

# A CASE OF CAMEOS

## Classical Ekphrasis and the English Parnassian Movement

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**Abstract** – The English Parnassian Movement, a poetic trend spanning nearly two decades, from the 1870s to the late 1880s, still lacks a comprehensive critical assessment. In a bid to contribute to a more nuanced view of the Movement, this article focuses on its interartistic dimension, discussing the intersections of visual art with the poetic principles of English Parnassianism, and then re-considering the privileged link between Parnassian ekphrasis and classical antiquity. In doing so, it focuses on texts that have been generally neglected by critics. More in particular, this article explores the metapoetic connotations of Graham R. Tomson’s literary-historical account of ancient epigrams, and then carries out a close reading of Austin Dobson’s poetic sequence *A Case of Cameos* (1877), which is a perfect example of the Parnassian ekphrastic trope of the poem as a carved precious stone. My article closes with an account of Andrew Lang’s deployment of the same trope in his sequence *Cameos: Sonnets from the Antique* (1884). On a first level, this article aims to add to the critical reflections on ekphrasis and interartistic modalities in Parnassian (and Victorian) poetry. On a second level, it seeks to analyze a few lesser-known Parnassian poems as well as to lay the ground for a much-needed systematic discussion of the classical components of the English Parnassian Movement. In this sense, my article may help fill two of the main gaps in the current scholarship on English Parnassianism, that is to say the overly limited selection of poetic works that have come under textual scrutiny and an insufficiently systematized definition of the movement.

**Keywords:** English Parnassianism; ekphrasis; classical reception; Austin Dobson; jewel imagery.

## 1. Introduction

The English Parnassian Movement, a poetic trend spanning nearly two decades, from the 1870s to the late 1880s, still lacks a comprehensive critical assessment. The Anglophone texts that have been labelled as Parnassian on the grounds of their literary-historical and aesthetic connections with the much more influential and critically dissected French Parnassianism have long been associated with either trite motifs or nugatory formal experiments, and generally dismissed as a vapid moment of transition (if not as an accident) in the development of English poetry.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the authors of these texts have been frequently written off as minor figures and, even when some of them have undergone a process of critical reevaluation, their involvement in Parnassian poetics have been usually taken to be merely a secondary aspect of their literary career — understandably, this is especially true with those practitioners of Parnassian poetry, such as Oscar Wilde and the Scottish critic and protoanthropologist Andrew Lang (1844-1912), who ended up playing an ostensibly larger role in the history of British literary culture.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Early (and influential) examples of this dismissal, notably by Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ford Madox Ford, T. E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound, are offered by Harris (2006, p. 42), Thain (2016, p. 90) and Sider (2023, p. 143-144).

<sup>2</sup> Sider (2023, p. 144). For Wilde and Parnassian poetry see at least Evangelista (2017). A recent biography of Lang is Sloan (2023).

In recent years, however, a moderate amount of scholarship has gone towards shedding better light on the specificities of English Parnassianism. Taking their cue from the first twentieth-century contributions to the field as well as from the manner in which some of the English Parnassians themselves chose to characterize their production, most of these critical works have investigated English Parnassian poetry from the perspective of its typical deployment of medieval and early modern fixed forms such as the ballade and the rondeau, metrical configurations which had been hitherto largely unrepresented in the national canon and were mainly imported from the French poetic tradition.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, scholars such as Linda K. Hughes (2019 and 2023), Christopher Harris (2006), Justin A. Sider (2023), and Marion Thain (2016, 2020, and 2023) have paid attention to how Anglophone Parnassian poetry originated from a surge of critical and poetic interest in (medieval) French literature that had occurred in British and American literary culture since the late 1860s. More in particular, these scholars have pointed out how almost all the English Parnassians conformed to that tendency of French Parnassianism, initiated primarily by Théodore de Banville (1823-1891), which had started displaying, roughly two decades earlier than its English followers, a similar attachment to outmoded fixed verse forms.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Hughes (2023) has also shown how the highbrow preciousness of Parnassian poems soon started to be paralleled by a good deal of popular verse circulating in periodicals that utilized the exotic metrical patterns of Parnassian poetry for parodic purposes, as well as for comic or satirical commentary on topical issues of the time. A focus on history and modernity also informs Thain's reading, which interprets the Parnassian concern with fixed forms (and therefore verbal repetition) as a reflection of broader socio-economic processes of commodification and technological innovation based on replicability, iteration, and reproduction (Thain 2016, pp. 90-113).

At the same time recent criticism (Kistler 2016, especially Pulham 2020 and Sider 2023) has also foregrounded the interartistic dimension of English Parnassianism, exploring the various ways in which diverse authors such as Andrew Lang, the critic and poet Edmund Gosse (1849-1928), and the poet and herpetologist Arthur O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881) referenced sculptures, paintings, or pieces of decorative art in their poems. In this sense, this line of research aligns itself with a broader group of studies devoted to the analysis of a similar interart tendency in French Parnassian poems, which frequently describe (material) objects of art either extensively or meaningfully, draw upon them to craft original images and metaphors, strive to imitate their unique aesthetic properties, and imbue them with emblematic or metapoetic undertones, at times idolizing them as analogues of verbal creation.<sup>5</sup> Typical of French Parnassianism since its very inception, this proliferation of art discourses includes a number of aspects that may be mostly subsumed under the concept of ekphrasis, a variously defined phenomenon which is here understood, more restrictedly, as the description or sustained evocation, in a literary work,

<sup>3</sup> See Cohen (1930, pp. 77-91), Buckley (1951, pp. 214-216), and especially Robinson (1953a) and (1953b). The Parnassian Edmund Gosse (1905, p. 362) was one of the first to coin the concept of English Parnassianism to refer to "a certain school of poets" influenced by the French Parnassians and strongly linked with the late-nineteenth century revival of fixed forms. In his lecture *The Influence of France Upon English Poetry*, delivered in Paris in 1904 and later collected in his *French Profiles* (1905), Gosse (1905, p. 362) defined the members of this poetic trend as "English Parnassians", and made a connection between them and the late medieval poets and masters of fixed forms Guillaume de Machault and Eustache Deschamps.

