



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
Literature and Culture**

The Madwoman in the Antique: Body and Gaze in Conrad's 'The Return'

Christine Vandamme



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6880>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.6880

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Christine Vandamme, "The Madwoman in the Antique:
Body and Gaze in Conrad's 'The Return'", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 21 July 2015,
connection on 08 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6880> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.6880>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The Madwoman in the Antique: Body and Gaze in Conrad's 'The Return'

Christine Vandamme

- 1 Conrad had mixed feelings about his short story "The Return".¹ He considered its writing a "left-handed production" (Author's Note, 11); in other words, a piece of fiction whose workings were partly unconscious and unaccountable but whose subversive implications would keep "returning" with a vengeance. My contention is that it is really about the need of a new *rapprochement* between men and women at a time when the paradigm of the "Angel in the House"² was still widely accepted.³ At home, upper-class Victorian women would be considered by some as antique marble statues expected to *embody* the Ideal of feminine self-sacrifice and self-denial both symbolically and literally.
- 2 This short story plunges the reader into a high-strung psychodrama which revolves almost exclusively around descriptions of the body and gaze of the main protagonists, a man and his wife. Mr. Hervey comes back from work one evening and finds a note from his wife telling him she has left to join another man and will not be coming back. She then suddenly reappears, expecting him to realise why she left in the first place. But he remains as obsessed with social conventions as he was before. When he insists on her showing some signs of remorse or shame and she refuses to do so, he realises it is he who has been living in a world of empty rituals and appearances. He departs, never to return. Throughout the short story, the main focus is essentially on both the man and the woman's physiognomies and physical reactions as determined by a very strict moral code of conduct. Mrs. Hervey's body in particular is presented as fashioned, or even *carved*, by what she imagines her Pygmalion-like husband expects of her as an ideal "angel in the house." It is no coincidence if the figure of the "marble woman" is omnipresent both literally with the antique statue adorning the first-floor landing and symbolically, with the many descriptions of a wife's "marmoreal impassiveness" (157).

- 3 And yet, the tale seems to rewrite Ovid's myth of Pygmalion in a subversive way. The husband, after turning his wife into an artifact of Apollonian perfection and smoothness is then made to witness the return of the repressed in his wife's body and gaze, which not only alienates her from him but also obliges him to question the foundations of his moral world. In a last twist, it is the woman's Medusa head that, instead of killing him, reconnects him with his Dionysian vitality and authenticity. Conrad here uses antique references as a subtle, metaphorical network—a means to reinterpret Victorian morality and approach to gender.
- 4 The short story refers to the antique motif of the "marble woman" relentlessly to offer a Nietzschean reappraisal of the Apollonian love of perfection, beauty and order as both counterbalanced and threatened by Dionysian, subterranean forces embodied by the figure of Mrs. Hervey: a woman instead of a wife.⁴ The dynamics of the text reside in the many displacements from the social and political question of a woman's position in Victorian society to the almost imperceptible transformations of her body as a symptom of shifting power relationships.

The antique marble woman: the vestal in the domestic shrine

- 5 Conrad's uneasiness about his own creation as witnessed in the author's note is symptomatic. He immediately acknowledges his perplexity, only to admit that the psychological reasons that convinced him to write are for the most part unknown to him. He also wonders about the extraordinary importance given to "physical impressions." Yet what is even more puzzling is that, if one rereads the author's note after reading the entire text, one cannot but be struck by the obliteration of the main argument of the tale, namely that of women's place in society and, ultimately, the impact, in Victorian England, of the ideals of "restraint, duty [and] fidelity" (144) Alvan Hervey so fervently worships. Conrad only mentions the sense impressions related to minor factual details such as the "station," the "streets" and a passing "horse":

In this connection I should like to confess my surprise on finding that notwithstanding all its apparatus of analysis the story consists for the most part of physical impressions; impressions of sound and sight, railway station, streets, a trotting horse, reflections in mirrors and so on, rendered as if for their own sake and combined with a sublimated description of a desirable middle-class town-residence which somehow manages to produce a sinister effect. (11)

