

“MARMOREALITY:” RE-ANIMATING THE CLASSICAL BODY IN THE ROMANTIC PRESENT

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Abstract: Taking as its starting point the popularity of the moving statue motif, this article explores the “re-animation” of the Classical body in early nineteenth-century literature and visual as well as material culture, with a focus on the figure of the “Dying Gladiator.” Some established strategies for viewing sculpture that attempted to simulate movement and life-likeness include gallery visits by torchlight (for instance at the Capitoline Museum in Rome – home of the *Dying Gladiator*), but for those unable to travel, other options were available. The first part of the article examines the “moving sculpture” shows on stage at Astley’s in London, in particular the innovative spectacles devised by the circus performer, Andrew Ducrow, who coined the term “*poses plastiques*” to describe attitudes drawn from Classical statuary or mythology that he performed on horseback. His performances were praised for “astonishing exactness and fidelity” as well as for impressive transitions between “marmoreality” and living flesh. The next part of the article positions the reception of Ducrow’s incarnations of the Dying Gladiator alongside responses to the statue in print culture, from the *Penny Magazine* to – in the final section – poems such as those of Lord Byron and Felicia Hemans that dwell on (and recover) the moment evoked by the statue when life and death hang in the balance. Here, the potent features of sculpture as a form, and the importance of the viewer’s imaginative engagement, become integral and activating elements in the works’ rapturous reception.

Keywords: Andrew Ducrow, *The Dying Gladiator*, Classical sculpture, moving statues, Lord Byron, Felicia Hemans, ekphrasis

I

This article locates the aesthetics of amazement in the encounter (imagined or real) with the “moving statue.” A fascination for the spectacle of a statue coming, or returning, to life, became notably prominent towards the end of the eighteenth

century and beyond, finding expression in many forms that deployed the living human body as a medium for the re-animation of Classical works of art. The resurgence of interest in the Pygmalion myth, with a spate of adaptations, would be an obvious example, along with a wide variety of both public and private “mimoplastic” practices passing by such names as “attitudes,” “*poses plastiques*,” “living pictures,” etc.¹ To set the stage, however, I would like to stand with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in front of that most famous of statues, the *Laocoön* group in Rome. In dialogue with Lessing’s interpretation of the statue, with its assertion that the work’s perfection can be attributed to the choice of a moment immediately prior to the putative climax of the scene – thus enabling the viewer to imagine the completion of the action, and in that way to *animate* the inert matter before them – Goethe agrees that it offers “a sense of real movement,” and a “living image,” because the moment it conveys is an inherently fleeting one.² To experience this fully, he advises the viewer to “face the sculpture from a proper distance” with eyes *closed*:

If you open and then immediately close your eyes, you can see the whole marble in motion, and you will even expect the whole group to have changed its position before you glance at it a second time. I would describe the sculpture as a frozen lightning bolt, a wave petrified at the very instant it is about to break upon the shore. The effect is the same if the group is viewed at night by torchlight.³

Torchlight visits to sculpture galleries were a popular practice among “Grand Tourists” in the period, particularly at the Capitoline and Pio Clementine museums in Rome, because the flickering light, with its play on light and shadow, could (it was claimed) create the impression of lifelike movements, while fixing the eye of the observer on the potentially dramatic details of an individual and individualized

¹ See Kristen G. Holmström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion 1770–1815* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1967), and my earlier exploration of this topic in “Playing ‘Alive’: Performing Sculpture on the Romantic Stage,” in *The Visual Life of Romantic Theatre*, ed. Terry Robinson and Diane Piccitto (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 159-81.

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “On the Laocoon Group” (1798), in *Goethe: The Collected Works, Vol. 3: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. John Gearey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 17-18. The sculpture, currently in the Vatican Museum, Rome, can be viewed at <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/Cortile-Ottagono/laocoonte.html>.

³ Goethe, “On the Laocoon Group,” 18.