<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive account of French Parnassianism is provided by Mortelette (2005).

<sup>5</sup> See, also for further references, Scott (2006) and Johnson (2008, pp. 109-130).

of a piece of visual art.<sup>6</sup> Although the use of ekphrastic modes has been less investigated, with respect to the English Parnassian Movement, than the penchant for unconventional metres described above, it is no less foundational.

In a bid to contribute to a better understanding and a more nuanced view of Parnassian ekphrasis, in this article I first discuss its intersections with the poetic tenets of Parnassianism, and then re-consider the privileged link between this phenomenon and classical antiquity, also focusing on textual examples that have been never studied by critics. The ultimate goal of this article is manifold. On a first level, it aims to add to the critical reflections on ekphrasis and interartistic modalities in Parnassian (and Victorian) poetry. On a second level, it seeks to carry out a (close) reading of a few lesser-known Parnassian poems as well as to lay the ground for a much-needed systematic analysis of the classical components of the English Parnassian Movement. In this sense, my article may also indirectly help fill two of the main gaps in the current scholarship on English Parnassianism, that is to say, the overly limited selection of poetic works that have come under textual scrutiny and an insufficiently systematized definition of the movement, both historically and theoretically. Significantly, these omissions are especially evident in comparison with French Parnassianism. For example, for all their points of contact, late-nineteenth century *vers de société* in English should be more clearly differentiated from Anglophone Parnassian poetry.<sup>7</sup> By the same token, and most importantly for my argument here, the similarities as well as oppositions between the Hellenism and the stress on (or withholding from) subjective emotions in Romantic and Victorian poetry, on the one hand, and the classicism and tension towards lyric impersonality typical of Parnassianism, on the other, should be assessed carefully and in detail with reference to English literary culture, especially since similar issues have been given a pivotal role in the history of French literature (where the innovations of Parnassian poetry are viewed as instrumental in shifting the literary landscape from Romanticism to Symbolism and beyond).<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Ekphrasis and (English) Parnassianism

While ekphrasis is undeniably a literary commonplace, it is evident that its aesthetic implications entertain a special relationship with Parnassian poetics. From the point of view of how it reconfigures the role of the speaker in a poem, ekphrasis may be viewed as key to the achievement of a state of poetic imperturbability and impersonality, a quality frequently prized by Parnassian verse. Indeed, subjecting poetry to the challenging task of describing works of visual art may help the (Parnassian) poet to concentrate on external, objective details and curb any excess of sentimental introspection, especially on the part of the poetic voice, thus leading to a higher degree of lyrical detachment. At the same time, the attention which ekphrasis inevitably draws to the effort intrinsic to poetry, as a medium, to reproduce different and more material aesthetic systems, to transfer visible or tangible properties of things into words ends up foregrounding the sensorial (if not the

<sup>6</sup> For a general treatment of ekphrasis see at least Hollander (1988), Heffernan (1993), Hollander (1995), Goldhill (2007), and Heffernan (2015). These all contain further bibliographies.

<sup>7</sup> For *vers de société* (or ‘light verse’) see chiefly Behlman (2018).

<sup>8</sup> See Mortelette (2005, pp. 86-103, 145-154).

sensual) aspects of verse and may therefore satisfy the Parnassian obsession with the physicality and concreteness of literary language.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the ekphrastic comparison between verbal and visual arts also betokens, by analogy, the struggle of poetic language with its own rules and limitations, as well as its aspiration towards formal perfection and autonomy. From the perspective of nineteenth-century literature, this implies that the use of ekphrasis may be seen as symptomatic of, or as a catalyst for, the much-discussed condition of poetic self-awareness and autoreferentiality that is to various degrees endemic to Victorian poetry and that forms an essential part of the Parnassian and later Decadent, Symbolist, and Modernist credos. If, as argued by scholars such as Valentine Cunningham (2011, pp. 482-503) and Herbert Tucker (2008), every form of ekphrasis (and, especially, of Victorian ekphrasis) always tends towards *autoekphrasis*, that is, towards symbolizing the relationship of verse with its own inner functioning, Parnassian poetry is fully representative of this tendency. However, in contrast with many other nineteenth century texts, which dramatize both the strengths and the antinomies of this ideal reflexivity of verse, Parnassian poems generally tend to present a more optimistic take on the travails of verbal creation. These poems often relish in (meta)poetic challenges such as those posed by ekphrasis, viewing them as an opportunity to display virtuosity rather than deficiency, and to show to what extent they can tune into the almost sacral power of language. To give an illustrious example, this sense of positivity animates the prefatory poem of one of the foundational texts of Parnassianism, Théophile Gautier's collection *Émaux et Camées* (1852). In the poem, a sonnet, the speaker (and author) has isolated himself from the chaos of real life — “Sans prendre garde à l'ouragan/Qui fouettait mes vitres fermées” (Gautier 1981, p. 25), an allusion to the revolutionary events of 1848 — and merrily devoted his existence to writing verse. The fruits of this secluded, yet pleasurable, labour are the pieces collected in the volume (“Moi, j'ai fait *Émaux et Camées*”; Gautier 1981, p. 25), which are clearly identified with the titular enamels and cameos. By revamping the age-worn association between poems and gems, Gautier clearly analogizes his own poems to precious, often antique or exotic, and refined objects d'art, thus inaugurating a common trope in Parnassian and later poetry.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Interartistic classicism

At the very beginning of the preface to his trailblazing collection *Poèmes antiques* (1852), another doyen of (French) Parnassianism, Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894), immediately sets out the new Parnassian aesthetics based on “impersonnalité” and “neutralité”, specifying that the poems in the volume are impassive and disengaged “études” (‘studies’, also in the sense of preparatory drawings or paintings), untainted by personal feelings and social issues (Leconte de Lisle 2011, p. 91). As pointed out by critics such as William Fitzgerald (2022, p. 168), in the preface the art-related term *études* “is associated with a return to antiquity that ensures one of the shibboleths of Parnassianism:

<sup>9</sup> Some of these connections are discussed in Johnson (2008, pp. 111-120), Pulham (2020, pp. 66.70), and Fitzgerald, pp. 165-167). All these references also explore how the Parnassian interartistic discourses are intertwined with the classical tradition.

