue's three-dimensional anatomical accuracy, its palpability, and its coexistence with the viewer in the same space threaten its status as a wholly spiritual icon.²¹ The real and the ideal, the pure and the impure, the static safety of the aesthetic and the kinetic danger of the erotic are mediated through and by the sculptural nude, which becomes an object of legitimate, transcendental desire and also of illegitimate earthly lust. The idealized white marble figure with its smooth surface, lack of expression, and generalized facial features signifies a body devoid of physical and psychic processes, immune from sexual desire, appetite, or emotion: it presents a body outside experience, outside history, 'outside a corporeal engagement with the world'.²²

To represent the sculptural body as having some engagement *with* the world is to invite the viewer to engage with that body in a worldly manner. This dichotomy was brought into sharp relief in the middle of the nineteenth century by the debate about whether classical Greek statues were originally coloured. Close examination of ancient sculptures unearthed early in the nineteenth century from such sites as the Temple of Aphaia on Aegina, excavated in 1811, had revealed significant traces of paint in the creases and folds of the garments and on the surface of the marble bodies. Such discoveries would have shocked the eminent art historian Johann Winckelmann, who insisted in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764) that the white form was the original aesthetic ideal. Hatt suggests that the possibility that these ancient classical marble forms were

¹⁸ Michael Hatt, 'Thoughts and Things: Sculpture and the Victorian Nude', in *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed. by Alison Smith (London: Tate, 2001), pp. 37–49 (p. 37).

¹⁹ Hatt, p. 38.

²⁰ Hatt, p. 38; Thomas Hardy, *The Well-Beloved* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 75.

²¹ Stefano Evangelista notes Pater's Winckelmann 'fingering ancient statues with "unsinged hands" and apprehending "the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner, not through the understanding, but by instinct or touch"'; see Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 33.

²² Hatt, 'Thoughts on Things', p. 38.

originally polychromatic ‘was the most urgent issue in sculptural aesthetics’ and prompted experiments such as Owen Jones’s coloured model of the Parthenon that was displayed at the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace.²³ In 1868 Lawrence Alma-Tadema exhibited his painting *Phidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends* in London, in which the temple frieze is emphatically coloured; but the most dramatic experiment was John Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* (1851–56), a glazed and coloured sculptural nude that caused a sensation at the International Exhibition of 1862 in London (see Figure 4). Gibson claimed that he had endeavoured to give his Venus an expression that denoted ‘that spiritual elevation of character which results from purity and sweetness, combined with an air of unaffected dignity and grace’.²⁴ The *Athenaeum*, however, denounced the piece as ‘a naked, impudent English woman’.²⁵

The tints that infuse Gibson’s *Venus*, the friable flakes of colour testifying to the original polychrome realism of its classical antecedents, the trace of libidinous desire left by the ‘stain’ that mars the white purity of the thighs of the *Cnidian Aphrodite* draw attention to the disturbing erotic response that threatens to trouble the static aesthetic appreciation of the sculpture. The knowing viewer’s gaze is drawn to seek out that spot on the thigh, or to the creases and folds of the marble image to search out the stain or those delicate flakes of colour that may be invisible to the naked eye but not to the eye of the mind. Like Freud’s mystic writing pad, once the libidinal message has been brought to the surface, it can never be completely erased: its imprint remains as a faint indentation on the surface of the wax.²⁶

In Henry James’s story ‘The Last of the Valerii’, an ancient classical statue of the goddess Juno excavated from the grounds of a newly renovated Italian Villa is the focus for a number of contentious issues, including atavistic paganism and Catholic idolatry, the new Yankee dollar and the ancient cultural heritage of Europe.²⁷ It also dramatizes the debate between the sculptural and the

²³ Hatt, pp. 38–39.

²⁴ *Life of John Gibson, RA, Sculptor*, ed. by Lady Eastlake (London: Longmans, Green, 1870), pp. 210–11.

²⁵ Hatt, ‘Thoughts on Things’, p. 38. We might compare Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* with Jeff Koons’s half-torso porcelain *Pink Panther* (1988), which represents a woman embracing a Pink Panther soft toy. Koons is quoted in the catalogue to the exhibition ‘Banality’ at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York as saying that “‘*Pink Panther* is about masturbation. I don’t know what she would be doing with the Pink Panther other than taking it home to masturbate with.’” In his notes for the sale of the Koons piece at Christie’s on 17 November 1999, Carter B. Horsley comments: “The catalogue goes on to note that “Pornography, like art, is designed for contemplation,” which is an acceptable notion, “and is intended to alter the emotions of, and inspire action by, the viewer,” which is debatable”; see <<http://www.thecityreview.com/f9gcon.html>> (accessed 18 December 2009).

²⁶ Sigmund A. Freud, ‘A Note on the “Mystic Writing Pad”’ (1925 [1924]), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), xix (1961), pp. 227–32.

²⁷ It was James’s practice to revise for book publication the tales that first appeared in magazines, often revising them further for subsequent reprinting. Significant variations from the 1875 edition noted here are taken from *The Tales of Henry James*, ed. by Maqbool Aziz, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973–84), II: 1870–1874 (1978), pp. 259–83.

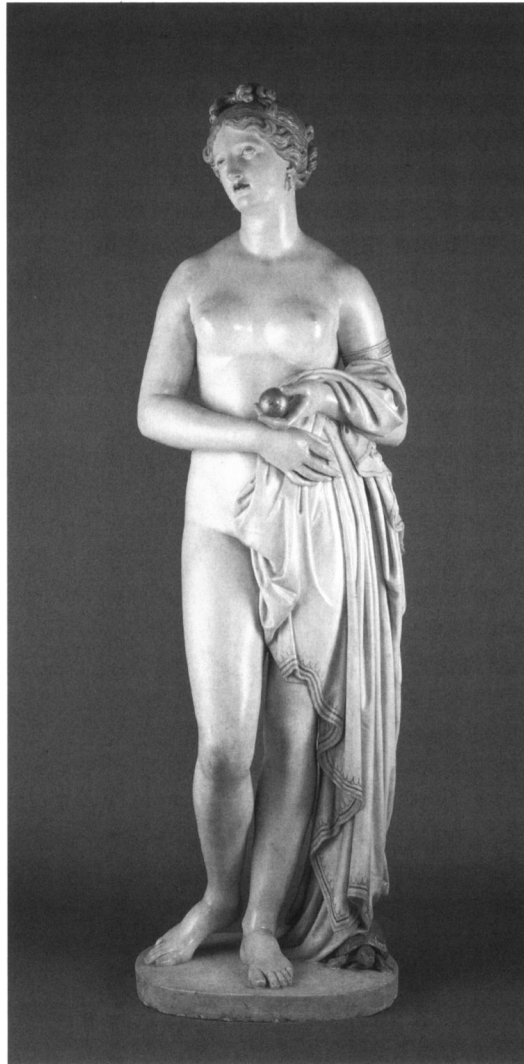


FIGURE 4 *The Tinted Venus* (tinted marble) by John Gibson (c. 1851–6), Walker Art Gallery. © National Museums Liverpool.

