



HAL
open science

Between the Olympian and the Dionysian: Pagan Energy in Paintings by Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada

► **To cite this version:**

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada. Between the Olympian and the Dionysian: Pagan Energy in Paintings by Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens, 2014, Paganism in Late Victorian Britain, 80 Automne, 10.4000/cve.1507 . hal-02092928

HAL Id: hal-02092928

<https://hal-normandie-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02092928>

Submitted on 8 Apr 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Between the Olympian and the Dionysian: Pagan Energy in Paintings by Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada

The return to Antiquity in British painting from the late 1860s onward is diverse and difficult to categorize. The collector and art historian Christopher Wood refers to these artists as ‘Classical Painters’, ‘Olympians’ or ‘Parnassians’ on account of their academic style and training.¹ Art historians such as Elizabeth Prettejohn now include some of these painters—mostly Frederic Leighton, Albert Moore, or Simeon Solomon—among the broader Aesthetic or ‘Art for Art Sake’ Movement. Other artists resist such categorizations and are closer to the historical *genre* painting practised by the contemporary French ‘*Néo-grec*’ painters, such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), whom Forbes refers to in his 1973 catalogue as the painter of ‘Victorians in togas’. The term ‘Olympians’, however, is problematic as it evacuates the ambivalent elements of their representations of Antiquity, such as the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in a context of diverging approaches to ancient Greece. The pictorial representations of Greco-Roman Antiquity then in vogue in Britain indeed articulate conflicting art-historical, aesthetic, political and anthropological discourses. This paper aims at concentrating on a few paintings of antique rituals by Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) and Lawrence Alma-Tadema to show that they are indeed paradigmatic of the polarity between the idealized and sanitized vision of Antiquity as propounded by the neo-Winckelmannian tradition and the more innovative explorations of paganism. Moreover, such polarity is reflected in the reception of that painting by the contemporary books, periodicals and specialized journals then massively published, which provide interesting verbalisations of contemporary fantasies or anxieties.

In a period of cross-fertilization between literature, archaeology and anthropology, Friedrich Nietzsche’s formulation of the opposition between Olympian mythology and the Dionysian Mysteries in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) not only came to modify contemporary mythography but also had a profound influence on European literature and the visual arts. Nietzsche’s impact on British classical studies and intellectual debates was strong—especially as classicists such as Walter Pater had been influenced by the same German sources.² In his review “Winckelmann” of 1867 and in the essays on Greek religion and sculpture written in

¹ See WOOD, 15-32.

² See INMAN on Pater’s German sources.

the 1870s-1880s and posthumously collected in the volume *Greek Studies* of 1895, Pater, among other ideas, questions the Winckemannian notion of the Greek ideal and acknowledged the Dionysian and the chthonian elements of ancient rituals and myths in his essays on Greek culture. Edward B. Tylor, envisioned culture in its ethnographic and anthropological aspects, focusing on animism and primitive rites in his book *Primitive Culture* of 1871—precisely at the time when Matthew Arnold defined Hellenic culture as an idealist and prescriptive model in his *Culture and Anarchy* of 1869. Tylor influenced the anthropologist Andrew Lang, who also stressed the irrational and wild elements of Greek myths and rituals in his *Custom and Myth*, published in 1884, and in *Myth and Religion* of 1887.