<sup>10</sup> Gautier's analogy is mentioned by practically all the studies on Parnassianism. The Parnassian metaphor of the poem as a gem or piece of decorative art is rediscussed in Thain (2020, pp. 470-474). For the image of the jewel in fin-de-siècle literature see also Mills (2010).

impersonality". The term therefore encapsulates not merely the interartistic, but also the classical dimension of the collection, which, except for a number of poems inspired by Vedic literature, is mostly built on classical references and motifs, and even includes adaptations and translations from the Greek collection *Anacreontea* as well as from Horace's *Odes*. Equally structural to other manifestoes of Parnassianism, such as Gautier's regularly cited poem *L'Art*, this connection with classical art testifies to how the interartistic quality of Parnassian poetry is often rooted in the classical tradition.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in a number of Parnassian works, both English and French, the verbal expression of classical subject matter is engaged in dialogue with visual art. In other words, these poems do not simply refer to classical figures, events, or themes, but simultaneously call into play, more or less openly, their artistic representation, whether real or fictional, pictorial or sculptural, two or three-dimensional. In this verse, the experience of the ancient world almost presupposes a specific idea of art criticism and, what matters most here, is frequently accessed via the device of ekphrasis.

If the ekphrastic mode has held a prominent place in the creative possibilities of Western literature since its inception, it is especially the classical tradition which has often proved to be fertile ground for the linguistic emulation of optic and haptic media. Canonical passages such as Homer's description of Achilles' shield (*Iliad* 18, ll. 478-608) have embedded ekphrasis in the very foundations of classical literature and made it a constitutive part of many of the classical or classicizing poetics that have followed. In the post-classical age, both this device and its link to the classics have been built upon by countless poets and writers, from Dante's much-dissected depiction of classical myths in Canto 12 of his *Purgatorio* to the painting of the fall of Troy in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, to the relative fortune of ekphrasis in Romantic and, more cogently here, Victorian verse, a phenomenon which may be seen in texts such as Felicia Hemans's *The Statue of the Dying Gladiator* (1812) and John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820), as well as in Alfred Tennyson's inclusion of the stories of Europa and Ganymede in that ekphrastic triumph *The Palace of Art* (1832; 1842), and, closer to the Parnassians proper, in Algernon Charles Swinburne's notorious four sonnets on the Louvre Hermaphrodite (1866).<sup>12</sup>

Following in this tradition, Parnassianism added, at times inventively, to the imbrication of interartistic discourses and practices with Greek and Roman antiquity. This process was favoured by broader cultural-historical factors. Indeed, if the connection between visual art and the classics has its roots in the origins of Western culture, at the time of the Parnassians it was possibly more vital than ever. Winckelmann's institution of the history of ancient art in the second half of the eighteenth century, Lessing's seminal reflections in his *Laocoön* (1766), the birth of aesthetics as a discipline and all the (post-) Romantic theories of art that ensued, the popular and intellectual resonance around the discovery and musealization of Greek and Roman antiquities, the advancements in the new subjects of archeology and anthropology, and, more in general, a more theoretically informed, interdisciplinary view of classical studies brought an unprecedented degree of attention to the materiality and sensoriality of the classical tradition, making nineteenth

<sup>11</sup> *L'Art* was first published in periodical form and then added to the 1858 edition of *Emaux et Camées*.

<sup>12</sup> For ekphrasis and the classics see chiefly the collected volume Goldhill, Osborne (1994), and Goldhill (2007). For the historical development of ekphrasis in Western literary culture see at least Heffernan (1993), which also focuses on Romantic ekphrasis, and Cunningham (2007), which discusses a number of nineteenth-century examples. For ekphrasis in (late) Victorian poetry see also Pulham (2016), Pulham (2020), Maxwell (2013), Helsinger (2024), and the aforementioned Cunningham (2011, pp. 482-503) and Tucker (2008). All these works include further references.

century Hellenism almost inextricable from art discourses.<sup>13</sup> At the peak of this renewed intermedial approach to the classics, French poets such as Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, and their followers frequently paid literary homage to classical art because, as hinted above, they viewed it as a testimony to the supreme value of beauty they were predicating. Not dissimilarly from the Hellenism of their French models, many of the English Parnassians seem to have invested ancient art with a similar sense of aesthetic primacy, and this may help explain the interartistic strain of their classicism. Moreover, the adoration of Greek art as an emblem of the independence and power of beauty was also central to Swinburne's and Pater's poetics, two indigenous cornerstones of Hellenism which the English Parnassians were undoubtedly conversant with and, especially in Swinburne's case, frequently elaborated upon in their works.