picturesque, idolatry and the ‘pure’ aesthetic response, transgressive and legitimate desire, and art and life. The tale presents the statue as an intermediary or mediator between these oppositional states and also implies its power to incite repressed, buried bodily drives. The fragments of marble, mouldy sarcophagi, moss-coated vases, and ‘sad disfeatured bust[s]’²⁸ in the decayed gardens of

²⁸ James, ‘The Last of the Valerii’, in *Selected Tales*, p. 17. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

Count Marco Valerio's Roman Villa carry the libidinal trace of Italy's pagan past, knowledge of which troubles the celibate narrator's phlegmatic address to the world. 'An unscrupulous old painter of ruins and relics', he initially neutralizes the affective charm of the place by reducing what he sees to a series of 'subjects' to be appropriated and transmuted into his picturesque studies (p. 17).²⁹ He preserves his aesthetic distance from the Villa's subtle, disconcerting influences by displacing them onto his American god-daughter Martha's new Italian husband, Count Marco Valerio, who signifies in his eyes 'neither beliefs, nor hopes nor fears — nothing but senses, appetites, serenely luxurious tastes' (p. 19).³⁰ The Count's 'corporeality' is seen as a manifestation of his pagan heritage, which is objectified through the use of racial stereotypes and sculptural metaphors. Adjectives such as 'massive', 'grave', 'slow', and 'dense' reduce Marco to a level of apparently inanimate soullessness, and his statuesque form seems to challenge the narrator's painterly gaze:

He had a head and throat like some of the busts in the Vatican. To my eye, which has looked at things now so long with a painter's purpose, it was a real annoyance to see such a throat rising out of the white cravat of the period. (pp. 13–14)

His appearance is likened to 'the familiar bust of the Emperor Caracalla', who epitomized for many the depravity, cruelty, and barbarism of pre-Christian Rome (see Figure 5). Marco has the same 'dense, sculptural crop of curls:

It was such hair as the old Romans must have had when they walked bareheaded and bronzed about the world. It made a perfect arch over his low, clear forehead, and prolonged itself on cheek and chin in a close, crisp beard, strong with its own strength and unstiffened by the razor. (p. 14)

In a classic piece of aesthetic legerdemain Marco's character is assumed to mirror his infamous predecessor's. The connection with barbarism and Christian persecution is also emphasized by James's choice of Marco's patronymic with its echo of the Roman Emperor Valerian and its link to the larger heritage of the Valerii, one of Ancient Rome's most aristocratic families, which provided many of its emperors.

The narrator discerns in Marco's 'untaught nature' the incurable revival of 'the unholy passions of his forefathers', which 'clamour [. . .] dumbly for an issue' (p. 29). These are also inchoate in the 'dumb' speech of the old weather-worn sculpture of Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and in the very elements themselves. Marco declares:

²⁹ In the 1874 edition of the tale originally published in *Atlantic Monthly*, the narrator describes himself as 'an unscrupulous old *genre* painter' (*Tales of Henry James*, II, 262). The term 'genre painting' had come into use the year before to describe 'a style of painting which depicts scenes and subjects of common life' (*OED*). The 'picturesque', meaning 'possessing pleasing and interesting qualities of form and colour', 'fit to be imitated in a picture' (*OED*) dates from the previous century. James's revision serves to make our narrator more traditional, even old-fashioned, in his painting style.

³⁰ Marco is called Camillo in the 1874 version.

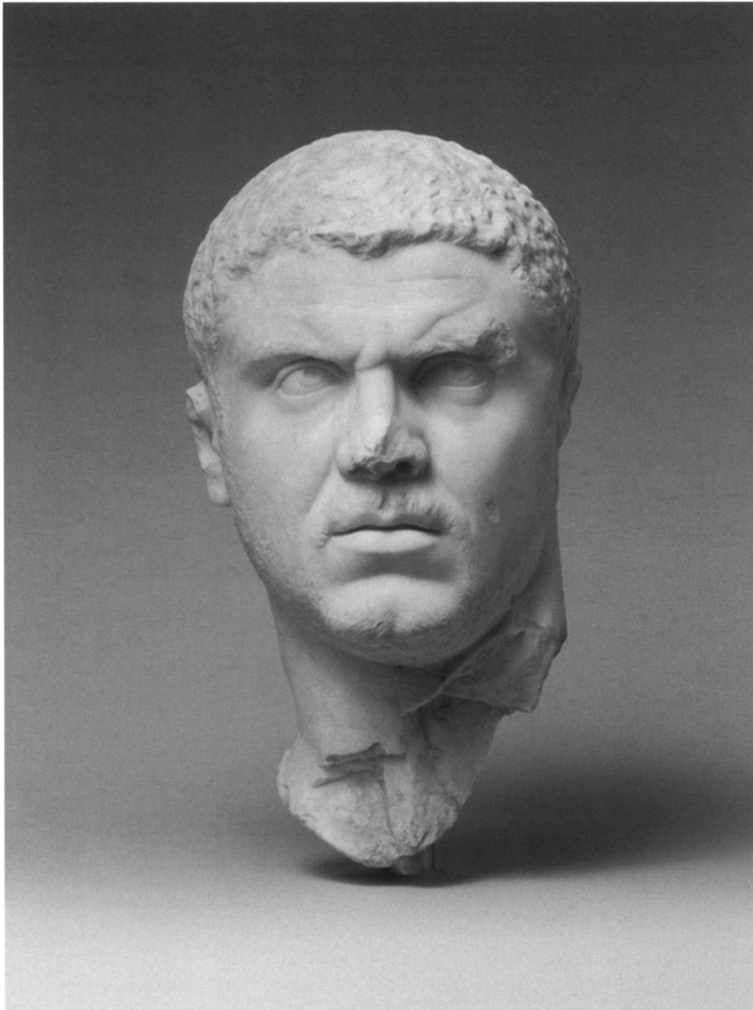


FIGURE 5 *Bust of the Emperor Caracalla* (Marble) Roman, AD 212–217, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Samuel D. Lee Fund, 1940 (40.11.1a).
Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There have been things seen and done here which leave strange influences behind! They don't touch you, doubtless, who come of another race. But me they touch often, in the whisper of the leaves and the odour of the mouldy soil and the blank eyes of the old statues. I can't bear to look the statues in the face. I seem to see other strange eyes in the empty sockets, and I hardly know what they say to me. (p. 21)