The painters who looked back to Antiquity as a formal and intellectual model were well aware that Greece could no longer be reduced to the serene and immaculate perfection of Hellenism as propounded by Arnold. Some of them depicted ancient Greek and Roman rituals in a way that showed their awareness of the licentious, irrational or even violent character. The *Addresses* Frederic Leighton delivered to the students of the Royal Academy between 1879 and 1893 were influenced by his reading of Pater's texts on Greek culture. When examining the relation of religion to art in his 1881 address, Leighton claims that the 'heathen world' was characterised by a separation between an *élite* religion that was 'purer' and 'more abstract', and a religion for the masses, which he describes as a more joyful and more boisterous faith. To him, it is this 'popular religion of Greece' that influenced art: the gods both embody 'that exuberant sense of life' and reflect an 'overmastering love of Beauty' (Leighton 52-3). These two polarities overlap the tension between, one the one hand, the serene and pure Greek ideal of Beauty as constructed by the neo-Winckelmannian academic tradition, and, one the other hand, the livelier but also darker conception of Greek culture which Pater examines in his essays. Leighton actually had a copy of his *Greek Studies* when he made his last trip to Tangiers in 1895 (Ormond 141). As to Alma-Tadema, Swanson regularly mentions his interest in Pater and Swinburne. He borrowed from Pater (Swanson, 40-1) and 'shared his fascination with ritual' (Lippincott 19). Alma-Tadema also copied lines from Swinburne's poems on the frames of some of his paintings or in the catalogues of the works he exhibited³. Swinburne's poems, mostly his *Poems and Ballads* of 1866, revelled on

³ For example, four lines of Swinburne's 'Dedication' are inscribed on the frame of the painting *Spring* (1894). Besides, the sales catalogue of the late painter's belongings mentions an edition of Swinburne's *Poems before Sunrise*. See LIPPINCOTT 14, BARROW 152.

wilder and sometimes more subversive aspects of Greek religion and rites, such as the Eleusinian mysteries and ‘Priapic orgies’ (Louis 29).

Leighton and Alma-Tadema both in their particular way exemplify the desire to unearth the traces of pagan erotic energy in Greek culture in a context when authors turned to the study of the past while envisaging its potential relevance to contemporary man—an undertaking that is at the core of Walter Pater’s intellectual project. Pater interrogates the validity of the ‘Greek spirit’ for modern man while precisely refashioning that concept. When describing the Mona Lisa, Pater favouringly refers to ‘the animalism of Greece’ (Pater 1980, 98) and in ‘Winckelmann’, he shows his fascination for the two poles he discerns in Greek culture: on the one hand, the wild paganism of Dionysian and Eleusinian worships, embodied by ambiguous, androgynous and awful gods; on the other hand, the serene and ideal type of beauty embodied by the Venus of Milo and the sculpted male athlete, whom he describes as expressionless and self-enclosed. This serene ideal finds visual equivalents in Leighton’s representations of neoclassical figures inspired by Greek statuary (for example his *Icarus and Daedalus* of 1869). But Leighton was also attracted to more disorderly rites. Notwithstanding the academic treatment, his painting deals with explorations of buried desires and archaic impulses. Likewise, Alma-Tadema’s depictions of Bacchanals point to a more complicated vision of the human psyche, despite the apparent propriety and blitheness of his figures. What is at stake in some of Leighton’s and Alma-Tadema’s works, then, is the investment of the libidinal in figures inspired by classical models. The way these painters of Antiquity represent the human body reflect those ‘psychosexual concerns peculiar to the period’ which Bullen discerns in the artistic productions of the Pre-Raphaelites and in their reception in periodical criticism (Bullen 2). Many of Leighton’s paintings of Antiquity are founded on an academic and aesthetic discourse that posits the centrality of the Greek ideal, but they also express ‘psychosexual’ fantasies that play on Antique motifs of pagan energy—a conflation of opposing forces that contemporary critical commentaries on that painting do reflect.

The paradoxes of Leighton’s Greek ideal

Leighton’s paintings are characterized by a duality—both formal and thematic—between order and disorder, or movement and rest. His writings testify to his questionings about the self as well as to his concerns that representing the Antique should necessarily imply the construction of a pure and serene ideal. He was in fact convinced that contemporary art should reflect a more ‘romantic’ (Leighton’s term) complexity. Leonée and Richard Ormond quote excerpts from his notebooks to claim that he refused to ‘to treat a Greek subject as a

