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Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
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Preface

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Preface

Caroline Bertoneche and Charlotte Ribeyrol

As to the Jason of the Louvre, one asks at first sight of him, as he stoops to make fast the sandal on his foot, whether the young man can be already so marked a personage. Is he already the approved hero, bent on some great act of his famous *épopée*; or mere youth only, again, arraying itself mechanically, but alert in eye and soul, prompt to be roused to any great action whatever? The vaguely opened lips certainly suggest the latter view; if indeed the body and the head (in a different sort of marble) really belong to one another. Ah! the more closely you consider the fragments of antiquity, those stray letters of the old Greek aesthetic alphabet, the less positive will your conclusions become, because less conclusive the data regarding artistic origin and purpose. Set here also, however, to the end that in a congruous atmosphere, in a real perspective, they may assume their full moral and aesthetic expression, whatever of like spirit you may come upon in Greek or any other work, remembering that in England also, in Oxford, we have still, for any master of such art that may be given us, subjects truly 'made to his hand.' As with these, so with their prototypes at Olympia, or at the Isthmus, above all perhaps in the Diadumenus of Polycleitus, a certain melancholy—a pagan melancholy, it may be rightly called, even when we detect it in our English youth—is blent with the final impression we retain of them. They are at play indeed, in the sun; but a little cloud passes over it now and then. (147)

- 1 In this passage taken from his 1894 essay 'The Age of Athletic Prizemen: A chapter in Greek art', Walter Pater explores a multifaceted classical body epitomized by the Jason of the Louvre. The adolescent here is not introduced as a luminously epic, 'approved hero' but as a romantic melancholy youth, reminding the Victorian essayist of his own Oxford athletic students. Rather than embracing the ideal of Hellenic 'sweetness and light'¹ which Matthew Arnold had set so high in *Culture and Anarchy*, Pater casts an unusual shadow ('cloud') on these flawless sculptural forms, including on the canonical body of the Diadumenus of Polycleitus. Its marmoreal perfection, celebrated by subsequent Roman copies, no longer appears as a page to be inscribed, a straightforward text to be chanted and imitated by future generations: the 'stray letters' of the 'old Greek aesthetic alphabet' have become too fragmentary and enigmatic.

- 2 If Pater indulges in a fantasized overlapping of antique and modern bodies in this essay, it is clearly with a different end in mind from his European hellenophile contemporaries who, in the wake of the archeological discoveries at Olympia led by Ernst Curtius in 1875, were starting to dream of Modern Olympics which would regenerate decaying *fin de siècle* bodies.² On the contrary, by displacing the focus of attention from a classical body in full athletic glory to a body ‘at rest’, passive—a ‘thing to be looked at rather than to think about’ (143), Pater may have been striving to challenge—albeit discreetly—the ideologically charged comparison between English cricketers and Olympian athletes extolled in Hippolyte Taine’s *Notes sur l’Angleterre* (1872)³, a text which also influenced the educational theories of the Anglophile Pierre de Coubertin⁴.
- 3 Pater’s quotation thus reveals a crucial shift in the reception of the classical body. Its progressive de-idealization may be partly ascribed to the archeological excavations carried out in the later decades of the 19th century which shattered the perfect surface of the Hellenic dream. Indeed, if the unearthing of the site of Olympia re-energised fantasies of physical discipline, British explorations of Assyrian sites as well as Henrich Schliemann’s findings at Mycenae in 1876 unveiled a more primitive and barbaric past which could no longer coincide with Neoclassical paradigms, as shown by this poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti describing the controversial entrance of a sculptured ‘beast’ from Nineveh in the sacred precinct of the British Museum:

In our Museum galleries
 To-day I lingered o’er the prize
 Dead Greece vouchsafes to living eyes,—
 Her Art for ever in fresh wise
 From hour to hour rejoicing me.
 Sighing I turned at last to win
 Once more the London dirt and din;
 And as I made the swing-door spin
 And issued, they were hoisting in
 A wingèd beast from Nineveh. (“The Burden of Nineveh”, 1856, l.1-10)