The narrator surmises that his god-daughter has married the Count 'because he was like a statue of the Decadence'. As such, Marco embodies not just the 'falling away' of his own race, but also the potential threat of the narrator's own

submission to an aberrant desire for the Count's sculptural form, a desire that the Villa's other ancient statues dimly suggest (p. 16).³¹

The narrator's response to Marco is initially pragmatic cynicism and an appalled rejection of these 'unholy passions' (p. 29). However, he also exhibits a familiar transatlantic envy of Marco's 'heavy heritage' and the access it affords him to the secrets of a classical past that our narrator does not possess. The statues seem to him to 'stand in the perpetual twilight like conscious things, brooding on their long observations', and although he lingers near them 'half expecting they would [. . .] tell me their stony secrets' (p. 18), like Prufrock's mermaids, they do not speak to him. The narrative appears to concern the struggle of the recidivist Count Marco to overcome the decadent pull of 'the evil germs which history had implanted in his line' (p. 29), but beneath the narrator's objectification of this in Marco's idolatrous obsession with the statue of Juno lies another reality: that of his own tussle with these nameless, unholy passions. While our transatlantic 'illustrissimo forestiero' is presumed to be immune to its influence, as the dwarfish superintendent of the excavation confides to him, "There is a pagan element in all of us" (p. 37).

The magnificent and perfectly preserved Juno excavated from the grounds of the Villa is the medium that translates this imperceptible 'hoarse whisper' of the past into the language of sculptural desire, and, through its own apparent transfiguration from the material to the divine, from the statuesque to the animate, it offers both the narrator and Marco the chance of an unholy alliance with the hidden, suppressed realm of the primitive and the pagan. The narrator's recognition of the statuesque in Marco is matched by his observation of the 'almost human look' of the statue, which he attempts to subsume in the pure aesthetic gaze:

She was amply draped so that I saw that she was not a Venus. 'She's a Juno,' said the expert, decisively; and she seemed indeed an embodiment of celestial supremacy and repose. Her beautiful head, bound with a single band, could have bent only to give the nod of command; her eyes looked straight before her; her mouth was implacably grave; one hand, outstretched, appeared to have held a kind of imperial wand; the arm from which the other had been broken hung at her side with the most queenly majesty. The workmanship was of the greatest delicacy, and though perhaps there was more in her than usual of a certain personal expression, she was wrought, as a whole, in the large and simple manner of the great Greek period. She was a masterpiece of skill and a marvel of preservation. (pp. 23–24)

The emphasis on the identity of the piece as a 'Juno' rather than a 'Venus' is significant, for this story is also concerned with the legitimate channelling of

³¹ The year 1874 saw not only the publication of James's tale but also the appearance of the first edition of John Pentland Mahaffy's *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (London: Macmillan), which featured a section on 'Greek Love' probably largely written by Oscar Wilde, Mahaffy's pupil at Trinity College Dublin at the time. This section was expurgated from subsequent editions. See Mahaffy, pp. 305–10.

libidinous desire into the safe, domestic confines of marriage. The 'charmed atmosphere' of his romantic, classical surroundings and the couple's drowsy sexual contentment troubles the narrator with a sense that they have retreated from the modern world and its scruples to the heathenish past with its idolatrous worship of images and its aberrant, as well as its legitimate, desires of the flesh.

'The Last of the Valerii' sets up a complex debate between the sculptural and the picturesque in which neither is wholly vindicated. While the sculptural seems to signify a primitive, barbarous, and decadent address to beauty, the picturesque, as professed by our narrator, implies a detachment from the real world and a suppression of the kind of response to beauty that involves sensual desire: it is a refusal of the body in deference to the demands of art. Turning back to his palette after catching sight of the couple walking arm in arm 'across the end of one of the long-drawn vistas', the narrator finds his colours 'dimmer for the radiant vision'; relegated to the margins of life, both literally and figuratively, he imagines himself as 'some old monkish chronicler or copyist, engaged in illuminating a medieval legend' (p. 20). Later, he finds himself no longer moved by 'the golden mists' and the 'thousand crimson fingers' of the evening sun, the 'violet shadows and the amber lights': 'my painting stood still; everything looked ugly. I sat and fumbled with my palette, and seemed to be mixing mud with my colours' (p. 29).

In the partially Christianized rotunda of the Pantheon, the narrator experiences a connection with the ancient religion akin to Mrs Moore's epiphanal moment in the Marabar Caves in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). He muses:

No Roman monument retains a deeper impress of ancient life, or has more of the form of the antique faiths whose temples were nobler than their gods. The huge dusky dome seems to the spiritual ear to hold a vague reverberation of pagan worship, as a shell picked up on the beach holds the rumour of the sea. (p. 31)

Watching the illuminated curtain of drizzle fall through the rotunda's uncapped vault, he notes how the weather current suppresses the odour of incense 'and transports one to a faith that was on terms of reciprocity with nature'. The Count and the painter experience a brief moment of mutual comprehension as Marco touches the narrator's arm and gives him 'a strange smile' before painting for him an imaginary scene of the pagan gods and goddesses descending through the great open skylight to take their places at the altar. Although the narrator remonstrates with him, and later condescends to and patronizes him, we sense that he too has '*felt*' the influence of the old religion (pp. 32–33). He confesses to 'a perverse fascination' with Marco's idea, a sense of tender respect for what he calls the Count's delusion, and a certain envy:

I envied him the force of his imagination, and I used sometimes to close my eyes with a vague desire that when I opened them I might find Apollo under the opposite tree, lazily kissing his flute, or see Diana hurrying with long steps down the ilex-walk. (p. 35)

Interestingly, what the narrator envies in Marco is ‘the force of his imagination’: that ability to penetrate through to the Real, a quality with which the purely ‘picturesque’ painter is less well acquainted. Later, in search of his eyeglass in the garden at night, he engages in an act of voyeurism that supplements his disturbingly close observations of the newly married couple. Alerted by a shaft of moonlight on the white marble figure on the pediment of the casino, he goes to spy on the Juno and witnesses her apparent metamorphosis into the goddess herself.