Greek would have treated it—any such attempt dishonest or self-deceiving—dead & unreal—without real appeal to complex modern mind’ (Ormond 84). To him indeed, Hellenism ‘never can be a complete expression of the complexities of a northern or modern mind’ (Ormond 85). A letter from Naples dated October 1895 shows that his reading of Nordau’s *Degeneracy* gave him occasions to ponder on one such ‘complexity’. He first approvingly evokes Nordau’s ‘dissecting’ of Nietzsche, but then envisages the anguishing possibility that sexual impulses might constantly be operating in art—an idea he immediately refutes:

What, for instance, can we say of a man who asserts, as a truism, that æsthetic and *sexual* (!) feelings (not sensual but ‘*geschlechtlich*’) are not merely akin but actually cover one another to a very large extent! I doubt whether there is anything chaster than the sense of beauty in abstract form; he has no inkling of this. (Rhys 326)

These comments are a clear reference to his privileged subject of the nude, which was often legitimized by such references to ‘abstractness’. He finally repudiates Nordau’s fixation: ‘he is himself in some measure a *cryptodegenerate*; degeneracy is a *Zwangsvorstellung* with him, he sees it everywhere’ (Rhys 326). The use of the German equivalent of the word ‘obsession’, later a favourite of Freud’s, as well as the numerous italics and exclamation marks, attest to the problematic significance of this topic to Leighton, who seems only too eager to evacuate the strong association between sexuality and art that Nordau establishes. Leighton’s final words also show his awareness of a more complex approach of the self: ‘that little (or large) spice of something which *might* be madness if there was much more of it, has given to us poor mortals some of our keenest delights.’ (Rhys 327) Leighton seems to adhere to a notion of the fissured self that would have attracted someone like Walter Pater, who praised Mona Lisa’s ‘beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed’ (Pater 1980, 98).

All in all, erotic fantasy is a *Zwangsvorstellung* that certainly haunts Leighton’s art, despite his recurrent claims that the painters who revived the classic forms were stirred by noble aspirations—exactly as the critics defended his art by alluding to his ‘Greek ideal’ and to his ‘pure’ and ‘noble’ intentions (to take up terms that recur in the periodical reviews of his paintings). His biographer and pupil Barrington is a case in point:

Beauty of every kind played on a very sensitive instrument, when it made an appeal to his nature, giving him very positive joy: no complication of subtle interest beyond the actual influence being required before a responding echo was sounded, because so pure and innocent was this joy he had in the charm of beauty;—so also attendant on his personal influence, there was no power

of mesmerism, nor of the black arts. In every direction it was healthy and bracing. Even a Nordau could have discovered no remotest taint of the degenerate! (Barrington 30)

Such claims are highly emblematic of latent anxieties about any trends in his art that might not be 'healthy'. Yet they should not blind us to other forces at work in his art. In *The Syracusan Bride*⁴, for example, pagan energy counterpoints stasis, and this is expressed through the use of the motif of the bacchante. Leighton was inspired by an extract from Theocritus's *Idylls*, which the anonymous critic of *The Athenaeum*, most presumably F. G. Stephens, sums up in an article of March 1866. But Stephens also touches on the tension between animal energy and human repose which is at play in the painting:

[T]he practice of the Syracusan virgins, when about to enter the marriage state, was to go in procession to the Temple of Diana in their city, and be preceded by ceremonial chanters, with music and flowers, and accompanied by tame tigers, leopards and the like beasts. This custom points, of course, to the Hellenic character of the people, and reflects in its peculiar accompanying animals an oriental influence, such as has always been perceptible in the great Sicilian cities. (*Athenaeum* 602)

Stephens refers to the conjunction of the Hellenic and the oriental, or Asiatic, in the ritual, which overlaps the Dorian/Apollonian and Ionian/ Dionysian polarity that Pater examines in many of his essays on Plato or on Greek culture. In 'The Marbles of Aegina', first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in April 1880 and then reprinted in *Greek Studies*, Pater describes the Dorian trend as a centripetal force that denotes the 'love of order', 'sanity', 'simplification', 'abstractness', and 'calm'; he opposes this to the centrifugal trend in Greek culture, which denotes disorder, the 'endless play of undirected imagination', and 'individualism' and comes from the 'Asiatic tradition' (Pater 1910, 252-3).