- 4 Rossetti’s ekphrastic style powerfully registers the visual shock brought about by the pairing of potentially monstrous Assyrian sculptures alongside the praised Elgin Marbles. And yet, the ‘burden’ of the monumental statues also enables the modern poet to revitalize ancient forms (‘burden’) as well as his own poetic inspiration.
- 5 Further disrupting purely philological approaches to Antiquity, the new anthropological discourse which these *material* discoveries fostered equally challenged Western attempts at cultural annexation of the classical body *as norm*, i.e. stripped from its corpo-reality. For instance, the confirmation by major archeologists of the polychromy of ancient Greek statues highlighting the eyes, hair, nipples or wounds of gods and heroes restored to their original pagan aura, unsettled the myth of their marmoreal flawlessness which had served as the basis of the ideologically charged *mimetic* injunction underlying Neoclassicism. Similarly, the growing interest in ancient pottery and more minor forms of arts and crafts (exemplified in the lectures of Jane Ellen Harrison) also led to new reflections on the life of the body in ancient times, as noted by Robin Osborne:

We can dissect neither the smooth solidity of the marble nor the tense surface of the bronze. And our vision is irredeemably clouded by the investment in the perfection of the classical body which our own tradition had made for us. (...) The

drawings on painted pottery are in this respect a much richer source for how classical Greeks saw the body than are classical sculptures. (44-45)

- 6 Until such archeological and anthropological discoveries, the classical body—whether Greek or Roman—had indeed been endowed with a political as much as an aesthetic value. It was therefore, more often than not, a *masculine* body clothed in an ideal nudity. The muscular forms of mythological heroes—from the Laocoon to the Belvedere torso praised by J.J. Winckelmann⁵—were meant to be admired as models of physical perfection, thus shaping the canon in subsequent artistic but also social and political history. Friedrich Nietzsche, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, even grounded part of his rejection of Christianity on the Hellenic praise of physicality: ‘one should inaugurate culture in the right place—not in the soul (...) the right place is the body, demeanous, diet, physiology: the rest follows...this is why the Greeks remain the supreme cultural event of history’ (112)⁶. George Vigarello and Alain Corbin also draw on this construction of an ‘enchanted’ classical body to understand modern reforms aimed at disciplining and controlling the physical⁷. And yet by the end of the 19th century, as we have seen, the ideality and integrity of the Greek body were also being challenged—including by Nietzsche himself who contributed to revealing its potential for pain⁸ and fragmentation. His seminal polarization between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, which the anthropologist Michael Taussig has recently re-read as a dichotomy between ‘the property of the image’ and ‘the property of materiality’ (248), echoes the revelation of repressed aspects of an antique body no longer perceived as pure, fossilized form but as potentially alive, archaic, primitive, and even feminine or Oriental⁹.
- 7 Throughout the 19th century different lights were therefore shed on Antiquity, its sculptural treasures and/or its body of texts. For many authors, the classical heritage suddenly became more than an evanescent source of intellectual bliss as it opened up a new *physical* sense of the eternal. This is the tension we wish to explore in this volume—a tension reflected by John Keats’s sonnet ‘On Seeing the Elgin Marbles’ which describes the hellenic sun as an essentially visual oxymoron: the ‘shadow of a magnitude’ (l.14). At the time, the controversial displacement of the fragmentary marbles from Athens to London (which Rossetti had in mind when composing ‘The Burden of Nineveh’) had indeed cast a cloud on Western fantasies of classical perfection, yet enabling future generations of Romantic and post-romantic writers to break away from Neoclassical dictats of imitation in favour of a more creative re-appropriation and reinvention of antique bodies.
- 8 For this reason, the adjective ‘antique’ with its potentially ambiguous implications and the chronological distance it suggests, seemed to us a more challenging term than the adjective ‘classical’, too fraught with normative connotations. The plural form is equally crucial, as our contention is to analyse a *multiplicity* of bodies—ranging from Neoclassical Roman copies soon superseded by Greek originals¹⁰, to more deviant, primitive and oriental bodies as Egypt progressively unearthed its colourful treasures for Britain and France¹¹. This multifaceted and ‘centrifugal’¹² Antiquity, both textual and visual, ideal and material, certainly complexified the question of cultural annexation as well as classical influence for many British authors, whether Romantic or Victorian. Therefore, rather than adopting a chronological perspective separating the Victorians from their Romantic predecessors, we have tried to question this polarised conception of antique bodies which runs throughout the 19th century, by contrasting utopian images of a heroic, politicised body with suffering bodily remains, so as to

embrace both the Western and the Eastern, the white and the coloured, the whole and the fragmentary, the masculine and the feminine.