The beautiful image stood bathed in the cold radiance, shining with a purity that made her convincingly divine. If by day her rich paleness suggested faded gold, she now had a complexion like silver slightly dimmed. The effect was almost terrible; beauty so expressive could hardly be inanimate. (p. 35)

He also sees his own moment of anthropomorphic ecstasy dramatized in front of him in the form of the sleeping Count, whose presence there impresses him with the sense that the shining image is really the goddess, who ‘seemed to throw a sort of conscious pride into her stony mask’ (p. 36). Marco’s sleep suggests both post-coital exhaustion and the aesthetic consummation with an Ideal beauty through the medium of the dream. However, blanched by the moonlight, which ‘travelled forward and covered his breast and face’, his body is virtually indistinguishable from that of the marble statue (p. 36). Together they form a sculptural group — goddess and worshipper, idol and idolater — such as might have been excavated from other ancient sites at the time. Just as the rumour of the sea in the shell is heard by the narrator in the Pantheon and made manifest by the iridescent rain that falls through the open vault, so the inchoate whisper of the ancient past is translated into the expressive, animate beauty of the moon-bathed sculptural form of the Venus, and the sculpture becomes for both Marco and the narrator an icon of platonic and earthly desire. The stir of aberrant and aesthetic desire in the narrator is made manifest by his sensually transfigured vision of Marco petrified by the light of the moon.

Of course, unlike the gardens of the Villa Valeria, James never gives up his secrets that easily. The choice of Juno over Venus (or even Adonis or Apollo) leaves many questions unanswered by this brief analysis. Juno is the goddess of women, she is the guardian of marriage, childbirth, and legitimate heterosexual desire, and it is Martha’s yankee dollars (tainted by trade) and new-found archaeological enthusiasm that resurrect her from the earth. However, Marco’s worship of the statue leads him to neglect his young wife emotionally and physically, slowly petrifying her into a marble image of sexual neglect (p. 37). Alerted by her godfather to Marco’s anthropomorphic obsession with the statue, it is Martha who commands that the Juno is reburied. It is as if the Juno has betrayed her in some way, despite her ‘lively tribute to the perfection of the image’ that confounds the narrator’s Schopenhauerian misogynistic surmise that ‘women lack the perception of the purest beauty’:

Martha however, seemed slowly to measure our Juno's infinite stateliness. She gazed a long time, silently, leaning against her husband, and then stepped, half-timidly, down upon the stones which formed a rough base for the figure. She laid her two rosy, ungloved hands upon the stony fingers of the goddess, and remained for some moments pressing them in her warm grasp and fixing her living eyes upon the sightless brow. When she turned round, her eyes were bright with the tear which deep admiration sometimes calls forth and which, in this case, her husband was too much absorbed to notice. (p. 25)

The goddess of marriage and childbirth and the pre-eminent deity of women, Juno is also the archetypal jealous wife and a merciless persecutor of Jupiter's mistresses and their children. Martha's comment when the statue is described to her — "A long, fluted peplum? [. . .] How very odd! I don't believe she's beautiful" — and the narrator's response — "She's beautiful enough to make you jealous, figlioccia mia" — suggest the judgement of Paris, that notorious beauty contest in which Juno or Hera famously lost to Aphrodite. Paris was, of course, rewarded with the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy, and the rest, as they say, is history. It is that threatening beauty that Martha 'smothers in the dreadful earth', commenting half-guiltily: "It makes me feel almost as if she were alive" (p. 41).

Both the narrator and Martha display milder forms of the iconoclastic frenzy of the Christianized Emperor Theodosius as described by Gibbon. The narrator is tempted to knock off the nose of a perfectly preserved statue of Hermes in protest at Marco's preference for marble over human companions, and Martha not only instigates the reburial of the Juno but also acts as funerary priest, dropping a handful of earth on the statue's breast. The burial of the Juno initiates Marco's return to the safe confines of the domestic and to the exercise of legitimate marital desire. His new fascination with the picturesque image of his wife engaged in her embroidery — drawing 'her silken threads like an image of domestic tranquility' (p. 42) — completes the apparent defeat of the sculptural and echoes the legend of Helen of Troy weaving her tapestry of the Trojan Wars, and also, more appropriately perhaps, the faithful Penelope weaving and unravelling her tapestry while awaiting the return of Odysseus.

The sculpture, and all it signifies, is safely reburied, but the trace remains in the form of the Juno's purloined hand, which the Count keeps suspended in an inner recess of his cabinet. He describes it as "the hand of a beautiful creature [. . .] whom I once greatly admired". "Ah — a Roman?" asked the gentleman with a smirk. "A Greek" said the Count, with a frown' (p. 42). The Count's apparent rejection of his own Roman heritage can be read in several ways. Is he denying his own idolatrous obsession with the Juno, placing her origins further back in history with the 'civilized' Greeks? Or maybe the smirking gentleman believes the hand to be a memento of a former lover or mistress? In any case the hand remains, providing a connection back to the buried sculpture

that initiated the resurgence of those aberrant, pagan passions in both Marco and the narrator.

The sculptural image in James's tale is hugely expressive. Its ancient pagan origins incite a response that threatens to cross the line of unacceptability, involving the actual sacrifice of a young animal and the implied sacrifice of Martha's right to a full erotic life. Its pose of arrested movement represents the fear that dark pagan forces, like Freud's mystic writing perhaps, might make themselves visible again on the surface of the modern consciousness.

For Walter Pater, the mark of a true humanist, such as Pico della Mirandola, was the belief that 'nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality'.³² In *The Renaissance* he prefaces his study of Pico (first published in 1868) with an extract from Heinrich Heine's 'The Gods in Exile', an essay that most scholars agree exercised a profound influence on Pater's imagination. He was fascinated by the idea that the ancient gods, deprived of shelter and ambrosia by the destructive frenzy of Christian monks, were forced to disguise themselves and live as ordinary humans, taking up occupations such as shepherd, soldier, and even, in the case of Bacchus, the superior of a Franciscan monastery. In Heine's essay a fisherman/ferryman hides in his own boat in order to discover where three mysterious monks who have hired it go to. He is taken to a wide forest glade, festooned with lamps and swarming with many hundreds of young men and women: 'Most of them beautiful as pictures, although their faces were all as white as marble, and this circumstance, together with their apparel, which consisted of girded tunics trimmed with purple cord gave them the appearance of wandering statues.'³³ The transubstantiation of the statues into gods and goddesses, so strikingly imagined by Marco Valerio in the dome of the Pantheon, takes place here in secret and out of sight of Christian mortals, except for the traumatized fisherman. The first and second monks throw off their habits to reveal themselves as satyric Dionysian revellers, but the third is a marvellously beautiful youth, robed in a radiant diamond-spangled tunic. Naught marred the perfect symmetry of his figure, save that the rounded hips and slender waist were almost feminine in their proportions. Then too, his delicately curved lips and soft mobile features gave him a somewhat effeminate appearance; but all this was redeemed by a certain daring, heroic, almost reckless expression of his countenance.³⁴

Pater suggests that because Dionysus is 'a woman-like god, it was on women and feminine souls that his power mainly fell'.³⁵ The blurring of masculine and

³² Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 38.