Leighton's canvas is based on symmetries and on an orderly, frieze-like composition: the vertical lines of the trees and figures match the horizontal lines of the theatrical platform. Yet, the oblique and/or undulating lines of the beasts and drapery offset the general sense of order. The women march in line but their heads and bodies adopt varied positions, and so the eye follows a progression from unruliness to near-rigidity—from the movements animating the beasts and the women who try to control them to the right, to the static order of the women on

⁴ Frederic Leighton, *The Syracusan Bride leading Wild Animals in Procession to the Temple of Diana*, 1865-6, oil on canvas, 133.5 x 424.3 cm, private collection. See the image online: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/frederic-leighton/the-syracusan-bride> (all images accessed July 2014).

the left, who are unaccompanied by cats. It is as if the progressive domestication of the wild beasts paralleled the gradual taming of the women. Indeed, the figure on the far right wears a dress that shows parts of her body (her arms and one leg), and her pose is modelled on the iconographical motif of the bacchante which appears in numerous reliefs and vases that Leighton could see for example in the Louvre or the British Museum. Conversely, the linear folds and raised arms of the priestess at the other end parallel the lines of the columns. There is a sense of gradual composure and stiffness. Some of the women on the left are wearing hoods, their mantles look heavier, and they are stiffer. The bride in the middle has managed to completely domesticate the lioness, whose head adorned with flower wreaths bends down in obedience. This woman contrasts with the animated figure to the right, whose posture evokes the trope of the *nympha* who is central to Aby Warburg's 1893 Florentine essays—the iconographic figure of pagan energy and movement whom Renaissance painters, such as Botticelli, conflated with Christian figures. The procession proceeds to enter the temple of Diana—the virgin goddess whose cropped statue is visible above the group of flower bearers. Tigers and panthers have traditionally been associated with animal drives, and so their proximity to women is often meant to evoke and at the same time relocate sexual impulses. Here, an intriguing effect is created: only one woman—modelled on the actress Dorothy Dene—looks directly at the spectator, and she is mirrored by the second tiger, who also turns to the onlookers, thus creating an analogy between them.

When reviewing the painting in 1866, the journalist of the *Art Journal* refers to Una, a character in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* whose innocence saves her from a lion's mouth. This seems to reinforce the contrast between virginity (as symbolized by Diana), married chastity and animal energy. A tension indeed settles between 'the powers of nature, which here triumph round about the altar' (*Art Journal* 1866, 163), and the idealized treatment:

But above all, this picture is dedicated to beauty—in thought, in form, and in colour. Accordingly the treatment is ideal rather than literal and individual. Indeed the figures are generalised[.] (*Art Journal* 1866, 164)

The painting seems to establish a clear-cut contrast between purity and order on the one hand, and unruliness and animalism on the other hand. However, such neat oppositions and their resolution may only be superficial. Indeed, the journalist of *The Athenaeum* describes the three brides (the one in the middle and the two just behind her) in terms that point to ardour: 'The faces of the damsels are rich in roseate bloom; all the glow of Hymen is in their eyes;

more than any of the others their forms display a conscious luxury and perfected charm' (*Athenaeum* 602). The passage into married life provokes a blush—a language of the skin denoting strong emotion and affect—which contrasts with the stiffness and decorum of the three central statuesque women. Furthermore, this sanguine vocabulary conflicts with the discourse of 'ideal' beauty and pure Hellenic forms. In the preface to Rhys's book, for example, F. G. Stephens refers to the painter's general propensity to smooth out any hints of energy:

All those accomplishments, and the indomitable industry they affirm, were strengthened, chastened, and stiffened in their effect by their possessor's unwavering love for his ideal, which is essentially Greek of a pure type and strain. [...] In every one of [his pictures] the Greekish strain and chastity are manifest, nay, in the very style, type and casting of the drapery studies[.] (Rhys xviii)

Greek here means the Apollonian tendency, which excludes any Dionysian impulse. This is also the way Rhys interprets the painting:

The Syracusean bride leads a lioness, and these are followed by a train of maidens and wild beasts, the last reduced to a pictorial seemliness and decorative calm, very fortunate under the circumstances. (Rhys 14)

Unruliness gives way to serenity and order, as fits a picture of domestication—not only of the animals. Through that displacement of the marriageable women's sexual impulses onto the tamed animals, Leighton provides a representation that is more problematic than it appears. Besides, the female narrator of Theocritus's second *Idyll* describes the violent fever that seizes her after she has seen a beautiful youth on the way back from the procession. This text, then, speaks of desire rather than of conjugal peace.

Leighton later turned to a contemporary subject which contains an interesting eruption of the Dionysian. In his picture *Weaving the Wreath*⁵, Leighton stages a young woman sitting in front of a bas-relief that looks like those represented in Alma-Tadema's pictures: the relief describes a Bacchanalian group consisting of a male nude, a fully draped female figure and a partially nude one. This serene and decorous scene of a beautiful 'Aesthetic' young woman opens up ambiguities. There is yet another contrast between immobility and movement—

⁵ Frederic Leighton, *Weaving the Wreath*, 1872, oil on canvas, 63.7 x 59.9 cm, Sudley House, National Museums Liverpool. See online: http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/sudley/collections/drawingroom/weaving_wreath_leighton.aspx

between the girl's modern gown and serene activity, and the unruly scene behind her. The laurel bough she holds visually echoes the thyrsus and drapery of the sculpted male figure, thus creating an association between them. It is as if an imaginative link could be established between the girl's thoughts or inner movements, and the disorder at work within the solid stone—as if the relief was a kind of concrete projection of the girl's hidden desires and fantasies. Leighton, who was aware of the hiatus between the notion of the Hellenic restraint and the idea of Romantic agitation, is playing on a contrast between outer order and inner movement—between a statue-like female figure, and elements that point to inner agitation or psychological tension. Animals, birds, objects or props are sometimes endowed with a sexual charge in his work, and here, the frozen frieze of a bacchanalian riot brings in the pagan world and what is constructed as its sensual energy.

The Bacchanals of Alma-Tadema

Displacing the erotic charge or the Dionysian energy onto a work of art—most often a relief or a vase—was a favourite device of Alma-Tadema's. The bacchante in particular holds an erotic and subversive potential both as form and theme: she is a figure of movement and energy, and she crystallizes sexual fantasy and bodily transgression. This figure also enables him to explore intricate notions of interiority as she exemplifies those instances when the coherent boundaries of the rational self are shaken—dreamy mental states, artificially induced trances, the partial or total loss of consciousness, erotic abandonment, and the swift transition from social propriety to unruliness. What he seems to be exploring with that figure is the problematic relationship between the social being and her hidden desires.

Alma-Tadema often used archaeological objects to allude to unorthodox forms of pagan sexuality⁶, and he was attracted to the theme of the Bacchic. The sales catalogues of his belongings show that he owned a few Bacchanalian statues and numerous photographs of artworks representing such themes. He often shows ancient people engaged in dances that seem to radically disrupt the coherent identity of the self. Most of all, many of the maenads he represents are socialised beings who ritually lose control and become governed by Dionysian impulses, which testifies to his interest in the theme of the liminal space between respectability and unruliness. His maenads and bacchantes are indeed not staged in mythological scenes, unlike William Bouguereau's bacchantes, who are seen leaping among Dionysus's *thiasos* or toying with lewd fauns in the woods; nor are they poised on tearing

⁶ See in particular BARROW for studies of Alma-Tadema's use of ancient erotic artefacts.