- 9 The first section on “Utopian Bodies” looks back on the political, economic and philosophical architecture of the antique model in the 19th century and revisits ancient history in light of its new theories, some popularized, some overshadowed by a range of conflicting, if not contradictory, interpretations. It focuses on the momentum of the time, that of a growing society, which itself had come to depend on a reproductive organism, whether animal or human: the anatomy of one text, one body made plural (bees then Jews) for the sake of social reinvention or racial power. The larger question was meant to be as haunting as it was endemic: a country, a state or a nation wondering how such a trained and fully shaped body (politic) in the form of an organised structure had come to rely on a moral imperative to either promote a greater good—the utopia—or justify a necessary evil—the nazi ideology.
- 10 Alexandra Sippel opens the debate on the glorified pillars of ancient democracy with her article on utopian writings in 19th century Britain. She chose as her point of focus *The Revolt of the Bees* (1826), John Minter Morgan’s consistently allegorical reply to Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*, in terms of Robert Owen or Thomas More’s heritage, of course, but not exclusively. Her body of work also includes Morgan’s own revision of other such prominent economic figures of the period as Malthus or Ricardo. The antique body, the object of political fantasy, the last vestige of Republican Athens and Sparta, is here conceived, like a framed insect, around a healthy idealisation of being as a culture of equality and togetherness. Two bees, two Parthenons, and many more: if antiquity—the queen bee in that particular subtext—can be so easily regenerated, the concept of utopia as a singular force mixing genre(s) to class can surely rise out of one identifiable ruin.
- 11 From England to Germany and back, Johann Chapoutot’s portrayal of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, pseudo-humanist and author of the very controversial *Foundations of the 19th century* (1899), is set against the previous model like the darker side of a diptych. The key word in Chamberlain’s subjective (and more often than not erroneous) rereading of antiquity is “foundation” or *foundations*—the plural always works better as an excuse to justify a deconstructed history of hybrids in the name of racial selection and preference. Again, a force of conviction, almost as vital as it is profoundly physical, brought about by every organ or muscle left in the antique body. Chamberlain, against all rational explanation and yet in a “grotesque” effort to challenge the genius of both Hegel and Nietzsche, holds on tight to this sculpted ideal, thus invoked as a means to rebuild and strengthen a crumbling architecture, eaten away by a Jewish infection—the mother of all fears. As he feeds his lines to Hitler, in his somewhat perverted body of words, Chamberlain relies on the historical discrepancies of ancient modes of discourse to dismiss the impact of Christianity. Like the genesis of a new religion, the antique world resurfaces as a whole, but stripped of its familiar signs of worship, it comes out in a different mould. The Germanic race stands erect, contemplated from every angle like the vision (or foundation) of another awe-inspiring monument: the birth of Nazism.
- 12 If antiquity, admired for its wide variety of powerful myths, has been so eagerly exhausted as a source of recreation in the 19th century, it is mostly due to the period’s first visible stigmas diagnosed as the signs a larger awareness: the threat of a decline, the scars of war, the fallen heroes... What then of modern heroism in literature? On the basis of this Romantic nostalgia for heroism (lost) as a step towards modernity, Céline

Sabiron invites us to steer away from English settings and venture into another vastly interesting territory: “Scott-land”. With references to Walter Scott’s *Guy Mannering* (1815) and *The Antiquary* (1816), this map of a Scottish antiquity or “Caledoniad” exhumed in the form of a dispersed body of fragments lays out all the pieces of a puzzle, in every sense of the term. Scott’s understanding of the antique motif is as much a quest for identity and reconstruction as it is a game of satirical play and veiled imagery. The quality of his writing certainly draws on the notion of geographical distance and exoticism but always seems to come back to the textual nature of the ancient corpus. This body thus laid out on the page by the modern cartographer is just another landmark in the history of Romanticism, one that helped build a more resistant narrative around the shadows of a vestigial past.