³³ Heinrich Heine, 'The Gods in Exile', in *Prose Miscellanies, from Heinrich Heine*, trans. by S. L. Fleishman (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1876), pp. 216–43 (p. 221).

³⁴ Heine, pp. 222–23.

³⁵ Walter Pater, 'The Bacchanals of Euripides', in *New Library Edition*, vii, 53–80 (p. 57). The essay was first published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in May 1889 and reprinted in *Greek Studies* (1895) after Pater's death.

feminine qualities in the figure of Dionysus is taken up again by Pater in his 'A Study of Dionysus' (1876), where, as Yopie Prins has shown, the shift from animism to anthropomorphism within Pater's anthropological model 'corresponds to a shift from ritual to myth, which narrates the story of Dionysus in human form. As Dionysus leaves the vineyards and enters Athens, Dionysiac worship is transferred from enthusiastic women to enthusiastic men.'³⁶ Vernon Lee's short story 'Dionea' uses the sculptural trope to explore the notion of androgyny and undifferentiated desire exemplified in the figure of Dionysus. At the same time, Lee expands the two-stage Pygmalionesque model of animism to anthropomorphism, where the statue functions as an intermediary stage between the idea and its realization, to a three-stage model of animism, anthropomorphism, and petrification, where the statue symbolizes the threat of specification. This model also structures her first novel *Miss Brown* (1884), which, much to his embarrassment, she dedicated to Henry James.

In their Introduction to *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham note how Vernon Lee's women 'transcended the often reductive misogynist limitations of this type as they defy being fixed and defined by those around them, even seeming to cross the boundaries of time and space'.³⁷ This is certainly true of Anne Brown in her struggle to break free from the specifying, petrifying gaze of the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Walter Hamlin, who literally and metaphorically 'excavates' her from his fellow poet Melton Perry's 'time- and weather-stained Tuscan country house', the Villa Arnolfini near the city of Lucca. Here she has languished as a children's maid in a low and vaulted frescoed room on the ground floor, among sacks of potatoes, garden-tools, silkworm-mats, battered dolls, and crumpled pinafores.³⁸ Hamlin compares the young woman to 'some' strange statue — cheek and chin and forehead of Parian marble, scarcely stained a dull red in the lips, and hair of dull wrought iron, and eyes of some mysterious greyish-blue, slate-tinted onyx: a beautiful and sombre idol of the heathen' (p. 25). The barely perceptible tints of the idol to which Anne is compared suggest the muted, troubling physical engagement with the world that periodically disrupts Hamlin's attempts to sculpt this unformed young woman into a purely aesthetic icon. Anne Brown, however, is no Aphrodite, Cnidian or 'Gibsonian'. Her 'monumental' features, high, narrow forehead, massive nose 'with a slight droop' remind Hamlin of 'the head of Antinous', the Greek youth who was the Emperor Hadrian's young favourite and lover (p. 25). After the youth's mysterious death, the Emperor was so grief-stricken that he caused an unidentified number of statues of him to be

³⁶ Yopie Prins, 'Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinners', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 43–82 (p. 52).

³⁷ Maxwell and Pulham, Introduction, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, p. 11.

³⁸ Lee, *Miss Brown*, pp. 13–14. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

made and venerated by his subjects. At least a hundred sculptures of Antinous are known to exist, each one a projection of desire into marble, an erotic charge fixed and sublimated into stone (see Figure 6). The comparison is even more apt if we are to believe that Antinous's mysterious death in the Nile was murder, or even some form of sacrifice possibly initiated by Hadrian himself.



FIGURE 6 *Antinous Mondragone* (marble) artist unknown (ca. 130 CE), Italy. Louvre Museum, Paris. Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen (2004).

Walter Hamlin's description of Anne is markedly sculptural: 'the lips thick, and of curiously bold projection and curl; the faintly hollowed cheek subsided gradually into a neck round and erect like a tower, but set into the massive chest as some strong supple branch into a tree trunk' (p. 25). Anne Brown inhabits a peculiarly liminal space in terms of her age, her gender, and her racial identity. Her voice, 'deep, nasal, but harmonious and weird, with curious sudden, metallic falsetto notes', is 'less like the voice of a woman than of a youth' (p. 14). Her 'type' is 'neither Latin nor Greek', but with something of Jewish and something of Ethiopian timelessness subdued into a statuesque but mostly Hellenic beauty. It has an archetypal quality for Hamlin, stimulating those responses deeply rooted in memory and desire that came to characterize the aestheticism of the Pre-Raphaelites. For Hamlin, it is 'as if at some dim distant time, he had seen and known it well before' (p. 25). Although her complexion is perfectly smooth, she is 'wholly unyouthful; the look was not of age, for you could not imagine her ever growing old, but of a perfect negation of youth' (p. 24). In her rough and untutored form Anne is 'the perfect negation' of the dominant specifying discourses of identity. The expensive intellectual, cultural, and social education that Hamlin goes on to provide for her animates her very soul, but he then proceeds to arrest the play of natural forces in the young woman. Rather than subduing these energies in the role of aesthetic muse which Hamlin and his circle have imposed upon her, Anne Brown yearns to be an independent and active woman and to put her education to good use by becoming a teacher at one of the clubs for working girls in London. Although she does not love him, she eventually agrees to become Hamlin's wife to save him from the decadent and corrupting embrace of his Russian cousin Sacha Elaguine. By marrying him, Anne condemns herself to a petrified life as a feminine aesthetic muse, endlessly reiterated by and embedded in the iconography of the movement, and to the rigidity of a spiritual death.