- 6 The descriptions of "sound and sight" are indeed to be found in almost every single line but the fact that Conrad should omit to mention the woman's body which constitutes the essential part of the tale is quite revealing. Right from the start, he is not willing to admit the real object of his story. It would have been a much more faithful tribute to the text to speak about the recurrent, and even obsessive, physical notations having to do with the body and gaze of both Alvan Hervey and his wife. The tale is indeed built on a central confrontation between a man and his wife after the latter has left a note announcing her departure with another man. The husband comes back from work and finds the note but his wife turns up soon after. In the ensuing psychological strife between the two characters, Mrs Hervey utters twenty lines at most. The real fight is mainly visual as their various gestures and postures take on an extraordinarily dramatic, if not cinematic, dimension.⁵

- 7 The short story begins with a very detailed description of a mass of ant-like businessmen from the City, all looking alike and all with “the same stare, concentrated and empty, satisfied and unthinking” (111). In this world of successful and self-satisfied clones, difference is to be avoided at all costs and the narrator then goes on to spell out the reasons why Alvan Hervey chose this particular wife: she was a “well connected, well-educated and intelligent woman” (111)–the very terms that were used to describe him a few lines before. In short, he looks for a feminine double of himself, a woman whose social status and skills will reinforce his own privileged position. But he also needs a very submissive woman who, far from being a precursor of Woolf, does not have anything “of her own,” not even a single “*thought* of her own” (112, my emphasis). Her physical description insists on rigidity, like a piece of architecture, an “obelisk,” which is only the first in a series of descriptions emphasising her upright bearing and social conformity:

She strode like a grenadier, was strong and upright like an obelisk, had a beautiful face, a candid brow, pure eyes, and not a thought of her own in her head. He surrendered quickly to all those charms, and she appeared to him so unquestionably of the right sort that he did not hesitate for a moment to declare himself in love. (112)

- 8 Alvan Hervey's wife has so skillfully adopted the role expected of her that her body is turned into a petrified object, the stiff and straight “obelisk.” It is clearly suggested here that the first element Victorian women were being deprived of was their body, “a body of their own.” But there is another very interesting angle from which to analyse such a passage. The description is surprisingly masculine and martial with the evocation of the “grenadier” and the phallic reference to the “obelisk”. Such obvious symbols confirm that Mrs. Hervey is perceived by her husband as a convenient extension of himself and his power but also as a perfect icon of Duty, both domestic and imperial. Her petrification into an “obelisk” and not into a remote marble antique statue cannot but evoke the geopolitical context at stake in the last decades of the century, the control of Egypt and the Suez Canal in particular. One should not forget that the moral imperatives of duty and fidelity which are so prominent in the tale were essential to imperialist propaganda and that women were often presented as torch-bearers of the civilising mission, just as Mr Hervey's “marble statue” is supposed to enlighten both his house and the world at large. The description of women as antique statues bearing the torch of civilisation is very common in Conrad's works.⁶ The blindness of such feminine figures is also characteristic of Conrad's fiction and Mrs Hervey seems at first to correspond to the type perfectly. The passage quoted above is not a love at first sight scene in which the exchange of looks would be essential.⁷ The eyes are “pure” but Alvan Hervey and his future wife never actually look into each other's eyes at all. He looks at her as he would at a work of art but certainly not as a woman, as the following sarcastic comment makes clear: “He thought of her as a well-bred girl, as a wife, as a cultured person, as the mistress of a house, as a lady; but he never for a moment thought of her simply as a woman” (120). The woman who was to become Mrs. Hervey was also more than happy to mould herself into what was expected of her. Her individuality “of which she was very conscious” (112) is quite conformist as can be seen in her choice of occupations:

[...] Alvan Hervey and his wife spent five years of prudent bliss unclouded by any doubt as to the moral propriety of their existence. She, to give her individuality fair play, took up all manner of philanthropic work and became a member of various rescuing and reforming societies patronized or presided over by ladies of title. (113)