A case in point of the Parnassian interartistic take on the classics is offered by Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poem sequence *Thoughts in Marble*, included in his collection *Songs of a Worker* (1881). Unlike other, more dispassionate, representations of the classics in Parnassian poetry, the intermedial approach to antiquity is here linked to sculpture rather than gem carving, and veined with a higher dose of eroticism, especially in relation to the speaker. For example, in the poem *Pentelicos* the speaker's sudden vision of "Some marble shape of Venus" rescues him from the weariness of earthly love, yet at the same time stirs him with a new, even more "impossible desire" (quoted in Pulham 2020, p. 73). Paradoxical though it may seem, this type of erotic involvement, which has been typical of statuary poetics since antiquity and permeated many Victorian discourses on sculpture (Pulham 2020), is not necessarily at odds with, and may even complement, the aura of purity and austerity that characterizes the Parnassian cult of beauty. Indeed, as scholars of French literature have amply shown, in Parnassian poetry the focus on aesthetic impersonality and serenity does not necessarily preclude a parallel concern with fleshier matter.<sup>14</sup> Building on the innovative conflation of artistic and physical beauty pioneered by nineteenth-century models such as Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), many of the Parnassians exalted form not only as the incorrupt product of art, but also, and at times simultaneously, as a pleasurable body. Whether openly or surreptitiously, in many Parnassian (and more generally post-Romantic) poems and poetics the centrality of form leads to a centrality of the body, and the literary treatment of (classical) art — and in particular of sculpture, the most haptic, simulacral, and Hellenic of the arts — is thus frequently imbued with sexual desire. As illustrated by Patricia Pulham (2020, pp. 65-84), this (Parnassian) ambivalence between the idea of statues as ultramundane emblems of the religion of art and their connotation as surrogates for sex is what lies at the centre of O'Shaughnessy's *Thoughts in Marble*. Pervaded by "tensions between art, craft and desire" (Pulham 2020, p. 83), poems such as *Living Marble*, the aforementioned *Pentelicos*, and *Dialogue between Two Venuses* — which directly calls into play topical contemporary issues in classical art such as polychrome sculpture and the reception of the Cnidian Venus — are evidently not free from sexuality, and rather serve to negotiate unsounded or repressed drives.

Pulham (2020, pp. 147-153) also describes a similar condition of sexual attachment to statues with reference to another member of the Parnassian group, Edmund Gosse. Gosse's view of classical antiquity was at least partly mediated by visual art, and his view of classical art was infused with homoerotic desire, as exemplified by his notorious

<sup>13</sup> See Prettejohn (2005, pp. 9-155), Evangelista (2009, especially pp. 1-54), Goldhill (2011), and Mortelette (2005, pp. 145-154).

<sup>14</sup> See Mortelette (2005, pp. 153-154) and Johnson (2008, pp. 111-125).

overexcitement at his first juvenile exposure, although through illustrations, to the forms and shapes of Greek statuary, as well as by his infatuation for the classicizing sculptor Hamo Thornycroft, which prompted a number of essays and poems. Even more structurally related to the classical tradition is the motif of the sexualized statue as deployed by other two figures considered by Pulham (2020, pp. 153-182), Oscar Wilde and Olive Custance, both of whom were influenced by Parnassianism, though neither identifiable as Parnassian. Significantly, the poems analyzed by Pulham – Wilde’s *Charmides* and Custance’s statue poems – are all firmly rooted in classical images or references.

On a smaller scale, the intermedial undertones of the Parnassian reception of the classics are also evident in the *Introductory Note* that the poet and writer Graham R. Tomson (one of the pen names of Rosamund Marriott Watson, née Ball; 1860-1911) appended to her *Selection from the Greek Anthology* (1889). This collection of previous nineteenth-century translations of poems from the monumental Greek Anthology was edited by Tomson at Lang’s suggestion and came after decades in which, following the new late-eighteenth century and early nineteenth century unbawdlerized editions of the text based on the Palatine manuscript, the Anthology had had a profound influence on British literary culture, serving as the channel for transgressive countercultural discourses, both sexually and aesthetically.<sup>15</sup> In explaining the elegant compactness and stylistic mastery that characterize the pieces anthologized, Tomson draws an analogy between (Greek) lyric poetry and (Greek) decorative art: “But, taking the book as a whole, it consists of miniature idyls, abridged odes, *jeux d’esprit* of a single feature, elegies no longer than a sigh; love lyrics as exquisitely perfect and uncramped in their constricted compass as are the groups on Greek intaglios of the best period” (Tomson 1889, p. xv). By referring to the artistic practice of carving precious materials (to produce engraved gems or intaglios), Tomson evidently hints at the ekphrastic etymology of the word *epigram* itself as well as at the birth of the corresponding poetic genre, to which almost all the pieces of the Greek Anthology, and certainly the entirety of those she selected, may be ascribed: rooted in material culture, epigrams were originally verse-inscriptions, “short poems engraved on tombstones, religious offerings, or honorific monuments” (Bing, Bruss, p. 1). However, especially in light of her connection with the Parnassian movement, her turn of phrase may also retain a trace of the gem imagery typical of Parnassian poetics, which Tomson might have seen as particularly consonant with ancient epigrams. In this sense, Tomson’s image of the intaglio to symbolize the concision, bravura, and inherent concreteness of epigrams is fully indicative of how this ancient poetic genre points towards similar aesthetic traits in Parnassian poetry. (Intriguingly, Tomson employed another jewel image in relation to Greek poetry in her later review of the 1891 new edition of her friend Amy Levy’s *A Minor Poet*, where she compares one of the poems to “the graven gems of the Greek Anthology” [Hughes 2005, p. 130].) Possibly, Tomson’s comparison may have also alluded to a well-known application of the Parnassian jewel trope, namely the title chosen by the poet and translator John Payne (1842-1916) for his *Intaglios* (1871), which has been unanimously considered by critics as one of the first Parnassian collections in England. In her monograph on Tomson, Linda K. Hughes does not provide information on her acquaintance with Payne, but given the fact that she hid her identity to her literary sponsor Lang until early 1888, and even more so in light of the fact that Payne despised Lang and apparently started living an increasingly secluded life since

<sup>15</sup> For Tomson’s role as the editor of the selection see Hughes (2005, pp. 65-99). A detailed reading of the impact of the Anthology on Victorian literary culture is offered by Nisbet (2013).

the mid 1880s, it is plausible that she did not meet Payne before 1889.<sup>16</sup> However, whether or not she might have crossed paths with Payne, Tomson was certainly aware of his works. By the time she wrote the *Introductory Note*, she had been gravitating for two years around the Parnassian circles connected with Lang, who were certainly familiar with Payne's works, and both her and Payne's poems featured in the main anthology of Anglophone Parnassian poetry, *Ballades and Rondeaux, Chants Royal, Sestinas, Villanelles, &c.* (1887) edited by the art writer Joseph Gleeson White.