Lee's *Miss Brown* deploys the sculptural trope to comment on different forms of desire: aspirational, erotic, and aesthetic. In condemning her to the status of an icon, a pure white body outside experience and outside the world, Hamlin takes on the role of the Gorgon rather than Pygmalion.³⁹ Lee's critique of Aestheticism and its insistence on maintaining a lofty distance from the social and political arena is pointedly didactic, as is her analysis of how Aestheticism condemns women to the role of passive muse.

Sculptural representations of Antinous often portrayed him as Dionysus, the god of wine, intoxication, and, as Geoffrey Miles puts it, the embodiment of 'the

³⁹ In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849; London: Dent, 1975), in a spirited exchange between the eponymous heroine and her former tutor Louis Moore, Shirley quotes the legend in which 'one man in times of old [. . .] imparted vitality to the statue he had chiseled'. 'Others', she remarks in a pointed aside to Moore, 'may have the contrary gift of turning life to stone' (p. 387).

emotional and irrational, inspiration and ecstasy, whatever lifts human beings out of their normal selves and beyond rational control'.⁴⁰ Dionysus also represents undifferentiated desires: desire outside the confines of the heterosexual imperative. Lee confounds the qualities of Dionysus with those of Venus/Aphrodite in the figure of Dionea in her eponymous short story. Dionea is a small 'heathen' child washed up on the shore of a village in the Gulf of La Spezia and placed under the protection of Dr Alessandro De Rosis, who narrates her story in a series of letters to her sponsor Lady Evelyn Savelli.⁴¹ De Rosis is writing a history of the fall of the pagan gods, which owes much to Heinrich Heine's 'Gods in Exile', but his book will never be finished.

Dionea is educated at the convent of the Sisters of the Stigmata, where she exercises a strange and troubling influence on the birds, plants, and people with whom she comes into contact. The sisters allow her to keep her 'unchristian' name because one of them finds a St Dionea of Antioch, Virgin and Martyr, in the Extravagant or Moveable Saints listed by Pedro de Ribadeneira in his *Flos Sanctorum* (1599–1610), but it is clear from the observations of our Jamesian narrator that Dionea's origins cannot be co-opted to the civilizing forces of Christianity. Her jaunty, but knowing, acts of sacrilege, her absence of what De Rosis calls 'natural piety' (behaviour that conforms to a recognizably feminine type), her possible seduction of Father Domenico, and the elopement of Sister Giuliana with a sailor-boy from the port are all evidence of Dionea's systematic overthrow of the new religion. Like Heine's exiled gods, Dionea lures these unsteadfast Christians to apostasy, her beauty inciting the impure, kinetic response of lust. As Maxwell and Pulham have suggested, her ability to stimulate aberrant desires in the most circumspect and continent of the villagers links her with the Dionysian spirit of excess and unrestraint, while her beauty and her props of myrtle, pigeons, and roses affiliate her with Venus-Aphrodite, whose temple once occupied the site of the now desecrated chapel where the visiting sculptor Waldemar has his studio.⁴²

For Pater, the spirit of rebellion and revolt against the dominant religious and moral precepts of the time that animated the abortive Renaissance in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was 'the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises'.⁴³ It also surfaces in his *Denis l'Auxerrois* (1886), the imaginary portrait of an ancient Greek god returning to medieval France and imbuing the town of Auxerre with

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Miles, 'A Rough Guide to the Gods', in *Classical Mythology in English Literature: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Miles (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 20–34 (p. 28).

⁴¹ See also Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits', *Word and Image*, 13 (1997), 253–69.

⁴² Maxwell and Pulham, Introduction, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, p. 81.

⁴³ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 19.

the artistic, communal, and political spirit that led to the building of its cathedral and the development of liturgical music. As John Smith Harrison suggests, Pater's concept of Denys is of 'a spiritual form', a manifestation of divine energy and the human political instinct: 'these two aspects coalesce and Denys becomes the very genius of that new, free and generous manner in art, active and potent as a living creature'.⁴⁴

Lee's conception of Dionysus is rather more anarchic than Pater's. In Dionea she fuses the spirit of Dionysian energy with the pure unassuageable desire that is symbolized in Venus; a desire that is irreducible to purely heterosexual forms and which also supersedes the misogynistic, homophobic aesthetic of the sculptor Waldemar. As De Rosis writes in one of his letters:

The sough of the waves, the warm wind carrying the sweetness of the lemon-blossoms, the bitterness of the myrtle on our rocks, the distant chaunt of the boys cleaning out their nets, of the girls sickling the grass under the olives, *Amor — amor — amor*, and all this is the great goddess Venus.⁴⁵

The sexuality and natural energy of Waldemar's wife Gertrude have been stilled into an embodiment of spiritualized, glacial femininity: 'a Memling Madonna finished by some Tuscan sculptor [. . .], her long, delicate white hands ever busy, like those of a mediæval lady, with some delicate piece of work' (p. 95). However, Gertrude's role in the procurement of Dionea (and I use the word advisedly) as a model for her husband is interesting. She scans the available village maidens 'with the eyes of a slave dealer' and seems to be searching for an antidote to Waldemar's extreme homophilia (p. 97). Although De Rosis senses in Waldemar 'something of the old spirit [. . .] the divineness of the mere body', there are no 'wide-shouldered Amazons' or 'broad-flanked Aphrodites' among his sculptures (p. 92). Waldemar's dismissal of the female body as 'expression' rather than 'form', and therefore more suited to painting than to sculpture (p. 96), is presented as symptomatic of his inhumation of Dionysian desire in the very depths of his unconscious. Those sculptured female forms of the Parthenon Fates, Phidias's *Venus*, and the *Venus de Milo* were not inspired by women, he suggests prophetically, but by the now vanquished goddesses who revealed themselves to mortals. Their sculptural forms are a product of divine energy tamed and arrested by the skill of their mortal lovers.

Like the narrator of James's 'The Last of the Valerii', the celibate De Rosis is antipathetic to the sculptural aesthetic, despite, or perhaps because of, his

⁴⁴ John Smith Harrison, 'Pater, Heine, and the Old Gods of Greece', *PMLA*, 39 (1924), 655–86 (p. 666). Compare De Rosis's description of Sor Agostino, 'a once patriarchally respectable old man' who is driven to 'sacrilegious madness' by Dionea and, in a reversal of the myth of Semele and Jupiter, is struck by lightning for bothering her (Lee, 'Dionea', p. 90), with Pater's story of the 'aged Dean of the Chapter' kicking a football with 'an amazing levity as if suddenly relieved of his burden of eighty years' (*New Library Edition*, iv, 58). The story echoes the episode in which Dionysus revivifies the spirit in the old veins of Cadmus in *The Bacchanals of Euripides* (Smith Harrison, 'Pater, Heine, and the Old Gods of Greece', pp. 665–66).