- 9 To that extent, she is extremely respectable and “morally prop[er]”, thus corresponding to the ideal Victorian lady delineated by such bestsellers at the time as Mrs Sarah Ellis’s widely read conduct book *Women of England* (1839).
- 10 After the description of Alvan Hervey’s wife and the presentation of his social relations, the narrator starts describing the house. He begins with the depiction of a statue which is referred to as a “woman.” It is all the more intriguing as the wife herself had never been identified as a woman until then. The phrase “marble woman” instead of “marble statue,” insists on the gender of the statue and its emblematic function: she is there to represent the ideal “angel in the house” or, more appropriately still, the pure vestal guarding the domestic shrine. Sarah S. Ellis refers to such a sacred domestic duty in *Women of England*:
- In short, the customs of English society have so constituted women the guardians of the comfort of their homes, that, like the Vestals of old, they cannot allow the lamp they cherish to be extinguished, or to fail for want of oil, without an equal share of degradation attaching to their names. (35)
- 11 The statue seems indeed to guard the domestic hearth. After ringing his door bell and being greeted by the maid, Alvan Hervey climbs a flight of stairs and arrives on a landing where he is welcomed by the “marble woman”: “On the first-floor landing a marble woman, decently covered from neck to instep with stone draperies, advanced a row of lifeless toes to the edge of the pedestal, and thrust out blindly a rigid white arm holding a cluster of lights” (115-116). The antique statue carries the sacred fire of domesticity but she is no real flesh and blood being, only a rigid “lifeless” statue.
- 12 In such a short story based on indirection and displacement, all aesthetic representations of women, be they inspired by antiquity or not, are highly revealing of the husband’s vision of women and their social status. The symbolical weight of both the antique statue and the paintings hung on the walls is confirmed by the fact that the short story also ends with them.
- 13 Every painting featuring a feminine figure has something to say about Alvan Hervey’s conception of women’s social role and it contains in miniature the dramatic development of the short story: the idyllic moment of courtship and love, the veiled warning against flirtatious temptations which only depraved women (euphemistically called “ragged maidens”) could even contemplate and the unavoidable retribution such misdemeanour would bring in its wake with the last painting featuring a helpless and “pathetically lean girl”⁸:
- On the rich, stamped paper of the walls hung sketches, water-colours, engravings. His tastes were distinctly artistic. Old church towers peeped above green masses of foliage; the hills were purple, the sands yellow, the seas sunny, the skies blue. A young lady sprawled with dreamy eyes in a moored boat, in company of a lunch basket, a champagne bottle, and an enamoured man in a blazer. Bare-legged boys flirted sweetly with ragged maidens, slept on stone steps, gambolled with dogs. A pathetically lean girl flattened against a blank wall, turned up expiring eyes and tendered a flower for sale (116).
- 14 The courtship depicted here in the context of the boat ride is very similar, in its impressionist treatment, to the memory Alvan Hervey has of the moment he proposed to his wife: the “groups of people scattered in sunshine,” the “shadows of leafy bows,” the “coloured sunshades,” the women in their “summer toilettes” gave him a “recklessly picturesque desire” to “get promptly something for himself only” (141). Alvan Hervey’s “artistic [and picturesque] tastes” (141) are but an aesthetic varnish

concealing his cruder desire of possession and control. He has fallen in love not so much with the woman herself as with the picturesque ideal of perfect beauty and purity she represents:

He remembered looking at her pure eyes, at her candid brow; he remembered glancing about quickly to see if they were being observed, and thinking that nothing could go wrong in a world of so much charm, purity, and distinction. He was proud of it. He was one of its makers, of its possessors, of its guardians, of its extollers. (141)

- 15 Once again, it is not the real woman that Alvan Hervey falls in love with but a statue-like woman with “pure eyes” and a “candid brow”. This is only to be expected as Mrs Hervey herself has willingly accepted to be reduced to a symbol, the embodiment of “charm, purity, and distinction.” She has been forced to abandon her subject position and become an object instead, an “object of vision” as John Berger puts it in *Ways of Seeing*:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.⁹

- 16 But what is even more interesting in Conrad's scene is that the feminine figure is not the only one to be alienated by such reification. Her husband, haunted by that same gaze, feels even more imprisoned than she does and shares with her a similar obsession: he cannot help “glancing about quickly to see if they [are] being observed” (141).
- 17 As a result the short story starts reeling when Mrs. Hervey refuses to be reduced to an “object of vision” and retrieves her ability not only to see but to gaze back. She looks at her husband from a subject position for the first time and obliges him to acknowledge the fundamental difference between what we see, or what we think we see, and what “looks back at us,” to quote Didi-Huberman's eponymous formulation.¹⁰