#### 4. Dobson's *A Case of Cameos*

A perfect and unstudied example of the interartistic use of the classics in English Parnassian verse is offered by the poet and critic Austin Dobson (1840-1921), who in his seven-poem sequence *A Case of Cameos*, included in *Proverbs in Porcelain* (1877), conceives each text as a gemstone carved with episodes from classical mythology. Taking his cue from illustrious predecessors – especially Gautier and his choice to clearly identify his poems with enamels and cameos in the title of his 1852 collection – Dobson here deploys a typical Parnassian and, more generally, post-Romantic trope, that is, the analogy between poems and jewels or precious stones. As discussed above, this metaphorical connection, which dates back to antiquity, was particularly congenial to the Parnassians because it helped them visualize their idea of poetry as a tangible and priceless artefact, the product of the verbal workmanship of the poet-jeweler. Dobson's poems build greatly on this association. Indeed, their ekphrastic nature is not merely suggested by the title of the sequence (and, arguably, of the collection itself), but is also made fully explicit by both the title of each poem, which refers to a specific gem, and its subtitle, which indicates the mythical subject represented. Moreover, the first lines of each piece reiterate what kind of stone is engraved and with what scene ("Lastly, with 'Pleasure' was a Beryl graven,/Clear-hued, – divine. Thereon the Sirens sung"; Dobson 1877, p. 58), therefore leaving no doubt that the rest of the text is an attempt to describe the masterfully hewn surface of the mineral. By the same token, the multimodality of the texts is enhanced by their form. Dobson wrote each of them as a dizain, a late medieval French metre consisting of ten lines usually rhyming *ababbccdd*.<sup>17</sup> Fairly infrequent in the English tradition, but favoured by the Parnassians, the dizain bears an epigrammatic, lapidary power and has been often used to write, translate, or imitate epigrams in the history of French literature, to the point that in the sixteenth century it became, like the sonnet, almost a synonym for the epigram (Hutton 1946, pp. 42-43). In their dainty and chiselled brevity, Dobson's dizains therefore tap into the epigrammatic tradition in order to reproduce the exquisite precision and minuteness of cameos.

The ekphrastic mode of Dobson's cameos is also aided by their choice of subjects, which are rather traditional and easy to trace back to well-known sources or conventions, both literary and visual, and therefore prone to being interpreted as artistic representations rather than actual events. While experiencing a text emulating an imagined piece of jewelry, the reader of these poems is therefore also driven to make comparisons with actual depictions of the same subject in different artistic (and textual) forms. The second poem of the series, *Cornelian (The Fall of the Giants)* depicts Jove defeating the giants (or

<sup>16</sup> See Hughes (2005, p. 63-64) and Thomas Wright's biography of Payne (Wright 1919, pp. 94, 157).

<sup>17</sup> Banville (1872, pp. 150-151).

titans) who were attempting to overthrow the Olympians. A typical Gigantomachy, this episode may be easily linked both to numerous ancient literary sources and to canonical Renaissance artworks starting with Giulio Romano's frescoes (1532-1534) at the Palazzo Te in Mantua, as well as to totemic examples of mythological representation (and later models for ekphrasis) such as the now lost east metopes of the Parthenon and the frieze on the Pergamon Altar. The brownish to orangey red of the cornelian suits the bloody and cataclysmic atmosphere of the event, and may be reminiscent of the palette of Romano's frescoes. Equally close to Romano's depiction, which shows the giants as a pile of limbs and rubble, is Dobson's confused "crowd/Of huge and wild-limbed Titans":

For lo, distort amid the crash of pine  
 Porphyryon lay; as tangled wrestlers twin,  
 Typhoeus,—Rhœtus, rolled ambiguous;  
 Mimas was blinded of the bolt divine;  
 And, like a mountain, fell Enceladus. (Dobson 1877, p. 53)

The representation of individual giants in this part of the poem combines several classical accounts of the Gigantomachia (from the *Aeneid* to Ovid, from Pindar to Apollodorus), all of which are mentioned in the entries dedicated to these mythical creatures in a staple Victorian encyclopedia of ancient mythology such as William Smith's 1849 *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.<sup>18</sup> (Resources such as this might have been of assistance to Dobson, who was no classicist and left grammar school at sixteen to pursue a successful lifelong career at the Board of Trade: he apparently knew Latin fairly well, though little to no Greek.)<sup>19</sup> For instance, the focus, in the final line of the poem, on Enceladus falling "like a mountain" is a learned allusion to the description of his demise in the third book of the *Aeneid*, where the titan is said to have been buried by Jove under what would become Mount Etna (Smith 1870a, p. 15).

The following dizain in the sequence, *Jasper* (Dobson 1877, p. 54) draws on the greenness of the titular stone, fictionally set in a "snake ring", to reproduce the myth of Pandora releasing all the "ills" of humanity from a box (originally, a jar). This story had been recounted and represented by many classical and post-classical antecedents since Hesiod, but Dobson (1877, p. 54) managed to craft a fairly original representation that focuses on the moment (or "moment-space") preceding the opening of the box, when Pandora kneels down before it and enigmatically smiles, animated by curiosity ("curious as a child") and possibly trepidation ("Yet, ere she loosed them, looking upward, smiled,/E'en with a finger, tremulous, at the lid"). Dobson's introspective words are ambiguous. Is Pandora's smile only a sign of curious excitement or does it derive, subconsciously and sadistically, from a pleasurable premonition of what is about to happen? And is her finger "tremulous" because of desire or fear? Even though it does not seem to follow closely one specific model, Dobson's dizain most likely hints at – or at least was certainly seen by his readers as hinting at – a recent Victorian multimodal treatment of the same subject offered by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who in 1869 wrote the sonnet *Pandora (For A Picture)* while working on the preparatory drawings for his eponymous painting. The sonnet was published in *Poems* (1870) and the year after, when

<sup>18</sup> See Smith (1870a, pp. 15-16, 267, 1088) and Smith (1870b, pp. 498, 653, 1195-1196).