Orpheus to pieces, as in Charles Gleyre's or Émile Lévy's paintings of savage maenads. Instead, Alma-Tadema's bacchantes engage in ritual activities that often take place in urban décors: they dance, go to processions, offer libations, participate in various rites, and have romantic yet suitable trysts; they also sleep after a night of rioting. The disposition of the bacchantes is extremely scenic, either well-orderedly grouped on a platform, as in *the Vintage Festival* (1871), scattered centre-stage, as in *The Women of Amphissa* (1881), or coming from the wings to the forestage, as in *A Dedication to Bacchus* (1889); sometimes Alma-Tadema plays on the stage-like depth of the canvas, placing a lone bacchante at the forefront and other celebrants in the background, as in *In the Temple* (1871) or in *The Way to the Temple* (1882). Dionysus is only symbolized by his attributes, such as wineskins, crowns of ivy leaves, thyrsi, or animal skins; and yet the Dionysian irrupts in an otherwise quite orderly city that bears analogies with the Victorian urban world: it brings along its animal energy (suggested by the leopard or tiger's skins), its dishevelled frenzy (the women's hair is let loose, unlike the neat hairstyles of respectable housewives and elegant matrons sometimes described in the paintings) and its emotional discharge (the women dance and have sometimes collapsed). But generally, the more disorderly stages of ritual Dionysian processions are expressed indirectly—mostly in the reliefs or sculptures depicted, which represent figures symbolizing sexual lust, such as cavorting satyrs or centaurs⁷. Pagan energy is also displaced onto a statuette representing Pan or Silenus⁸—gods that symbolize the sexual impulses—which recurs in various shapes: a tutelary god in a niche in *A Garden God* (1879), a statuette in the hand of a girl in *The Way to the Temple* (1882), and a bigger statue that presides over the initiation ritual in *A Dedication to Bacchus* (1889). This pagan idol, then, seems to confer its decidedly subversive symbolical associations to the whole scene.

Alma-Tadema's bacchanals contain a Dionysian and an erotic dimension, but most of his paintings stage ordinary citizens who are likely to suddenly forget orderly socialized behaviour and to fall into trance-like states. In *A Private Celebration* (1871), dancing turns into frenzy: the celebrants frantically leap into the air while one drunken man modelled on the antique figure of Silenus has passed out at the foot of a herm. The figures painted on the wall

⁷ See also BARROW for analyses of the sexualized reliefs and ex-votos of Alma-Tadema's Roman and Pompeian scenes.

⁸ A close examination of the photographs in the Lawrence Alma-Tadema' Collection at the University of Birmingham Library (also available as microfiches at the British Library) shows that this figure may have been inspired by Etruscan or Roman busts, stone masks or sarcophagi reliefs of satyrs, Silenus or Pan, such as those photographed in Florence, in the museum Bruschi (Cornetto), in the Etruscan necropolis of Cerveteri or on the Nerva Forum in Rome.

are clearly derived from a vase painted by the Dinos painter describing a bacchanal,⁹ which Alma-Tadema had copied. In *The Vintage Festival* (1871) and *A Dedication to Bacchus* (1889), the figures' attitudes and movements also imitate the arched backs, the heads thrown backward and the dancing steps of the maenads depicted in many Greek reliefs and vases. For example, Alma-Tadema regularly copied the maenads and fauns of a Dionysian procession on a bas-relief he could see in the British Museum,¹⁰ which he transposes onto the huge vase placed on the left hand-side in *The Vintage Festival*,¹¹ again playing on the suggestion of yet further disorderliness to come. The composition is based on horizontal planes, thus evoking a frieze. The members of the procession emerge from the wings and enter what looks like a theatrical stage. Alma-Tadema was sometimes commissioned to devise stage designs and décors for contemporary productions of historical plays¹². They dance and play instruments in a way that evokes both unruliness and order. The original sketch for the picture¹³ is in fact more animated than the finished picture, in which the members of the procession appear rather orderly and stiff. However, a closer look at the small figures in the background shows a crowd of more riotous celebrants. Besides, some of the mural paintings and archaeological artefacts allude to unorthodox sexual or ritual practices, such as the phallus carried by the priest—Alma-Tadema's private joke.