The Risk of Contamination: from the Antique to the Gothic

- 18 Alvan was at first looking for an antique vestal as solid and rigid as a “marble woman” to defend the domestic hearth and carry the sacred domestic fire. But, at the end of the short story, the “woman of marble, livid and still like a patient phantom, [holds] out in the night a cluster of extinguished lights” (167). And yet the description does not evoke the idea of plenitude and depth commonly associated with antiquity. The prevailing impression is that of an eerie presence, a marble statue which has turned into a gothic spectre—the “patient phantom.” Alvan/Pygmalion looks at his creation but instead of giving it life, he creates a monster, a “woman of marble” who does not carry the sacred fire but only pretends to do so. In the Greek myth, Pygmalion gives life to a lifeless statue whereas in Conrad's tale, Alvan turns a living woman into a ghost or worse, a fetish—a convenient symbol which precludes the possibility of impotence, whether literal or figurative. Such a reversal of the original myth points to the dramatic irony of the tale: a wife comes back to her husband after hoping to elope with another man. She then offers herself as a simulacrum but she adamantly refuses to give him anything

more. She agrees to pretend that she still believes in the Victorian ideal of feminine self-sacrifice and strict morality, but she wants Alvan to be fully aware that she cannot offer more and she is not ready to deny herself the right to actually resent or question such a model. The husband now understands that what he sees is definitely not what looks back at him. Instead of an idealised vestal in the domestic Temple, he is faced with a spectral woman who can only offer him the antique trappings of her social role. When Mrs. Hervey comes back, what strikes the reader is the “stony forgetfulness of her pose,” as if fitting into the mould of the “angel in the house” had turned her into stone:

She sat with closed lips, with an air of lassitude in the stony forgetfulness of her pose, but after a moment she lifted her drooping eyelids and met his tense and inquisitive stare by a look that had all the formless eloquence of a cry. It penetrated, it stirred without informing; it was the very essence of anguish stripped of words that can be smiled at, argued away, shouted down, disdained. (131)

- 19 And yet she also seems to regain her own individuality and selfhood in retrieving her piercing and singularly “formless” gaze: “a look that had all the formless eloquence of a cry”. This is a very peculiar way of describing a gaze: not only is the visual associated with the auditory but the meta-diegetic comment underlines the force of the visual as opposed to the verbal. The text then goes on spinning the metaphor of the fallen goddess or the corrupted priestess who defiled the temple of domestic submission and self-forgetfulness, a temple of virtue and self-sacrifice, which was so central to the Victorian ethos:

He felt full of rancorous indignation against the woman who could look like this at one. This look probed him; it tampered with him. It was dangerous to one as would be a hint of unbelief whispered by a priest in the august decorum of a temple [...] (131)

- 20 There is an unexpected displacement which suggests Alvan Hervey has already realised his wife’s *probing* look invites him to also probe his moral conscience. One would logically have expected the term “priestess” or “vestal” here—he has just been referring to his wife’s searching gaze—and yet the term used is “priest”; a Freudian slip of the tongue maybe, mirroring the husband’s own moral doubts.
- 21 This is where the short story reaches its subversive climax. The female figure resists male oppression and domination not through starvation, flight or madness as her feminine Victorian predecessors would have done as suggested in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar 341), but through a make-believe acceptance of Victorian patriarchy, in order to better sap its foundations.
- 22 Mrs. Hervey’s way of resisting such oppression is by inhabiting the “temple”, thus hollowing it out from the inside. Mrs. Hervey reenters the temple but as an actress on a stage, not as a vestal carrying out a sacred ritual in which she believes herself. This is one of the central motifs of the tale: the reified body of the antique vestal as well as its reassuring marble solidity and draperies on the one hand and the woman’s piercing or “penetrat[ing]” gaze on the other. Mrs. Hervey’s enquiring glance has nothing in common with the “tranquil face” of the ideal Victorian woman:

For something that abode endued
With temple-like repose, an air
Of life’s kind purposes pursued
With order’d freedom sweet and fair.
A tent pitch’d in a world not right
It seem’d, whose inmates, every one,

On tranquil faces bore the light
Of duties beautifully done, (21)