<sup>19</sup> Dobson included a number of translations from Latin in his collections, some of which are accomplished poems on their own. He therefore must have had a good degree of familiarity with the language. As for his Greek, Dobson's son Alan reported that, to his knowledge, his father had "never read Homer in the original Greek". For this information and Dobson's education see Dobson (pp. 5-6, 90).

the oil portrait *Pandora* was completed, the poem was inscribed in the frame of the picture; moreover, in the following years Rossetti would create another painting of Pandora and her box (1874-1878).<sup>20</sup> Rossetti's depictions opened the pathway for a number of late-nineteenth century representations of Pandora by different artists, from Alma Tadema (1881) to Walter Crane (1892), from Charles Edward Perugini (1891) to John William Waterhouse (1896). If Rossetti's sonnet and pictures do not have much in common with Dobson's text, Perugini's and especially Waterhouse's paintings are not distant from it in that they concentrate on the same fatal moment and depict Pandora kneeling. However, they cannot obviously be considered as sources for Dobson's poem since they were painted more than fifteen years later. The iconography of Pandora on her knees while opening the vessel of all evils was not unprecedented, though. Around Dobson's time, this figuration occurred, for example, both in the last piece of John Flaxman's cycle of six drawings of the story of Pandora included in his *Compositions from the Works, Days and Theogony of Hesiod* (1816-1817) and, most importantly, in one of Hammatt Billings's illustrations for Nathaniel Hawthorne's rewriting of the myth as a story for children in his extremely popular *Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1852).<sup>21</sup> Intriguingly, Hawthorne's narrative shares with Dobson's dizain the same emphasis on Pandora's infantile curiosity and ecstatic absorption in the act of opening the box.

The fourth poem, *Chalcedony (The Thefts of Mercury)* clearly elaborates on the episode of Mercury purloining Apollo's quivers — which is mentioned by Horace in *Odes* 1.10 and by Lucian of Samosata in his *Dialogues of the Gods* (7, 2-3) — but also possibly, by extension, harks back to the iconography of Mercury stealing cattle from Apollo's or Admetus' herd (see, for example, the representation of this episode in Claude Lorrain's 1660 painting, now exhibited at The Wallace Collection and bought by the 4<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Hertford in 1846).<sup>22</sup> Together with the poem's references to a "laurel tree" (Dobson 1877, p. 55) and to Apollo more in general, the possible figurative model of Lorrain seems to indicate that the episode is set in an Arcadian landscape. If this is the case, the rococo lightness with which Dobson (1877, p. 55) describes Mercury's false repentance ("with downcast eyes, and feigned distress", "His very heel-wings drooped") envelops the bucolic setting, carved in a mercurially "pale" variety of chalcedony, in a Watteau-like aura. The iconographic motifs of the next poem, *Sardonyx (The Song of Orpheus)*, which represents the titular Orpheus charming the wild beasts with his song, has been exemplified by myriad literary passages and art pieces since antiquity. By the same token, the representation of the conventional Bacchic subject of the triumph of Silenus in the grape-coloured *Amethyst* is equally evocative of a number of previous models – to give an important example, Nicolas Poussin's 1636 painting, housed at the National Gallery since 1824.<sup>23</sup> The dizain adds to the carnivalesque sense of "fresh excess" of the traditional iconography, especially by closing with the memorable and (possibly) original detail of the ass munching "the wreaths upon her Master's brows" (Dobson 1877, p. 57).

<sup>20</sup> For Rossetti and Pandora see the Rossetti Archive: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s224.rap.html> (23.03.2024). Cunningham's treatment of ekphrasis includes an analysis of Rossetti's sonnet (2011, pp. 493-497).

<sup>21</sup> For the iconography of Pandora see Panofsky, Panofsky (1956, especially pp. 85-111).

<sup>22</sup> For information on Lorrain's painting see the Wallace Collection website: <https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=65048&viewType=detailView> (27.03.2024).

<sup>23</sup> This information is taken from the website of the National Gallery in London: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/nicolas-poussin-the-triumph-of-silenus> (27.03.2024)

The first poem of the cameo sequence, *Agate (The Power of Love)*, is particularly interesting both because it ultimately refers to a specific work of classical art and because it adapts a conventional iconography to fit the agenda of Parnassian poetics:

First, in an Agate-vein, a Centaur strong,  
 With square man-breasts and hide of dapple dun,  
 His brown arms bound behind him with a throng,  
 On strained croup strove to free himself from one, –  
 A holder rider than Bellerophon.  
 For, on his back, by some strange power of art,  
 There sat a laughing Boy with bow and dart,  
 Who drove him where he would, and driving him,  
 With that barbed toy would make him rear and start,  
 To this was writ “World-victor” on the rim. (Dobson 1877, p. 52)

Dobson here draws on the iconographic motif of the centaur ridden and tormented by young Cupid, whose earliest (and certainly most influential) surviving examples are the white marble statue known as the Borghese Centaur and the grey-black marble statue of the Old Centaur, which is one of the pair of the Furietti Centaurs in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. Both statues seem to be second-century Roman copies of Hellenistic sculptures and probably derive from the same model (the main difference being that the figure of Cupid has survived only in the Borghese statue). While the Furietti Centaurs were discovered in Tivoli in the early eighteenth century and have remained in the Capitoline Museum since 1765, the Borghese statue was found at the beginning of the seventeenth century in Rome and originally belonged to the Roman aristocratic family of the Borghese (hence the name), but has been housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris since the early nineteenth-century.<sup>24</sup> Both works have enjoyed a good deal of popularity among artists, critics, and collectors of replicas alike since their discoveries – for example, they were mentioned by Winckelmann (2006, pp. 246-247, 337) in his *The History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764) and plaster casts of the Furietti pair could be seen adorning the two sides of the access to the main staircase in the Hall of the Royal Academy at Somerset House as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century (the room is now the entrance to the Courtauld Gallery, but the statues have been relocated).<sup>25</sup> Interested in the world of art since his youth – when he apparently entertained the idea of becoming a painter before finally turning to poetry – Dobson was almost certainly acquainted with the ancient statues or, at least, with their many imitations.<sup>26</sup> In his poem, he reproduces faithfully the pose of the Old Centaur and of the Louvre exemplar when he focuses on the detail of the centaur’s arms tied behind his back, but interpolates the traditional reference to Cupid’s “bow and dart” (Dobson 1877, p. 52).