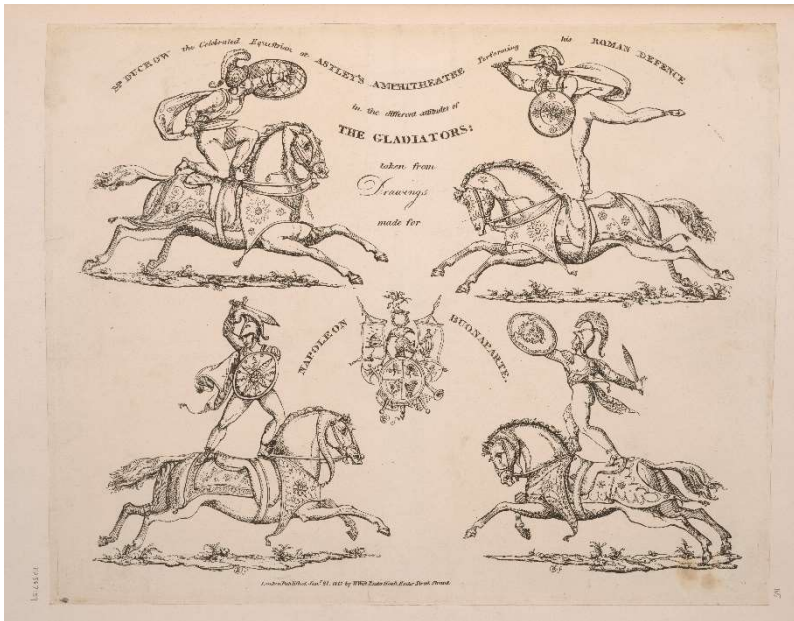
work. Goethe praised in particular how in this “powerfully active light, all the nuances of the work appear with more clarity.”⁴

Goethe’s suggestions about how best to view the *Laocoön* group are suggestively in step with a wide range of efforts to re-animate the Classical body in literature, visual and material culture, and popular spectacle, where attempts to make matter move playfully bridged the divide between past and present, presence and absence. At Astley’s Amphitheatre in London in the later 1820s, under the management of Andrew Ducrow, patrons of the circus were treated to a number of spectacles under the intriguing rubric of the moving statue that capitalized on the vogue for attitudes popularized by such figures as Emma Hamilton, and turned them into a public, and highly profitable, form of entertainment.⁵ Ducrow, a circus artist and England’s “most celebrated equestrian,” had first come to public attention as a brilliant performer on horseback, but his talents were various: tightrope dancer, contortionist, animal trainer, skilled manager, and “an accomplished mime and actor of mute roles in melodramas who regularly performed on the stages of the legitimate theatres.”⁶ In addition to regularly touring on the continent, Ducrow had spent a number of years performing with the Paris-based Cirque Olympique, before taking the reins at Astley’s in 1825. His innovative equestrian exploits and pantomime performances, which were rapturously received, involved impersonating such figures as Mercury, Zephyr, a “Wild Indian Hunter” or the “Chinese Enchanter;” one of his most impressive roles was as the “Courier of St Petersburg,” for which he entered the ring astride four (or sometimes five) horses. Some of the earliest of the equestrian attitudes, documented in prints published by William West in 1816 and 1817, were performed in the character of a Roman gladiator (Figure 1 depicts four variations for a performance at Astley’s). As the detailed playbills show, these virtuoso performances, which were evidently dramatic and dangerous, were embedded in a varied program that stressed sensational production values (see Figure 2); they often responded directly to contemporary political events or recreated legendary narratives from Classical antiquity such as the Trojan War.

⁴ From a note in *Italian Journey*, cited in Claudia Mattos, “The Torchlight Visit: Guiding the Eye through Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Antique Sculpture Galleries,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49-50 (2006): 149.

⁵ A.H. Saxon argues that Ducrow was one of the first to perform attitudes publicly, and that his influence on other performers was “far reaching;” A.H. Saxon, *The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow and the Romantic Age of the English Circus* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), 151. See also Nicole Anae, “Poses Plastiques: The Art and Style of ‘Statuary’ in Victorian Visual Theatre,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 52 (2008): 113.

⁶ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 27.



**Fig. 1. Andrew Ducrow in four attitudes as "The Gladiators."
Published by William West, 21 January 1817. The British Museum.**

It has been suggested that Ducrow first used the term "*poses plastiques*" in 1818 for a new style of performance in which he would strike attitudes drawn from Classical statuary or mythology while riding the ring.⁷ In later years, Ducrow dispensed with the horse and performed attitudes on a pedestal (which was in some instances set inside a constructed picture frame). In 1828 he developed a new form of entertainment he called "The Living Statue, or Model of Antiquities," which would undergo numerous modifications and become a "quasi-dramatic" piece.⁸ The playbill in Figure 2 offers details of the nineteen poses that made up the act, now called "The Venetian Statue! or Living Model of Antiquity!" These included Hercules in six attitudes, Cincinnatus doing up his sandals, Ajax defying lightning, and concluded with "three of the celebrated positions of the Dying Gladiator."⁹

⁷ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 74-75.

⁸ Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 149-50.

⁹ Playbill for Astley's Royal Amphitheatre, August 1828, British Library (Mic.C.13137/ Playbills 171, no. 122).

ROYAL AMPHITHEATRE, (ASTLEY'S.)

Under the Management of Messrs. DUCROW and WATTS.

On Account of the respective Artists, who, by the Permission of Mr. DUCROW's Board, and the immense Overtow on the occasion, the following Entertainments will be Rescued Every Evening this Week.