- 23 In Patmore's poem, home is a "temple" but also a prison whose "inmates" seem either unaware of their confinement or, at the very least, willing to accept it as part of their "angelic" duty. Their "tranquil faces" do not express any resentment or frustration, they only radiate the "light" of contentment that "duties beautifully done" supposedly bring in their wake. Mrs Hervey's face on the contrary is far from "tranquil": it is crying out its sense of injustice and frustration in a very modern and even expressionistic way. Instead of showing neoclassical restraint, composure and balance, it is distorted by a cry which has the "formless[ness]" of sheer anguish. The surface of the visible is disfigured by the woman's own gaze, as a sign of her irrepressible singularity and individuality.
- 24 What she has to offer is only a simulacrum, a surface, a "pose," or the "stone draperies" of the "marble woman" (116). Mrs. Hervey's "crime" or "profanation" is to make the simulacrum appear as simulacrum, the "draperies" as nothing else than "draperies." It is no coincidence if her husband regrets she should have "de-faced" his conception of life: "And life was his concern: that sane and gratifying existence untroubled by too much love or by too much regret. She had interfered with it; she had *defaced* it." (120, my emphasis) Even before the first confrontation, the discovery of a white envelope lying on a table in sight of any passing servant intrigues him. Once he has read it, he is said to have seen an "illimitable darkness" (118). The black words in the white envelope just as Mrs Hervey's white face around her dark penetrating gaze bring about a moral revelation, that of the fantasmatic nature of Alvan Hervey's conception of morality—a conception which only focuses on white surfaces or simulacra but not on the black inscriptions or manifestations of one's individuality. He even has a sort of hallucination when he imagines a spectral "unclean hand" soiling the white surface of the drapery:
- [...] but passion is the unpardonable and secret infamy of our hearts, a thing to curse, to hide and to deny; a shameless and forlorn thing that tramples upon the smiling promises, that tears off the placid mask, that strips the body of life. And it had come to him! It had laid its unclean hand upon the spotless draperies of his existence, and he had to face it alone with all the world looking on. [...] He put both his hands out as if to ward off the reproach of a defiling truth [...] (122)
- 25 "[T]ear[ing] off the placid mask" and "strip[ping] the body of life" are both linked to a dialectic of surface and depth but they also suggest the truth is to be found in the real face behind the "placid mask" of the "angel in the house"; her actual body thus "strip[ped]" of the draperies of social conventions and obligations. For Alvan Hervey at this point, removing the veil is only synonymous with profanation. The obsessive recurrence of walls or curtains in the short story stand for Alvan Hervey's desire to protect the marble domestic temple he lives in from any such profanation or defiling influence. But what the two quotations reveal is that such a world of "spotless draperies" is hollow at the core and devoid of any moral depth or plenitude. The reification of the Victorian woman as an "angel in the house" is subverted from within with the multiplication of gothic references. Here passion is personified as some sort of monstrous force putting forward its "unclean hand" and tearing off the veil of Victorian moral standards. To that extent, the short story questions Victorian morality as that of a degenerate or degenerating society which insists on pure and white surfaces because it lacks any strength or vitality. The omnipresence of images suggesting decay, imminent corruption and death imply that the Victorian fetishisation

of women into icons of perfect morality might be a symptom of the decay of British morality and civilisation just as Nietzsche considered the excessive cult of perfect beauty, rationality and utilitarianism of late Greece as a sign of decadence. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche even wonders if the apparently morbid fascination for the ugly and the irrational to be found in earlier Greek periods when tragedy reigned supreme might not have been, on the contrary, a manifestation of great vitality:

[...] could it then perhaps be the case, despite all 'modern ideas' and the prejudices of democratic taste, that the victory of optimism, the predominance of reasonableness, practical and theoretical utilitarianism, like its contemporary, democracy, that all this is symptomatic of a decline in strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion? [...] As you see, this book burdened itself with a whole bundle of difficult questions. So let us add the hardest question of all! What, when seen from the prism of life, is the meaning of morality? (5)

- 26 Similarly, Conrad's "The Return" is an indirect appeal to the reader's conscience. The story shatters the solidity of the "angel in the house" myth presented under the guise of the antique "marble woman" to expose what "morality" means when experienced from the point of view of the living, from one's own conscience and its inner contradictions and not from a dead and disembodied moral imperative.

- 27 "The Return" is a clever presentation of the endless metamorphoses men and women undergo in their successive processes of identification when faced with a particularly prescriptive moral code of conduct which turns them into living symbols of Victorian respectability. They are made to literally *embody* such moral standards in *turning* their own flesh into stainless stone and marble. Alvan Hervey therefore offers the sacrifice of his own body—a wooden statue whose words are as "weighty" and rigid as "punishing stone[s]":

'Yes! Restraint, duty, fidelity—unswerving fidelity to what is expected of you. This—only this—secures the reward, the peace. [...] His eyes were still, his stare exalted and sullen; his face was set, was hard, was woodenly exulting over the grim inspiration that secretly possessed him, seethed within him, lifted him up into a stealthy frenzy of belief. Now and then he would stretch out his right arm over her head, as it were, and he spoke down at that sinner from a height, and with a sense of avenging virtue, with a profound and pure joy as though he could from his steep pinnacle see every weighty word strike and hurt like a punishing stone. (144-145)

- 28 And yet far from having the performative effect he expects, his words only ring hollow. Instead of granting them any form of "vital" power, Mrs. Hervey empties them of their meaning by repeating them endlessly:

"Rigid principles—adherence to what is right," he finished after a pause.