The meaning of the iconographic motif of Eros subduing the centaur seems to be connected with the overwhelming effects of love, but its interpretation is complicated by

<sup>24</sup> For information on the Borghese Centaur see the website of the Louvre Museum, which also includes plenty of further bibliographical references: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010278904> (26.03.2024). For the Old Centaur see its description on the website of the Musei Capitolini in Rome: <http://capitolini.info/scu00658/> (26.03.2024), and Albertoni (2006, p. 58).

<sup>25</sup> The casts are visible in an early nineteenth-century coloured engraving of The Hall: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/the-hall-at-the-royal-academy-somerset-house> (26.03.2024). As a testimony to its popularity, the statue of the Young Centaur of the Furietti pair features in the background of the scene depicted in Alma Tadema’s painting *A Dedication to Bacchus* (1889).

<sup>26</sup> For Dobson’s interest in visual art see Dobson (1928, pp. 6, 90).

the absence of a precise literary source and has raised a relative amount of speculation.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Dobson adds a further, original layer of signification to the iconography. On a first level, he makes it clear that this figuration may be allegorically read as a celebration of the power of love. By implication, however, he also turns the triumph of love into an even greater glorification of the power of art. Indeed, the poem shows that Love, the “World-victor”, can tame the “strong” centaur (and therefore everything else in the world), but also specifies that this is only possible because “some strange power of art” has placed the god on the back of the creature (Dobson 1877, p. 52). Eloquently, this fundamental remark occurs in line 6, at the very core of the poem. Indeed, as pointed out in a seminal text of French prosody and a bible for the English Parnassians, that is Théodore de Banville’s *Petit traité de poésie française* (1872), lines 5 and 6 are the most delicate section of the dizain to handle, where the couplet of lines 4 and 5 terminates and a new set of rhymes is introduced, potentially posing the risk of splitting the poem into two disconnected parts (“Tout l’artifice, toute la gloire du poète consiste à bien attacher sa strophe, précisément là où elle risque de se casser, c’est-à-dire entre le cinquième vers et le sixième”; Banville 1872, p. 151). Taking pride of place at the adroitly handled turning point of the poem, Dobson’s affirmation of art’s agency seems to imply that, if art is the origin of Love’s dominion, art can be mightier than love and thus the supreme force in the universe. The representation of Eros and the centaur is therefore morphed into a symbol of the Parnassian cult of artistic beauty. By extension, and in light of the fact that the only art which is actually operating in the poems-cameos is poetry, this symbol also celebrates the verbal prowess that shapes the entire sequence.

Appropriately, the focus on eros is iterated in the closing poem, *Beryl (The Sirens)*, therefore bookending the whole sequence. As the title indicates, the beryl, which is “Clear-hued” and therefore possibly an aquamarine, is fittingly “graven” with the marine myth of the sirens (Dobson 1877, p. 58). In this case, however, Dobson somewhat swerves away from the classics in that his sirens are not explicitly depicted as the avian monsters of classical literature and may also fit the later tradition of representing them as fishy underwater creatures. This tradition was much alive in British nineteenth century culture and, by the time Dobson composed the poem, had famously provided material for one of Scott’s ballads in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802) as well as for Tennyson’s eponymous *The Mermaid* in his early collection *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), both of which insist on the eerie submarine environment where the titular siren lives, and on her egotistic passions and magical song.<sup>28</sup> In addition, this theme had been also repeatedly tapped into by Rossetti, both in his poems and in his artworks. Rossetti, however, was less concerned with its subaqueous imagery and developed the myth more in connection with his favoured trope of the femme fatale or *belle dame sans merci*.<sup>29</sup>

The poem’s relative freedom from classical sources is also evident in the scene represented, which is almost the reversal of the canonical episode of Ulysses and the sirens. Indeed, while Ulysses’ mariners are protected from the voice of the sirens and row on impassably past their isle, in Dobson (1877, p. 58) the ship is drifting ‘helplessly’ towards shore because the ‘rowers’ cannot help diving into the “Deep” and do not “seek from that sweet fate to flee”. In this sense, by alerting the reader to the destructive charms

<sup>27</sup> An in-depth discussion of this iconography is provided by Grift (1984).

<sup>28</sup> Scott’s introductory note to his ballad *The Mermaid* is a good indication of how this myth resonated with British contemporary culture. A much-cited reading of Tennyson’s poem is in Armstrong (1993, pp. 43-47).

<sup>29</sup> See the Rossetti Archive: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/47p-1869.raw.html> (25.03.2024).

of these “Women-witches”, Dobson (1877, p. 58) uses the sirens as a symbol of the dangers of “Pleasure”, the very word which, in the opening line of the poem, is said to be carved as a motto in the emblem-like beryl. If read against our interpretation of the opening cameo, this symbolism may therefore be viewed as referring to the perils of love, as well as possibly to the enemies and the agonies of artistic creation. In this sense, this reading of the final poem, which shows that the aesthetic religion may exact too high a toll, seems to trouble the optimistic glorification of art that opens the sequence. Significantly, this possible questioning of the powers of artistic representation may also manifest itself stylistically. Indeed, the final line of the poem is opened by the exclamation “Ah me” (Dobson 1877, p. 58), which, despite being an utterly conventional iambic opening, is eloquently the only first-person reference in the text and is therefore somewhat disruptive of the state of absolute lyrical impersonality that characterizes the entire sequence. Completely concealed under the precious surface of the ekphrastic description, the poetic I seems almost to inadvertently reveal their presence at the very closing of the text.