TUESDAY, Aug. 26th, 1828, and During the Week.

On this Evening will be produced a variety of Exhibitions of a variety, Number, Splendour, and Effect, totally unparalled. To commence at a Quarter of 8 (except on the Great Jubilee Spectacles), and continue till nine & a half, unless called.

Bonaparte's Invasion of Russia!

OR THE CONFLAGRATION OF MOSCOW.

In the course of this highly popular Spectacle will be displayed the celebrated Scene of the FRENCH ENCAMPMENT. Bonaparte's Address to his Army from his Travelling Carriage.

The highly and often applauded View of the CITY OF MOSCOW IN FLAMES!

A WIDE EXTENT OF RUSSIAN COUNTRY, FROZEN.

Perishing Soldiers amidst the Mountains, in a dreadful Storm of Snow.

Between the Pieces, Mr. HERRING will sing a Popular Comic Medley.

And the Musical Infant Phenomenon Miss POOLE will sing a favorite Ballad.

Also which, a Classical Interlude, in One Act, by Mr. DUCROW, in which he will appear at the

Venetian Statue, or Living Model of Antiquity!

Which will be represented by him on a Pedestal. This arrangement is made in order to convey to the Classical taste of Artists and Students in the Fine Arts, in an effective manner, a Series of the beautiful Compositions of Ancient Sculpture, the fidelity of which will be recognised by every Artist and Connoisseur, as they are studied from Figures and Drawings, of the very best Antiquities. The following is the order of the Pictures.

1. Hercules struggling with the Nemean Lion, in the 5th well known attitude.
2. Cincinnatus, the Roman, fastening his Sash.
3. Hercules throwing Lyones into the sea, from Crotus's chair.
4. The Slave Remond, the Grandfather, embracing his wife, while embracing the Cypriotes.
5. Three of the beautiful Poses of the Fighting Gladiator.
6. The African slaying the Tiger.
7. Ajax defying the Labyrinth.
8. Hercules slaying the Hydra.
9. Remond's Defence from the same.
10. The Representation will conclude with three of the celebrated Postures of the Dying Gladiator.

SECOND WEEK OF THE ITALIAN

TIGHT ROPE DANCERS

On which occasion,

Signor LALANNE & Others will go through the whole of their Astonishing Performances.

SCENES in the CIRCLE.

Mr. DUCROW's celebrated high-bred Persian Steed,

REGEE PAK, or the Omrah's Charger!

This unrivaled Animal descended from the best bred Barbs of Persia, mentioned in the Works of Sir W. JONES, D'HERBESVILLE, MONTELLI, and Sir J. MACDONALD, and noted for the singular possession of his Blood, his high Blood, and exquisite Training. *REGEE PAK* (*Persian Prince*) will make his Entrance, attended in all the Splendid Paraphernalia and Magnificent Trappings, peculiar to the Menage of the Horses of the East, required at such a time, to be only second in the Rank of horses to the Lordly *Moslem*. To add to the general admiration of the Spectator, and give the British Public an adequate idea of the Pomp and Brilliance of attendance customary with Oriental Cavalry, *REGEE PAK* will be accompanied by his Attendants, *Jedidiah*, (*Groom*) preceded by his Skirted *Baraboo* Footmen and *Gladiators* 3 Males, (*Royal Guard*) bearing the Imperial Banner of the Mahad of the Province of this astonishing *PERSIAN STEED* are entirely New, and loaned by Mr. DUCROW. *The Horse* *Invincible* *Breaks and Tames* by him.

In the course of the Representations in the Circle, Mr. WILKINSON will throw his wonderful incredible

TOURBILLONS IN THE AIR

Miss WOLFORD's graceful Performances on a Single Horse will be added to the Equestrian Programme.

A New Act by Mr. D's Pupil, called, **THE GREEK YOUTH.**

In the course of the Evening, Mr. DUCROW will appear on his rapid Charger, in a Rustic and Heroic Picture, and call,

Andrew, the Mountain Shepherd, and Rob Roy.

The whole to conclude with an entirely New Splendid Sicilian Harlequinade called the **KNIGHTS OF SICILY**, or

THE OCEAN FIEND!