"What is right?" she said, distinctly, without uncovering her face.

[...]

"You must respect the moral foundations of a society that has made you what you are. Be true to it. That's duty—that's honour—that's honesty."

[...]

"What's right?" you ask me. Think only. What would you have been if you had gone off with that infernal vagabond? . . . What would you have been? . . . You! My wife! . . ."

[...] She murmured faintly, as if to herself—

"Ah! What am I now?" (145)

- 29 The ultimate twist of the short story lies in the final reversal of the antique motif. The "marble woman" who had been fashioned by a Pygmalion-like Alvan is now the one who will enable him to leave his dead social self behind and live his life more fully. She

forces him to realise that the core of the domestic temple is empty if women are turned into antique "marble" statues with nothing, not a "thought" nor a desire of their own, except that of carrying "the light [o]f duties beautifully done" (Patmore, 21). As Alvan deplures, "she will give nothing but what I see" (163). The realm of "rigid principles" (145) is only valid if it corresponds to the "sacredness of ideals" (123) in which a woman or a man can honestly believe. Since Hervey's wife does not love or respect her husband any longer, he has to face the moral consequences that come with such a realisation. His world collapses and his conscience is thus reborn: "To give her your thought, your belief, was like whispering your confession over the edge of the world. Nothing came back—not even an echo." (167) This is where the antique motif reappears in the tale but in an unexpected way: Mrs. Hervey undergoes another metamorphosis at this crucial point in becoming a Medusa-like figure who, instead of turning her husband into stone, gives him back his freedom and his life. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Medusa's decapitated head kills anyone who looks her in the face. In Freud's interpretation of the myth, it is synonymous with castration ("The Medusa's head", 273). In Conrad's tale it brings a man back to life and frees him from a rigid and alienating moral code of conduct.

- 30 After having experienced the rebirth of his conscience, Alvan cannot be content with the "lying solemnity of a temple devoted to the rites of a debasing persuasion" (168). He panics and wishes his wife could help him perpetuate the old myths surrounding the domestic "temple," however defiled it might have been. This is when her description, no longer vestal-like, evokes another antique figure: the Greek mythical figure of Medusa associated with death and the fear of castration. Not only do we find the emphasis on the "detached head" but also the snake-like hair streaming over her shoulders as well as the exchange of looks:

His conscience was born. [...] He wanted help against himself, against the cruel decree of salvation. [...] Perhaps she would help... [...] and then, as if detached and floating in it on the level of his eyes, appeared the head of a woman. She had jumped up when he burst into the room.

For a moment they contemplated each other as if struck dumb with amazement. Her hair streaming on her shoulders glinted like burnished gold. He looked into the unfathomable candour of her eyes. Nothing within—nothing—nothing. (169)

- 31 But Conrad's provocative playfulness is such that the Medusa figure turns the onlooker not into stone but into a flesh and blood human being with a conscience "of his own." His wife's gaze transfixes him into becoming a man who, in turn, refuses to stay in that sepulchered house. When he challenges her and asks her if she can stand such a marital and moral masquerade, she answers positively. Their exchange of "glar[ing]" and "blaz[ing]" looks (169), far from petrifying or annihilating him, actually frees him from "invisible bonds" (169). He retorts: "Well, I can't!" The short story ends on the following words: "He never returned."
- 32 In such a compact and highly dramatic short story, Conrad manages to offer a contrasted portrait of a Victorian lady who loses herself while trying to conform to the moral paradigm of perfection, purity and self-sacrifice. But the extraordinarily modern and unexpected twist of the tale has to do with the way she tries to resist such a Pygmalion-like fetishisation of her body: by first refusing to flee and then by choosing to *return* back home to her husband. The reversal of the original myth is therefore complete. It is the wife who *returns* her husband to his real self, away from his deadly identification with strict Victorian morality. Yet the play on *antique* references and the