At the same time, however, it is possible to argue that the supremacy of art expressed in the first poem remains ultimately undisputed. In the final cameo, after all, it is love, rather than art, that is unequivocally presented as potentially treacherous. Moreover, and especially in light of the jewel trope that informs the entire sequence, the closing poem may nonetheless be viewed, like the previous cameos, as foregrounding and celebrating the mimetic capacity of gem carving and, even more so, of poetry, which in this case allows for describing, detecting, exploring, and even replicating the risks of pleasure. From this perspective, the pleasures emblemized by the sirens may thus be read as the non-artistic lures of life which the poet must shield themselves against or artistically sublimate, in an ascetic manner, in order to produce aesthetic objects. Similarly, it is possible to corroborate the art-for-art’s-sake interpretation of the cameo sequence by swapping the assumed gender identity of the poetic voice, a process which is not alien to Victorian poetry (and actually much implicated in Tennyson’s mermaid model). If we identify the sirens with the poet, their song may be read not as an impediment to poetry, but as its analogue, thus reaffirming the omnipotence of art celebrated in the opening poem.

## 5. Lang’s cameos, and conclusion

The trope of the poem as a carved gemstone is also deployed in relation to the classics by Andrew Lang. In his sonnet sequence *Cameos: Sonnets from the Antique*, which forms part of his collection *Rhymes à la Mode* (1884), Lang imagines each text as a cameo illustrating a canonical passage from classical literature. The opening sonnet, *Cameos*, which is printed in italics and untraditionally written in iambic tetrameter, fully works out this interart analogy. Just as Greek engravers were so skillful as to “copy” works of art figuring gods or godlike figures (“*face divine*”) on the narrow surface of semiprecious stones (“*Within a beryl’s golden band,/Or on some fiery opal fire*”) that, unlike their models, have survived to the present day, so the speaker/poet hopes to succeed in distilling the formal and symbolic grandeur of Greek literature into the limited measure and resources of the sonnets that follow: “*So I, within the sonnet’s space,/The large Hellenic lines might trace,/The statue in the cameo*” (Lang 1887, p. 117). Bearing the trace of his interests in classical studies, history, and anthropology, Lang’s beautifully orchestrated analogy is philological in that it evokes the stratification of literary and visual sources as

well as the issue of indirect tradition. Intriguingly, Lang here seems to describe the condition typified by Dobson's cameos commented above, which manage to condense, in their compact form, a number of different and lofty antecedents. Moreover, Lang is not distant from Dobson in his belief in the synthesizing, almost sublimating, potentials of (short) verse – the metaphor in *Cameos* seems to suggest that, like the engraver, also the sonneteer can grant immortality to his models. In Lang's case, however, the interartistic association is far less strong than in Dobson. It is only the title of the sequence, once again echoing Gautier, and the introductory sonnet that sustain the ekphrastic framework. In fact, taken in isolation, each sonnet is practically shorn of any precise reference to hardstone carving and, unlike Dobson's cameos, does not rely on imagery and vocabulary that may immediately characterize it as a material object. Moreover, the introductory note to the sequence, several of the poem titles, which are fairly straightforward as to the content of the following texts (*Helen on the Walls*, *Colonus*, *The Invocation of Isis*), as well as the actual references given in brackets under the title of each poem so as to openly reveal its source indicate that these sonnets have a quintessentially literary (if not scholarly) nature.

In the introductory note, Lang almost underplays the interartistic implications and, arguably, the poetic originality of the sequence when he hastens to point out, somewhat in the manner of a classicist, that his adaptations are respectful of the originals, closer to translations proper than rewritings: "These versions from classical passages are pretty close to the original, except where compression was needed, as in the sonnets from Pausanias and Apuleius, or where, as in the case of fragments of Æschylus and Sophocles, a little expansion was required" (Lang 1887, p. 115). Interestingly, a cursory reading of the poems seems to suggest that Lang may have at times resorted to nineteenth-century English poetic models in his bid to structure the classical passages into the sonnet form. The final words ("Our Lady, hear!"; Lang 1887, p. 132) of his *Invocation of Isis* (from Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, 11, 2) may be seen as echoing the Psalmic closing ("O hear!") of the first three sections of Shelley's poem in the form of a sonnet sequence *Ode to the West Wind* as well as Swinburne's equally biblically-inflected vocatives in *Dolores* ("Our Lady of Pain").<sup>30</sup> More cogently, *The Isles of the Blessed* — which adapts Pindar's fragments on the afterlife, Persephone, and the Fortunate Isles (or Isles of the Blessed) — deploys Swinburne's typical six-beat triple rhythm, a meter which, significantly, Swinburne himself had used in his *Hesperia*, a much more accomplished poem than Lang's, yet similarly concerned with the myth of the Isles.<sup>31</sup>

For all their individual differences, the examples that I have discussed fully indicate that ekphrastic and interartistic discourses and modalities do not play a lesser role in English Parnassianism than in its French antecedent, in both cases being equally instrumental in achieving the aesthetic conditions advocated by the various strains of the Movement. At the same time, and perhaps more cogently, my analysis testifies to the strong link between Anglophone Parnassian poetry and the classics, both in terms of sources, forms, and poetics, and therefore points towards the need for a separate, in-depth assessment of this phenomenon.

<sup>30</sup> For Shelley's and Swinburne's texts see Shelley (2014, pp. 204-209) and Swinburne (2000, p. 122).

<sup>31</sup> *Hesperia* forms part of *Poems and Ballads* (1866). For a discussion of Pindar's fragments see Lloyd-Jones (1985).

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