Orlando, *Knight of the Cross*, and *Scorn Crusader*, afterwards *Harlequin*, Mr. LECLERCQ, his Second Appearance in that Character. *Diagon*, afterwards *Squire*, afterwards *Clown*, Mr. TAYLOR. *Alfon*, the Governor of Sicily, Mr. S. SMITH, afterwards *Farolero*, Mr. M. CORRIGAN. *Turbo*, the Ocean Fiend, Mr. RIDGWAY, afterwards *Lover*, Mr. MONTGOMERY. *Seymour*, Father of the Fiend, Mr. J. SMITH. *Falshin*, afterwards *Funch*, Mr. FILLINGHAM. *Old Chappan*, Bellman of the Island, Mr. LAWRENCE. *Laurett*, afterwards *Columbine*, Miss BURNETT, Pupil of Mr. Leclercq. *Rowell*, Mrs. DUBOIS. *Crusader*, *Knight*, *Dancer*, *Maids*, *Warrior*, *Wooden Horse Riders*, *Devils*, &c. &c.

In the course of the Performance will be exhibited the following Scenery.

A Brilliant Meridian Sunny View of the Coast of Sicily.
With Corvettes and Gallies at Anchor.

A SPLENDID HALL OF AUDIENCE.

A Mountain View of the Magic Hill, surrounded by the Governor's Terrace.
Enchanted Rocks & Lava's Bores—Meeting of the opposite Elements.

A great Variety of laughable and extravagant Situations and Pastimes.

Changes, illustrated by appropriate Local Views—Also an entirely New

BURLESQUE STAG HUNT!

with Wooden Horses, expressly made in the Carpenter's Shop for the occasion.

A BRILLIANT FEU D'ARTIFICE.

mounted by high mounted Riders, who will brilliantly illustrate, by their own example, what execution may be achieved on Live Hips. *One & Old Women*. *A Grand Har and Cry*, introductory to the Chase, which will afford an opportunity of shooting.

A Real Stag and Pack of Real Hounds!

The Devil among the Pantalonnists.

Who meets their final Doom in BEZEBUB'S MOUTH, while the Knight and his Dame are transferred to the REGIONS OF MIRTH, in which will be introduced the TIMID DEER, which by careful training, will exhibit the almost incredible feat of standing in limited accuracy, surrounded by

BOOKS as FIT as GALLIE. Doors open at Half-past Five and the Performance to commence at Quarter-past 8.

Prices taken of Mr. BURTON at the Box Office from 11 o'clock till 4. Children under 12 Years of Age will be admitted by admission.

THE Police Regulations of the Amphitheatre require that Carriages shall set down with the Horse Hounds towards Family and Private Boxes to be had Nightly.

Tuition in the Art of Riding given in the School of the Theatre D'Equitation, and Horse-jacks for the Field or Road.

Victors from Greenwich, Deptford, &c. are informed that Mr. MATYON'S Coach is Nightly in attendance to convey Passengers to & from the Theatre.

Fig. 2. Playbill for Astley's Royal Amphitheatre, August 1828. From the British Library collection, Mic.C.13137/Playbills 171, no. 122.

Prince Pückler-Muskau, visiting from Germany, described the performance in glowing terms, emphasizing the pleasure it offered to lovers of art in particular. He noted the gradual nature of the transitions, in contrast to how, "at the moment in which he presented a perfect copy of the most celebrated statues of antiquity,

he suddenly became fixed as if changed to marble.”¹⁰ A review in *The Examiner* in 1829, of a performance of Ducrow’s “Representations” of “some of the grandest of the Antique Statues” at Drury Lane Theatre, praised the “electrical effect,” magnificence, and power of the display. The show opened with Ducrow in the position of Hercules, reportedly indistinguishable from a statue, until the first movement – when,

[to] the sound of appropriate music, the model darts into various attitudes introductory to the grand stand which he takes as the statue: and into this he shoots his form with a fire and vigour, as though he were compelled into it by a thunderbolt. The transitions from one position to another were as though a shock of the voltaic projected his body into them: the energy and spirit with which they were successively taken made the nerves thrill with wonder and delight.¹¹

There is something contagious at work here, that evidently draws in and ‘animates’ the beholder. As the reviewer (simply signed “A Student of Art”) continues, the precision and skill of Ducrow, and a forceful instantaneity in each successive transformation, in which “every muscle excited by the most vigorous action, and *as crisp* as though made of marble, is surprising;” and yet surprise and gratification are dismissed as among the “lowest in the order of emotions” elicited by this “tasteful” and “instructive” display.¹²

What Ducrow accomplished was not entirely without precedent. In 1813, in Oxford, Giovanni Belzoni mounted a show called “The Roman Hercules,” in which the former strongman struck a number of attitudes “from the most admired antique statues.”¹³ Ducrow, however, took this mode of performance to new heights, occupying the lucrative intersection of high and low art, in keeping with the productive crossovers increasingly common between the circus and the theatres. Many of these performances were captured and circulated in popular prints, such as those by William West (see Figure 1). In addition to popularizing attitudes for a variety of exhibition venues, Ducrow was an innovator in exhibiting *tableaux vivants*, in which the action is briefly held or frozen, usually in imitation

¹⁰ [Hermann von Pückler-Muskau], *Tour in England, Ireland, and France, in the Years 1828 & 1829; with Remarks on the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants In a Series of Letters. By a German Prince. In Two Volumes*, trans. Sarah Austen (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1832), 2:97-98.