- 13 From earth to water, Ignacio Ramos Gay completes this tableau of antiquity’s essential elements. Now liquid, the antique body stages a return to its place of origin. We are indeed reminded that the Ancients had once bathed in that same primitive theatricality which was then poured out into the bosom of 19th century culture. The ancient drama extends to the Victorian attraction for the *naumachia* as a mythic, if not epic, performance, the result of the period’s taste for naval battles. The body in such an act—acting certainly prevents the player from *actually* drowning—is a tribute to what deception can achieve in terms of social entertainment and control. In that risky but gigantic perspective, the fake hero is made to look as real as can be on a stage larger than life taking the Victorians back to a time when one could physically touch the instruments of national glorification. Here depicted are bodily scenes made out of water but also built around it, revitalized and kept alive by the art of *naumachia*’s vital attachment to ancient grandeur, balance and discipline.
- 14 The problem with such a perfect decor is the ruin hidden underneath: in other words, what remains once it has fallen apart. The theme we have chosen for our second section, “Bodily Remains”, combines tension with contrast, metaphors of stillness and paralysis with organic movement. It explores both the morbid aesthetics of dismemberment in a landscape filled with the corpses of time and the revival of antiquity’s human extractions as an active process. Like the dissolution of a body, the ancient truth of an authentic piece of work is to be found in the spaces between the disassembled parts. As such, the flesh and blood literature of antiquity—like the tortured bodies of a Greek tragedy maybe?—acts as an insidious symptom which is left to grow, contaminate and sometimes even rot in its most living or erotic form. To that extent, the historical, the poetic, the fictional and the theatrical further incorporate other important layers of meaning and bodily matter: the psychoanalytical, the autobiographical, the medical and the sexual.
- 15 In her article on De Quincey’s poetics of antiquity, Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay brings Romanticism closer to Greece around a common representation of trauma. Like two ancient families afflicted by death and discord, forever carrying the burden of guilt, the complex (Electral, Œdipal) nature of De Quincey’s confessional writings always unfolds quite dramatically as would the extremities of a body-palimpsest. The depths of this investigation cover a large corpus including the Romantic’s relationship to a number of ghosts: the *spectrum* of canonical authors (Euripides, Aeschylus) bearing the weight of both tradition and intimacy when the memory of De Quincey’s deceased sister comes back to haunt him. In that sense, the Romantic body is like an open wound and shares with its antique double the remnants of a psychological conflict. Every mark leaves a

trace and the (inter)texts overlap by way of a not so distant echo: the voice, however modern, of symptomatic figures chained together and caught up in a long unresolved cycle.