⁴⁵ Lee, 'Dionea', p. 92. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

hours in the studio of John Gibson: “‘tis a dead art”, he declares, “we should do better to bury” (p. 92). But even he responds to the shape of the goddess emerging from the clay representation of Dionea’s body, celebrating it as ‘a Venus immortally beautiful’ (p. 98). However, Waldemar’s skill cannot capture Dionea’s beauty; instead, it opens up to him the realm that lies beyond the material form, the Platonic Absolute that is also the realm beyond the confines of the signifier and the realm of undifferentiated desire. Dionea’s retelling of the tale of the Judgement of Paris to Waldemar’s young children suggests both her aesthetic and her erotic challenge to this ‘lover of a woman’s mere shape’ (p. 98). As Paris, the homophile Waldemar awards the golden apple to Dionea’s androgynous spirit of beauty and desire.

A Pygmalion in reverse, Waldemar strives to apprehend the Ideal through the physical body of the girl, but, like ‘Tommasino the Rosebud’, the village boy who is given sea water to drink in order to stimulate his desire for the blacksmith’s daughter, Waldemar is driven insane by the insatiable nature of desire itself. He abandons the mediatory sculpture and instead physically worships the principle, or the goddess, that inspired it. Borrowing an antique altar to Venus from De Rosis’s collection, he follows the example of Marco Valerio with a libation of wine and then a blood sacrifice. But where Marco offers ‘a lamb, a kid or a sucking calf’ (p. 39) to his transfigured marble Juno, Waldemar sacrifices Gertrude. Where Marco is induced to forsake his goddess for his patient domestic embroidering ‘Angel’, here the goddess triumphs and Dionea leads Waldemar to sacrifice his living icon of a wife to her (p. 95) and thus dramatizes the tale’s rejection of this constraining feminine model.⁴⁶ Despite Waldemar’s emulation of the ‘zealous iconoclasm’ of Heine’s monks, who ‘hunted down the gods with fire and malediction, and razed their temples’,⁴⁷ the trace of Dionea’s influence remains. A witness reports her singing words in an unknown tongue on board her Greek boat with its painted eyes as it heads straight out to sea, a sea, as De Rosis describes it in the opening of the story, ‘wicked in its loveliness [. . .] from which must have arisen in times gone by [. . .] a baleful goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia [. . .] overwhelming men’s lives in sudden darkness like that squall of last week’ (pp. 77–78).

In James’s ‘The Last of the Valerii’ Marco’s atavistic communion with the statue of Juno leaves him translated by moonlight into a sculptural figure that ‘completed the impressiveness of the scene’ (p. 35). Something similar happens in Thomas Hardy’s story of 1891, ‘Barbara of the House of Grebe’. Barbara’s second husband, the Earl of Uplandtowers, sees his wife locked in an embrace

⁴⁶ Like Pliny and Lucian’s anonymous defiler of Aphrodite, Waldemar is found dead at the foot of a cliff.

⁴⁷ Heine, ‘The Gods in Exile’, p. 217.

with a statue of her first husband, the plebeian Edmond Willowes, carved by a Pisan sculptor from the finest Carrara marble:

Her arms clasped tightly round the neck of her Edmond, and her mouth on his. The shawl which she had thrown round her nightclothes had slipped from her shoulders, and her long white robe and pale face lent her the blanched appearance of a second statue embracing the first.⁴⁸

The narrator describes the statue that represents Willowes in all his original beauty as ‘a specimen of manhood almost perfect in every line and contour. The work had been carried out with absolute fidelity. “Phoebus-Apollo, sure” said the Earl of Uplandtowers, who had never seen Willowes, real or represented, till now’ (p. 81). As a classical abstraction of manly beauty and a lifelike representation of his rival, Edmond Willowes’s statue inspires an aesthetic response in the Earl, but also a most impure and physical jealousy. The statue threatens him sexually and puts the continuation of his line in doubt: ““This is where we evaporate — this is where my hopes of a successor in the title dissolve””, he retorts (p. 84). The Earl’s name and lineage dematerialize in the face of this solid embodiment of Barbara’s ‘ideal’ love. But what can one do when a beautiful man is made of stone? Look at him, to be sure, and if the statue of Edmond Willowes resembles an ancient representation of Phoebus-Apollo, there will be plenty for her to look at, for such statues were usually naked. However, as in so many of Hardy’s texts, from *Desperate Remedies* (1871) to *Jude the Obscure* (1895), ‘Barbara of the House of Grebe’ is about the shattering of ideals and the grimness of life for those who are undeceived. Like Lee’s *Miss Brown*, the story challenges Neoplatonic ideas, but Hardy goes a stage further than Lee by demonstrating that while it may be desirable — even necessary — to privilege Life over Art, a life without ideals is a short and brutal affair.

At first Barbara is transported by the statue’s beauty and comes away from it with ‘a sort of silent ecstasy, a reserved beatification’ (p. 82). However, like Pliny’s and Lucian’s unnamed defiler of Praxiteles’ Venus, she is soon consumed with erotic desire, visiting it at night to enjoy, as Lucian suggests, ‘all that a statue could bestow’. And what exactly does this statue bestow? How are we to translate her ‘low murmurs of infantine tenderness’, her ‘sobs and streaming tears, and dishevelled hair [which] testified to an intensity of feeling in his wife which Lord Uplandtowers had not dreamed of her possessing’ (p. 84)? Although Barbara’s response to the statue is blatantly physical, it is hard to tell whether her tears signify orgasmic joy or sexual frustration. Nevertheless, her passion for her first husband, newly awakened by the arrival of his statue some time after his disfigurement by a fire and his eventual death, appears to have rendered her infertile or, more likely, wholly unresponsive to the Earl’s sexual embraces. It is

⁴⁸ Hardy, ‘Barbara of the House of Grebe’, p. 83. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

his brutal coercion of his wife back into her conjugal and reproductive role that makes an ideal love into a monstrous reality.