¹¹ “Mr. Ducrow’s Representations,” *The Examiner* (11 October 1829): 1132.

¹² “Mr. Ducrow’s Representations,” 1132.

¹³ Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 343.

of another (usually pre-existing) artwork. One of his most celebrated, broadly derived from the various “living statue” acts, was *Raphael’s Dream, or The Mummy and the Study of Living Pictures*, introduced in September of 1830 (as the playbill tantalizingly enthuses, “For this night only, the Canvas lives, and Marble learns to breathe”).¹⁴ Here, Ducrow’s poses were elaborated within a framework that included dioramic scenery, music and dialogue, effectively dramatizing an art historical lecture or a guided gallery visit. One segment involved the exhibition of “Stone Statues of the Grecian & Italian School,” followed by a sequence of “Imaginary Moving Forms of Sculpture.” Some of the attitudes reprised here included the “Dying Gladiator,” and “Hercules’ Combat with the Lion” (in four positions). The intermittent movement in the sequence was noteworthy, with a critic for the Brighton *Guardian* commenting (of a later performance in 1832) that “the resemblance is so correct, so true to Nature, that when the figure moves the effect is magical, and we see with a surprise which it is difficult to describe a statue start to life.”¹⁵ The final and crowning section of the spectacle was the most elaborate: “Coloured Specimens of Art in a series of Living Pictures” consisted of large dioramic paintings, displayed and illuminated in turn inside a huge picture frame.

Contemporary reviews consistently convey the singularity of these shows, which elevated Ducrow in critical esteem above a mere “equestrian miracle,” in light of the “splendour of his conceptions, and perfection of his execution in his visionary representations of the *chefs-d’oeuvres* of ancient and modern art.”¹⁶ Ducrow’s statuesque physique appears to have been especially well suited to the task, and his remarkable ability “to convert his frame into such forms—shapes—attitudes—postures—as the Greek imagination moulded into perfect expression of the highest state of the soul” suggested that he possessed “a spirit kindred to those who in marble made their mythology immortal.”¹⁷ These dramatic and sensational productions, part of a popular trend described by Altick as “art-acting,” became popular at a time when public access to the visual arts had considerably expanded, in ways more widely mediated in both visual and print culture, with the establishment of public sculpture galleries, and of dedicated sculpture galleries within broader, national collections (such as those of the British Museum

¹⁴ Astley’s Playbill for September 21, 1830 (British Library, Mic.C.13137/Playbills 171, no. 143). See Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 226-32, for a description of this production compiled from the manuscript Ducrow deposited for licensing by the Lord Chamberlain (for performances a few years later at Drury Lane) as well as from playbills and reviews.

¹⁵ 7 November 1832.

¹⁶ Old Cerberus, “The Edinburgh Drama,” *The Edinburgh Literary Journal, or, Weekly Register of Criticism and Belles Lettres* (18 December 1830): 110.

¹⁷ Christopher North, cited in Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 226.

or the Louvre).¹⁸ Many of these displayed the recently unearthed or appropriated objects of Classical antiquity, whether from Pompeii or the Parthenon, that – along with increased travel to their revered geographic origins – inspired a variety of re-animation narratives, in which a figure or motif from the past re-appears tangibly in the present. An apposite example here would be Byron’s wholesale reimagining, in the poetic persona of Childe Harold, of a gladiator’s final moments, in which the scene is effectively re-staged in the present time of the poem. “I see before me the Gladiator lie:” the noisy arena “swims around him” as he “sinks gradually low,” but his mind and heart are “far away; / [...] where his rude hut by the Danube lay.”¹⁹ Implicitly, the scene is set in the ruins of the Roman Colosseum, but what follows is a description of a statue in a museum.

II

The “Dying Gladiator” was, as we have seen, a staple in Ducrow’s performance roster, and its re-mediation in other contemporary cultural forms makes it a suggestive case study for assessing the meaning and the appeal of the spectacle of the moving statue, with its powerful capacity to surprise. The statue in question (see Figure 3), also known as the *Dying Gaul*, occupies an important place in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. It is displayed in the centre of the room named after it, the Hall of the Gaul, which also contains a number of other significant Classical masterpieces, such as the *Wounded Amazon* (attributed to Phidias, from the fifth century BC). Information offered by the museum reflects a more current appraisal of the origin and identity of the statue, noting that it was found in 1622 in the ancient Gardens of Caesar, and that it “represents an excellent copy of one of the sculptures which made up the monument dedicated to Athena Poliade by Attalus I (241-197 BC), king of Pergamon, for his victories over the Galatians.”²⁰ Specific features, such as the collar (torques), moustache and hairstyle, suggest a Celtic identity for the figure who – like Laocoön and his sons – is depicted just this side of death’s door.