Some critics were receptive to Alma-Tadema's intimations of the porous border between propriety and unruliness. In his review of *The Vintage Festival*, William Bell Scott rejects the neoclassicism of French painters and applauds Alma-Tadema's successful reconstitutions of Rome, and this precisely because he depicted the latent savagery of that civilization:

How many of us in various ways have tried to recreate Roman times, and failed; how much French art has striven to reproduce the ways and aspects of the times of the Gracci, the Horatii, of Hannibal and of Cleopatra, and given

⁹ Dinos painter, *Maenads dancing around a pillar idol of Dionysos*, late 5th c. B.-C., red figure stamnos, 49 cm, National Archaeological Museum of Naples:

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/tools/pottery/painters/keypieces/redfigure/dinos.htm>

¹⁰ *A maenad and two satyrs in a Bacchic procession*, marble relief, c. 100 B. C., neo-Attic relief derived from Athenian prototypes of the 4th century BC, 1.21 x 0.99 m, British Museum:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=240351&objectId=460401&partId=1

¹¹ Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Vintage Festival*, 1870, oil on canvas, 77 x 177 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lawrence_Alma-Tadema_-_The_vintage_festival_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

¹² In 1879 for example, Henry Irving asked him to provide designs for his contemplated production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. See BECKER 258-9.

¹³ This sketch, drawn in pencil and black chalk, is reproduced in SWANSON 37.

the world only a sculpturesque schoolboy's interest in the past! And here it is at last: [...] here is the material luxury, the strength of enjoyment that identified itself with religion, the eclectic cosmopolitanism that assimilated the art and cultus of all the conquered world, the little biting taint of the savage showing through the highest civilization, all expressed beautifully in point of art, in the character of the actors and in the scene in which they act. (Scott 237)

In such representations of cosmopolitan and advanced societies, what interests Scott is the presence of pagan energy. He even wishes that the painter were wilder and more passionate:

These multitudes of figures are, however, of little importance, the excitement of the Bacchanals being judiciously kept out of view. Rather too much so, we think; the worship of the god whom Horace describes as binding the hair of his Thracian priestesses with vipers without hurt, and whose feet, as he returned from hell decorated with his golden horn, Cerberus licked with his triple tongue, was still in the days of Julius, which time Tadema's picture is intended to represent, more exuberant and demonstrative than here expressed. [...] The dramatic interest is in the *mise en scène*, not in the passion; nor is there a morsel of that vague and flaccid *poetic* element that deals with the barbaric pearl and gold of Pagan times in the mediaeval spirit of sentiment and sadness. (Scott 237)

Scott is aware of the theatrical dimension of the scene. But although the staging seems a bit too orderly for him, he is grateful to Alma-Tadema for having rejected a more sanitized view of paganism in favour of a livelier representation: the reference to the 'flaccid *poetic* element' is probably an allusion to Arnold's Hellenism, which Scott seems to discard. He is more in tune with Alma-Tadema's way of humorously playing with the codes of respectability and modesty, which indeed often verge on unsuitability and suggestiveness. The return to Antiquity was in fact a perfectly appropriate subject for the indirect treatment of salacious subjects.