Unlike the other texts analysed here, this is one where, as Sophie Gilmartin and Rod Mengham have noted, the sexually appreciative gaze is female.⁴⁹ Not only Barbara but also her mother responds to the young Edmond's physical perfection: "How handsome he is!" she said to herself. "I don't wonder at Barbara's craze for him" (p. 63). But Barbara's awakened sexuality is checked when, after only two months of marriage, her young husband is sent away for a year to be educated into a gentleman, and is almost literally petrified when he returns to her horribly mutilated by a fire. After his death brought on by her rejection, his despair, and a 'mild ailment', Barbara develops an idealized love for him in his former physical perfection. The memory of this still moves her with 'a thrill of tenderness' (p. 77), which contrasts strongly with the 'uneasy sense of self-stultification' that Edmond's actual disfigured face and body initiate in her (p. 68). Edmond's reluctant unveiling of his horribly mutilated countenance has a Gorgon-like effect on his sensitive young wife, who, after a 'quick spasm of horror', sinks to the floor unable to bear the sight of him any longer (p. 73). In a grotesque reversal of the Pygmalion myth, he declares that Barbara's flesh-and-blood Adonis has metamorphosed into 'a thing of the charnel-house' (p. 74). For Barbara, her divine Edmond has been translated into something that is scarcely human: 'a specimen of another species' (p. 74).

The arrival at Knollingwood of the full-length statue of Edmond, commissioned in Pisa before his accident with the express purpose of keeping Barbara's passion for him alive, is a new take on one of Hardy's favourite themes: the revenant husband or wife. However, this revenant is made not of flesh but of marble. Edmond's statue is emblematic of stultified female sexual desire, which is made monstrous by repressive and jealous patriarchal forces. In mutilating and defacing the statue so as to make it resemble the lopped and mangled form of Edmond, the Earl is re-enacting the iconoclastic frenzy of early Christian monks. At the same time, his garish colouring of the pure white Carrara marble strips the image of its ideal beauty and links it even more firmly to the baser material aspects of the body:

The ingenious mechanic and painter [. . .] set to work upon the god-like countenance of the statue under my lord's direction. What the fire had maimed in the original the chisel maimed in the copy. It was a fiendish disfigurement, ruthlessly carried out, and was rendered still more shocking by being tinted to the hues of life, as life had been after the wreck. (p. 85)

⁴⁹ Sophie Gilmartin and Rod Mengham, *Thomas Hardy's Shorter Fiction: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 62.

This cruel and calculated reduction of the work of art to a work of life would have struck a chord with Hardy's contemporary Oscar Wilde. In Wilde's critical dialogue 'The Decay of Lying', Vivian reminds Cyril of how the Greeks 'set in the bride's chamber the statue of Hermes or of Apollo, that she might bear children as lovely as the works of art that she looked upon in her rapture or her pain'. The statue is precisely meant to stimulate erotic desire in the bride and influence her to produce children 'with the dignity of Pheidias as well as the grace of Praxiteles'.⁵⁰ Uplandtowers stations the mutilated statue of Willows in its own 'little shrine' at the foot of the marital bed to stimulate in Barbara an aversion towards her first husband and also to revive her own healthy female sexual instinct, which his own 'sculptural repose', 'hard dogged determination', and 'sang froid' have never managed to arouse. Barbara submits her will and her body to Uplandtowers but bears him sickly or still-born children before wasting away, in mind and in body, in Florence.

Hardy's tale appears to exemplify Stephen Daedalus's distinction between divine love — which first looks at, and then beyond, the physical, and is translated to a state of aesthetic ecstasy — and impure, human love that is arrested at the level of appearances and moved by either loathing or desire. But the reader feels that the narrator, his audience, and Edmond himself are a little hard on Barbara. In fact all the male characters seem to collude with the Earl, however unwittingly, in his merciless suppression of her sex drive. In accusing her of having merely 'human' love for him, rather than the 'divine' love that sees past his mangled physical appearance, Edmond somewhat ironically misses the point. He confuses a 'carnal' or fleshly, sensuous love with the morbidity and decay of the 'charnel-house' in which he contrives to place her healthy sexual instincts. The Rural Dean, who hears the story, describes it as an example of 'passion electrified back into life, rather than of a latent, true affection', and this echo of Frankenstein's creature suggests once again the monstrous nature of Barbara's erotic drives (p. 92).

Despite Barbara's decline and demise, the trace of her sensuality remains, if only in petrified and fragmented form. In excavating the foundations for the enlargement of the hall for the Sixth Earl, pieces of the broken statue are unearthed, which, in the opinion of various antiquaries, appear to be the remains of a mutilated satyr or an allegorical figure of death (p. 91). The fragmentary remains of Barbara's desire are translated yet again into symbols of eros/thanatos by masculine arbiters. This modern re-enactment of the excavations of Greek and Roman antiquities that inspired James's story and Lee's supernatural tale brings those repressed and buried atavistic instincts from

⁵⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying: An Observation', in *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 215–40 (p. 229).

the decadent villas of Italy to the very foundations of the stately homes of England.

Stefano Evangelista notes Walter Pater's conception of the spiritual forces of a Greek past that refuses to stick to the "underground life" to which cultures are relegated in the cycles of historical evolution, and periodically resurfaces in order to "clarify" and "correct" the present'.⁵¹ The hand of Marco's Juno, or the reported sightings of the singing Dionea in her boat with the painted eyes, are the remains or traces of that libidinal, pagan past that periodically make themselves visible on the consciousnesses of James's and Lee's protagonists. Hardy's story however has a stronger political message for its time. The unearthed fragments of Edmond's statue, sculpted in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, symbolize the resurgence of repressed and petrified female desire in the closing decades of the nineteenth. Like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Well-Beloved*, Hardy's shorter and equally fascinating sculptural tale 'Barbara of the House of Grebe' is an indictment of patriarchal attitudes to female sexuality and also, perhaps, a challenge to Pater's insistence on the regenerative force of the Hellenistic past.

Some time around 1898 Hardy noted Edward Dowden's account of Shelley's attraction to 'the ideality of the art of sculpture — each object presenting beauty or passion in an immortal abstraction from all that is temporary and accidental'.⁵² If nothing else, these texts challenge this conception of the genre, reminding both viewer and reader of the interconnection of bodily drives with aesthetic judgement and challenging the patriarchal prescriptions that seek to petrify the spirit of desire in conventional forms. However we read them, the power of their sculptural metaphors gives a peculiar resonance to De Rosis's pronouncement on the form as 'a dead art [that] we should do better to bury' (p. 92).

⁵¹ Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, p. 24.

⁵² *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Lennart A. Björk, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1985), II, 69, n. 1964.