¹⁸ Altick, *The Shows of London*, 344. Altick coins the term in relation to the *tableaux vivants* and living pictures entertainments that grew in popularity, across social classes, in the 1820s.

¹⁹ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV.140-41, ll. 1252, 1262, 1264, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, Vol. 2, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 171.

²⁰ Musei Capitolini, Hall of the Galatian, accessed 21 June 2025, https://www.museicapitolini.org/en/collezioni/percorsi_per_sale/palazzo_nuovo/sala_del_gladiatore. See also the detailed account of the statue in Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 224-27.



Fig. 3. *The Dying Gaul*, late third century BC. Roman marble copy of a Greek statue. Capitoline Museums, Rome (author's photo).

Ducrow's performance of the "dying" gladiator unfolded through a series of distinctive positions, capitalizing on the inherent pathos of the warrior's plight. A vivid and detailed description in *The Edinburgh Literary Journal's* 1830 review, noted above, conveys the performance moment by moment, play by play ("the curtain is withdrawn, and behold!"), turning the reader into a spectator. As in Byron's lines, the "Dying Gladiator" dies again before our eyes, as we are commanded to imagine for ourselves the drama of his final minutes:

Another change! The dying gladiator. By heaven! too painful! The big tears are trickling down the cheeks of the stricken warrior; he has fought many a noble fight with many a brave antagonist, and now he dies to swell a Roman triumph. He is a stranger in the land, but "dulces moriens reminiscitur Argos." Ay! That memory has nerved him yet! he is up at bay in the arena! there is danger and death in his brawny arm! In vain! in vain! the mists of the grave are in his eyes; he reels, he falls, he is no more! — [...] Behold!²¹

²¹ Old Cerberus, "The Edinburgh Drama," 377. (The Latin quotation, "As he dies, he remembers his beloved Argos," is from Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 10). See Saxon, *Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow*, 150, for a somewhat schematic illustration of "Ducrow performing 'The Dying Gladiator' on a pedestal at his Royal Olympic Arena in Aberdeen, 1838."

Of course, he, Ducrow, *is* still there, which makes the reviewer's exhortation that "All this is sculpture—white unbending marble" equally surprising, reflecting the uncertain status of the spectacle's "marmoreality."

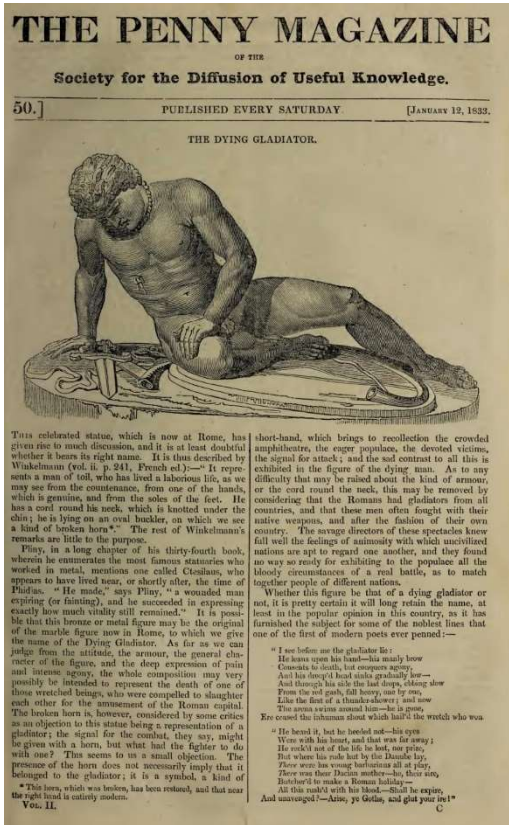


Fig. 4. "The Dying Gladiator," *The Penny Magazine*, Vol. 2 (12 January 1833), title page. Public Domain.