- 16 Delphine Cadwallader-Bouron leaves the Greeks behind for Ancient Rome to focus our attention on yet another Victorian deformation: Wilkie Collins's own version of Hercules in *Antonina or the Fall of Rome* (1850). Her choice to dissect a rather unknown text (there are no recent editions of the novel) urges us to draw a parallel with Collins's excavation of a "fresh corpse". Inspired by the pictorial heritage of his father but also by both the medicine of the time—the "miasmatic theory", for example—and the nascent Gothic fantasies meant to challenge the supremacy of science, Collins wrote a bizarre "specimen" of a novel: the symptom of a reptilian growth, like one of its main (or maimed) characters, Ulpius. In this context, antiquity breeds new medical myths and monsters, runs through the veins of its creatures and spreads like a disease. The body and mind of the antique hero(in), cut and sharpened by Collins's scalpel-like penmanship, sinks deep within the underworld of a "schizophrenic" narrative only to better mimic the decadence of Rome.
- 17 Looking further down, one step beyond the assimilation of body parts, the sense of attraction for ancient symptoms is not unlike the erotics of an antique fetish: the foot. The "naked foot of Poesy" writes Keats, "the Feet of love", in the words of Swinburne, both adepts of a cult which ranges from a medical condition ("antique podophilia") to an aesthetic obsession ("the antique striptease")—a cult made to stand out and last in that it is of a similar nature than the bodily remain itself. The sculpted foot, sexualised embodiment of the beauty, texture and colour of a vestige passed on as a mythography of lust and contemplation. We have here ample grounds (the pace, the rhyme) to celebrate the shared perversions of one generation of poets closely following the next—*vestigium*, traces of footsteps.
- 18 In Christine Vandamme's analysis of Conrad's *The Return* (1898), the vestige is a woman, herself featured as a statue transported back from the antique. Lying still or on their feet, female figures are thus stigmatized in late Victorian literature to unveil the dynamics of a gendered antiquity. Behind the Gothic draperies and proliferating ornaments of the (short) story, the contours of an enslaved icon of femininity are but a distant memory now recaptured in a larger narrative of subversion and displacement. Reversed roles, missteps and repeated attempts at sexual emancipation, Conrad's efforts to modernise the ancient motifs and upset the old myths (Pygmalion, Medusa) are not left unheard, despite the sexes' failure to communicate or speak the same language. Here torn to pieces, the married couple always remains at the heart of this twisted story, thereby reminding us that the antique body (not just another passing "angel in the house") can also be as steady a marble stone as it is a mixed and dislocated form.
- 19 The chapter (and volume) ends with Nolwenn Corriou's tribute to mummy fiction, a distinctive genre anxious to rethink antiquity in terms of a politics of gender. The intrigue, extracted from the mother-land (the "mum-my"), revolves around an imperial concern which has long ago detected the necessity for the preservation of a colonized body in the last remains of a living corpse—the Egyptian mummy. Wrapped, undressed or even raped, the seemingly dead woman, reified in the form of an archeological find and therefore no longer the sole mistress of her virgin territory, is left to invent other means of survival, one of which is the resistance offered to the masculine force of

occupation. Sexual imperialism is indeed brought back to its inherent instinct to violate and, in this case, establish stronger fictional bonds between antique modes of seduction and the prospect of erotic dispossession. There is no end to what an en-gendered culture of the past can achieve: restore the art, unearth the object or praise the undead, and the antique body continues to live on.

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NOTES

1. 'Sweetness and Light' is the title of the first chapter of *Culture and Anarchy* (1868).
2. On the need to regenerate decadent bodies thanks to classical models in late 19th century Europe, see Athena S. Leoussi, 'From Civic to Ethnic Classicism: The Cult of the Greek Body in Late Nineteenth century French Society and Art' (2009) and George Vigarello, *Le corps redressé, Histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique*, 95.
3. See the section devoted to Eton and Harrow in Taine's *Notes sur l'Angleterre* (139).
4. Pierre de Coubertin's first essays were on the English public school system which he deeply admired. He was also an enthusiastic reader of Winckelmann and of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857).
5. On Winckelmann's reading of the Torso, see Katherine Harloe's *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity* (2013), 90 and sq.
6. Nietzsche's quotation is also used by James I. Porter in *Constructions of the Classical Body* (1999).
7. See A. Corbin, J.J. Courtine and G. Vigarello, *Histoire du Corps (XVIè-XXè siècles)* (2006). In his introduction to *Penser et Représenter le corps dans l'Antiquité* (11), Francis Prost challenges this 'enchanted' conception of the antique body, which originated in the Renaissance and still prevails (to a certain extent) in modern histories of the body. According to Prost, who follows in this the works of Jean-Pierre Vernant, antique bodies must not be excluded from such historical and anthropological investigations.
8. In his analysis of the Dionysian pole of Hellenic culture, Nietzsche described the ancient Greeks as a people so 'uniquely capable of suffering' (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 23).
9. Dionysos is indeed a god coming from the East, always accompanied by his feminine, menadic *thiasos*.
10. On the competition of classical models in 19th century Britain, see Frank Turner, 'Why the Greeks and not the Romans in Victorian Britain', in Clarke G. W. (ed.). *Rediscovering Hellenism, The Hellenic Inheritance and the English Imagination* (1989).
11. On the reception of Egyptian archeological discoveries in 19th century Europe, see Jean-Marcel, Humbert, et al. *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art, 1730-1930* (1994). For Britain more specifically, see Stephanie Moser, *Designing Antiquity, Owen Jones, Ancient Egypt and the Crystal Palace* (2012).
12. Pater uses this key adjective in *Plato and Platonism* (1893), 91.

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