many variations around the Medusa and her gaze bring about another female act of mythic proportions: instead of petrifying both men and women into stereotyped social positions, it allows them to reconnect with their own self as well as with their own personal sense of duty and morality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Tales of Unrest*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*. Paris : Minuit/Critique, 1992.
- . *L'image ouverte. Motifs de l'incarnation dans les arts visuels*. Paris : Gallimard, 2007.
- Ellis, Sarah Stickney. *The Women of England, their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. 1839. London: Fisher, 1845.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Medusa's Head." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. vol. XVIII. Ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and GUBAR, Susan. *The VANDAMME CHRISTINE* 2015-07-07T15:27:00VCMadwoman in the Attic. 1979. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Goldhill, Simon. *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. "Power, Gender and Imperialism in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad". In *Nineteenth Century Literature in English*, 8:2, 2004, 199-219.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. "The Women of *Heart of Darkness*." In *Heart of Darkness: Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Paul B. Armstrong. Fourth ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006. 405-415.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. *Sexuality and the Erotic in Conrad's Fiction*. London: Continuum, 2007.
- Krenn, Heliéna M. "Conrad's women and art: 'The Return' and 'The Planter of Malata' as Signposts in Conrad's creative landscape". In *Fu Jen Studies*, 33, 2000, 1-15.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. C. Martin trans. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Paccaud-Huguet, Josiane. "Economies of the Gaze in *The Secret Agent*." In *Conradiana*, 42:3 (2010), 1-16.
- Panagopoulos, Nic. "Heart of Darkness" and The Birth of Tragedy: A Comparative Study, Athens: Kardamitsa, 2002.
- Patmore, Coventry. *The Angel in the House*. London and Cambridge : Macmillan, 1863.
- Rousset, Jean. *Leurs yeux se rencontrèrent. La scène de première vue dans le roman*. Paris : Librairie José Corti, 1981.

Schneider, Lissa. *Conrad's Narratives of Difference. Not Exactly Tales for Boys*. New York and London: Routledge/ Studies in Major Literary Authors, 2003.

Texier-Vandamme, Christine. "A Gaze, a Voice and a Body of One's Own: Conrad's 'The Return' and Chéreau's *Gabrielle*." In *L'Époque Conradienne*, 34, 2008, 11-28.

NOTES

1. It was first published in 1898 in a collection of short stories, *Tales of Unrest*.
2. The phrase "angel in the house" is borrowed from a very popular Victorian poem written by Coventry Patmore about his wife's perfection—a woman who willingly accepts her subordinate position as a sacred mission. The poem was first published in 1854.
3. By the end of the century, such a vision had evolved though, as women had gained more social and political power with significant progress concerning property rights, career and education, not to mention the impact of the suffragette movement.
4. It cannot be proved that Conrad actually read *The Birth of Tragedy* but it is a well-known fact among Conradian scholars that Conrad was significantly influenced by the philosopher. There are numerous references to Nietzsche in his letters and many of his works are undeniably influenced by him. For more information, see Nic Panagopoulos, "Heart of Darkness" and *The Birth of Tragedy: A Comparative Study*, Athens: Kardamitsa, 2002.
5. It is no coincidence if Patrice Chéreau, a famous French theatre, opera and film director, adapted the short story into a film in 2005, renaming it *Gabrielle*, and paying particular attention to close-ups on her face.
6. Lissa Schneider presents in a very detailed and convincing way the numerous links between Conrad's representations of women and allegorical representations of Britannia as a draped antique statue or icon often associated with a lighthouse: "Britannia, represented on the backs of Victorian pennies (circa 1860-1894) with a ship at her left and a lighthouse on her right [...] is best known for her helmet, shield and spear." (Schneider, 20)
7. French critic Jean Rousset speaks of a "fundamental situation", the dramatic moment when two people look at each other "face to face" for the first time and experience a revelation (*Leurs yeux se rencontrèrent*, 7). In Conrad's short story on the contrary, the husband only falls in love with his own mirror image and there is no exchange of glances whatsoever. It is no coincidence if the passage quoted above should start with the exact same syntagm as the one that was used to refer to Alvan Hervey in the previous paragraph: "He strode firmly"/ "She strode like a grenadier" (112)
8. With such a juxtaposition of three paintings referring to women figures, the reader can interpret them as illustrating three phases of a young woman's life: courtship (and probable marriage), possible adultery (albeit only indirectly, as it is displaced onto socially despicable individuals, the "bare-legged boys" and the "ragged maidens") and final retribution (the repudiated wife having to beg in order to survive). Such a description is not without recalling a very popular mode of painting in the Victorian period— the narrative and didactic painting in a diptych or triptych. One of the most famous examples, which was much decried at the time, is Augustus Leopold Egg's triptych *Past and Present* (1858) featuring a woman's decline after an adulterous affair in a very melodramatic way.
9. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972, 46-47.
10. In *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, French critic Didi-Huberman spells out the dialectic at work in the act of seeing. Seeing is different from being looked at as when you look at someone, you have the illusion you possess the other, you know him or her fully when in fact, what you see is partly fantasmatic and imaginary and therefore fundamentally different from