Visitors to Astley's Amphitheatre might well have been readers of Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine* which, like other periodicals, featured, and aimed to popularize, important works of art for a broad audience. In the 1830s, the magazine ran illustrated articles on revered Classical sculptures such as the *Laocöon* and the *Apollo Belvedere*; in one issue, its title page featured a woodcut of the new "Gallery of Athenian Antiquities in the British Museum" that was to be followed, in

subsequent numbers, by articles on individual statues such as the Theseus and the Ilissus “with brief observations on their peculiar merits,” explicitly to foster tasteful appreciation in readers who might otherwise find them “uninteresting.”²² In 1833, the magazine featured *The Dying Gladiator* (see Figure 4). The descriptive comments that open the article, drawn from Winckelmann, emphasize the extent to which the sculpture represents not simply an aesthetic object, but the body of a labourer, a “man of toil,” in a state of agony. What follows is a summary of the debates about the origin and identity of the figure. Certainly, the “attitude, the armour, the general character [...], and the deep expression of pain” suggest that the “whole composition may very possibly be intended to represent the death of one of those wretched beings, who were compelled to slaughter each other for the amusement of the Roman capital.”²³ The article includes the celebrated lines from Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* noted above.

Much like Ducrow’s entertaining statuary, the inclusion of illustrated works of art – normally the preserve of an educated elite – in such popular periodicals as *The Penny Magazine* disseminated knowledge of Classical artworks and brought certain kinds of aesthetic encounter to a wider audience. They also served, as Patricia Anderson has argued, to reinforce a particular set of “civilizing values,” in this case the figure’s manly stoicism and restraint.²⁴ While Classical material culture could thus be leveraged for socially improving purposes in the (contemporary) world of the 1830s (and thus made new, or ‘old-new,’ again), the reception and re-mediation of the statue of the *Dying Gaul* remained very attentive to its peculiar aesthetic status as a representation not only of a man at the end of life, but of a sculpture in formation, in so far as ‘death’ could be thus contained and expressed, in a material embodiment of the tension between vitality and stasis – the very tension that made all manner of mimo-plastic art forms so compelling in the first instance. Literary re-mediations of the statue represent an additional turn of the screw, so to speak, fixing in evocative (and often self-conscious) narrative formulations that moment of tension and transition.

III

Artworks from Greek and Roman antiquity were frequently the subject of literary texts in the period, and in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge ran annual poetry competitions that often

²² *The Penny Magazine*, Vol. 1 (3 November 1832): 305.

²³ *The Penny Magazine*, Vol. 2 (12 January 1833): 9.

²⁴ Patricia J. Anderson, “Civilizing the Viewer: Images of Social Virtue in English Popular Magazines, 1830-1860,” *Visual Resources* 8, no. 2 (January 1991): 109-11.

featured Classical subjects. This attention is thought to have fuelled a widespread fashion for ekphrastic poetry addressing Classical sculpture,²⁵ which also reflects the excitement generated by contemporary archaeological discoveries, widely mediated in print culture, as well as geo-political realities (consider for instance the English visitors flocking to the Louvre in 1802-1803, during the short-lived Peace of Amiens, to see first-hand the extraordinary collection of artworks and antiquities appropriated by Napoleon, among them the *Dying Gladiator* – a highly symbolic trophy of war if ever there was one). According to Kasahara Yorimichi, the statue of the *Dying Gladiator* was one of the most popular themes for poems in the early nineteenth century.²⁶ It was, for instance, the chosen subject for the Newdigate Prize at Oxford in 1810, the same year that the statue was featured in *The Universal Magazine*, which ran a series of detailed articles covering 128 of the works of art in the “Museum of Napoleon” in Paris.²⁷

The winning entry for that year’s competition, by George Robert Chinnery, focuses firmly on the gladiator’s plight as he confronts the inevitability of his death. A fixation on his final moments is articulated through a set of paradoxes, such as the persistence of the “unconquer’d mind” in the mortally wounded body, and culminates in an attenuated conflict between proud resistance and defeat, and in an (imagined) active embrace of death that requires everything he has of life:

He will not sink, but plunge into the grave,
Exhaust his mighty heart in one last sigh.
And rally life’s whole energy – to die!²⁸

Another poem, published privately that same year, pays equally pointed attention to the inexorable contradictions of the gladiator’s last moments. It stresses the gladiator’s noble resistance, in the face of defeat, against the ignobility of death and its attack on living form. At the heart of the poem, however, are observations

²⁵ See Grant Scott, “The Fragile Image: Felicia Hemans and Romantic Ekphrasis,” in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (London: Palgrave, 2001), 38.

²⁶ Yorimichi Kasahara, “Byron’s Dying Gladiator in Context,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 40, no. 1 (2009): 44.

²⁷ See Kasahara, “Byron’s Dying Gladiator,” 46.

²⁸ George Robert Chinnery, “The Statue of the Dying Gladiator,” in *Oxford Prize Poems: Being a Collection of Such English Poems as Have at Various Times Obtained Prizes in the University of Oxford* (Oxford: J.H. Parker, J. Vincent, and H. Slatter, 1834), 132. The poem also appeared (after its public recitation) in periodicals such as *The Gentleman’s Magazine* and *The Lady’s Monthly Museum*.

about the “wondrous art” of sculpture as a medium – “Sculpture! ... / Who from the rude rock call’st the perfect form, / Can’st soften stone, and flinty marble warm” – that address the statue in terms at once specific and general. It is through the animating powers of sculpture’s “magic chisel” that the Dying Gladiator “lives:” his inner life, his passions, “swell expressive in the living stone” as his very life blood ebbs away.²⁹

It was Chinnery’s poem that provided, as Scott suggests, the model for Felicia Hemans’s poem on the same theme, though evidently there are a number of shared tropes in play across the poems that address the *Dying Gladiator*.³⁰ Like Chinnery, she attends closely to the plight of the figure, and the extent to which “vanquish’d valor soars above his fate!” However, in keeping with the previous example, her attention is directed to the significance of the gladiator *as a statue*, and the first six lines also apostrophize the power of sculpture as an art form:

COMMANDING pow’r! whose hand with plastic art
Bids the rude stone to grace and being start;
Swell to the waving line the polish’d form,
And only want Promethean fire to warm;
Sculpture, exult! thy triumph proudly see,
The Roman slave immortalized by thee!³¹

The speaker surmises that had this slave’s “courage” and skill been put to better use, deployed for instance on “Glory’s laureate field,” his name would have lived on “in history’s brightest page.”³² Instead, we behold, through the efforts of “art majestic,” a representation of a dying hero, “alone / And *Mind’s bright grandeur* animates the stone.” The “Mind” in question is manifold, evidently a composite of the expressive features of the gladiator and their reception in a responsive beholder; hovering above it all, however, is the figure of the sculptor, personified as female, to whom the poet returns in the final lines. This is “Art, rejoicing in the work sublime, / Unhurt by all the sacrilege of time,” who “[s]miles o’er the marble, her divine control / Moulded to symmetry, and fir’d with soul!”³³

²⁹ *The Statue of the Dying Gladiator, a Poem [...] By a Non-Academic* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1810).

³⁰ Scott, “The Fragile Image,” 38.

³¹ Felicia Dorothea Browne [Felicia Hemans], “The Statue of the Dying Gladiator,” in *The Domestic Affections, and Other Poems* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1812), 136.

³² [Hemans], “The Dying Gladiator,” 137.

³³ [Hemans], “The Dying Gladiator,” 138.

The female artist here is a reflective projection of Hemans herself, who makes herself not merely a detached observer, but an active participant through her capacity for affective, imaginative sympathy. This is another way, perhaps, of "animating" statues, while contributing to wider debates about the comparative value of the "sister arts" of poetry and sculpture. Many other writers tried their hand at composing ekphrastic poems addressing this particular statue, but were largely superseded by the power and popularity of Byron's stanzas in Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, noted above. These lines were written after Napoleon's defeat in 1815, and the wholesale return, in 1816, of plundered artworks that prompted Hemans to publish (anonymously) *The Restoration of Works of Art to Italy*. By then, the restored statue of the *Dying Gladiator* was back on display at the Capitoline Museum in Rome, where Byron would see it in May of 1817.

From the circus ring to the pages of a book, these diverse encounters with the *Dying Gladiator* reflect widespread efforts – in literature, material and visual culture – to re-animate the Classical body, leveraging experiences of astonishment predicated on playful transitions between past and present, presence and absence, vital and inert, living and dying. As Goethe argues in the *Laocoön* essay, transitional moments are crucially important for the plastic arts in general: "The most sublime expression of pathos which art can achieve is to be found in the transition from one condition to another."³⁴ The instances discussed here, in addition to modelling, and performing, both the limits and potentialities of sculpture as a practice and a form, necessitate if not implicate a responsive audience; the movements of the viewer, and the imaginative participation of both speaker and reader, are key factors in bringing inert matter to life, while promoting a more intimate, and direct, relationship to the art of antiquity. This is fully in keeping with eighteenth-century aesthetic theory that began increasingly to emphasize the active participation of the beholder, in which the stimulation of the imagination – facilitated by the torchlight visit, as much as Ducrow's spectacular attitudes – played an important role.³⁵ Questions of connoisseurship and class inevitably inform these various modes of re-mediating or galvanizing the past for the delectation of the present (complete with a pleasing *frisson*), that make the "shock of the old" emphatically new. In each case, however, the spectacle of a statue, poised as it were *on the brink*, never ceased to amaze.³⁶

³⁴ Goethe, "On the Laocoon Group," 20.

³⁵ See Mattos, "The Torchlight Visit," 140. Mattos notes the influence here of Winckelmann's "high emotional response," in his detailed descriptions of the work of antiquity, as a "model of aesthetic fulfilment for the next generation of art lovers" (147).

³⁶ I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) in the completion of this essay.

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