what the person really is. Seeing a thing means you have to accept that you are losing it at the same time: "But the modality of the visible becomes ineluctable—in other words destined to be a matter of *being*—when seeing goes hand in hand with a feeling something escapes us inexorably or, to put it differently—when seeing means losing." (14, my translation)

ABSTRACTS

"The Return" is often considered one of Conrad's less successful works and yet it offers an acerbic, if oblique, critique of Victorian approach to gender and morality. The short story revisits the hackneyed issue of infidelity but only as a pretext to reflect on the way Victorian women were fetishised and confined to the role of the "angel in the house," famously celebrated by Coventry Patmore. In Conrad's tale though, the woman is not so much an angel as a statue-like woman, a "marble woman" whose antique beauty and composure are supposed to be those of a vestal defending the sacred temple of domesticity. She is seen by her husband as a mirror image of himself and Victorian society at large in her rigid adherence to "restraint", "duty" and "fidelity." When Mrs Hervey's social mask drops and when she falls from her pedestal, apollonian perfection and restraint recede the better to introduce the vibrating and dionysian power of both her body and gaze. Gothic images start proliferating as Pygmalion's statue turns into a Medusa-like figure of castration and unexpected liberation. Conrad thus offers his readers a fascinating reflection on the reification of Victorian women and their reduction to a simulacrum as well as an unexpected re-appraisal of some of the pillars of his moral world in a haunting tale of *visitation*.

A lire le résumé de l'intrigue, la nouvelle de Joseph Conrad « The Return », pourrait sembler un peu terne et conventionnelle: il n'est pas de thème plus rebattu que l'infidélité et Mrs Hervey a, de surcroît, le mauvais goût de revenir au foyer conjugal sans raison apparente, du moins aux yeux de son époux. Mais c'est justement sur cette question des apparences et de leur vacillement en tant que symptôme d'une société victorienne pétrifiée et moribonde, que repose toute l'originalité de la nouvelle. La subtile critique morale et sociétale de Conrad se joue sur un mode presque théâtral où le lecteur-spectateur assiste à la confrontation entre un homme et son épouse fétichisée et érigée en femme-statue, supposée lui offrir en miroir les vertus cardinales de l'idéal féminin victorien, le célèbre « ange domestique » célébré par Coventry Patmore. Mais toute l'originalité et la force de la nouvelle résident justement dans le choix de valeurs à la fois victorienne et hautement conradiennes, la retenue, le devoir et la fidélité qui se voient ainsi apparemment souillées aux yeux du mari, alors même que la fissuration progressive du masque et du moule hérités de la perfection et de la maîtrise antiques et apolliniennes introduisent le retour du corps, du désir et surtout de la vitalité dionysiaque, ultime retournement salvateur mais non dénué d'une ironie dramatique cinglante puisque c'est le mari qui ressortira purifié de cette éprouvante traversée des apparences. Au travers de jeux subtils de métaphores et de références à la statuaire et à la mythologie antiques d'une part et aux frémissements du corps et du regard de l'autre, Conrad offre au lecteur un corps-à-corps avec le texte saisissant de clairvoyance et de dérision sur le simulacre, moralité figée ou vision délétère des rapports homme-femme à l'époque victorienne.

INDEX

Mots-clés: simulacre, apollinien, dionysiaque, genre, regard, voix, idéal antique, morale

Keywords: simulacrum, apollonian, dionysian, genre, gaze, voice, antique ideal, morality

AUTHORS

CHRISTINE VANDAMME

Senior Lecturer

Grenoble Alpes University

christine.vandamme@u-grenoble3.fr