The journalist of the *Art Journal* also evokes the pagan energy latent in the painting, but there is, again, a striking contrast between the scene represented and the journalist's expectations. The scene he describes is one of boisterousness—as 'a bevy of laughing dancing-girls follow, wildly beating their timbrels' (*Art Journal* 1871, 166). In the background, he spots 'more dancers and timbrel-players of both sexes, who seem decidedly inspired by the god they have come to honour', although the general feeling is rather one of restraint:

It is a picture, of which the title would lead one to imagine the portrayal of vine-clad slopes, with picturesque semi-nudities plucking the purple fruit, but in Mr. Tadema's 'Vintage' we have a very different scene. We see a

scholarly and graphic representation of heathen thanksgivings for a successful wine-making season. (*Art Journal* 1871, 166)

There is a difference between what the critic expects to find in representations of Antiquity—mostly daring images—and what is actually depicted. Still, what the journalist appreciates is Alma-Tadema's particular empathy with the ancient world, which does not derive from his erudition:

[...] the quality that throws into the background all others—is its intense realism, a realism that we cannot believe to be *merely* the result of the diligent perusal of the pages of Tacitus and other authors of Caesarean times, or researches in architectural and other antiquities; [...] the realistic feature of Mr. Tadema's art seems the outward and visible sign of a similarity in mind, a congeniality in spirit with those who led the taste of Imperial Rome. (*Art Journal* 1871, 166)

Alma-Tadema's art differs from history painting, which largely draws on literary sources, as he seems to express a kind of identification with the people of the past, despite their peculiar mores.

However, many critics disliked the painting's controlled theatricality and restrained energy. Atkinson criticised its stiff and static dimension: to him, it lacks movement and tragic intensity, and it differs not only from the Greek sources, such as those vases showing frantic maenads, but also from French contemporary treatments of the theme:

Naturally enough the paramount motive is to gain, though at the sacrifice of purism, utmost pictorial effect. Yet swift movement, or intensity of tragic action, from want of ready command of the figure, would seem beyond reach; thus the festival of 'The Vintage' falls short of a saturnalia; the intoxication of the vine does not convulse torsi or limbs with madness, as in classic reliefs; the dance is not wild in movement as the revel of Maenads by Gleyre; the bacchanalia has none of the abandonment of Couture's great picture, 'L'Orgie Romaine,' in the gallery of the Luxembourg. (Atkinson 402)

The British public was in fact not totally ready for the contorted and lascivious bodies of the nude antique women as depicted by Thomas Couture, Charles Gleyre, Jean-Léon Gérôme or William Bouguereau.

Many critics try hard to justify Alma-Tadema's noble intentions. When reviewing his painting *'He is coming'*¹⁴ (1875) for *The Academy*, the commentator is ecstatic over the ingenuous sunniness of the figure:

Nothing can exceed the transparency and splendour of the cheek and eye of this Bacchante, who does not belong to the early Maenadic period, but to the latest orderly Athenian festivals. She looks over a balcony seeing her friends assembling, with a bright holiday smile on her face. (*Academy* 131-2)

The critic seems eager to mention the orderliness of that festival. In the picture, Alma-Tadema depicts a young woman wearing a Bacchanalian wreath and hailing someone from her window. She is holding a basket that contains a curious, anamorphic animal skin. Her hair is not dishevelled yet, but again, the painter has suggested the next stage of the celebration in the sculpted relief behind her, which represents a scene of seduction, also known as *Alcibiades among the courtesans*, of which the painter had a photograph¹⁵. The fact that the work has different titles indicates this hesitation between a rather neutral fact ('he is coming') and the highly connoted allusion to 'a bacchante'.

Georg Ebers, Alma-Tadema's biographer, points to the sensual or erotic potential of the picture:

'He is coming' takes us to Rome again. The festival of Bacchus has begun, the shouts and the music of the flutes have already died away, and the lovely—we will say Lydia—clad in a rose-coloured robe, stands behind the curtain watching for her lover, who will clasp her in his arms, and inspired by the god whirl along in the throng of frantic revellers. (Ebers 71)

What is interesting is that Ebers, who also wrote historical novels, expresses in words what Alma-Tadema has represented in the relief behind the would-be bacchante: he envisions a temporal sequence which includes bacchic frenzy and a mildly erotic love-affair.

Another biographer, Percy Cross Standing, places the painting in a series that comprises a more provocative subject, *After the Dance* (1875). This work depicts a single reclining female

¹⁴ Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *'There he is!'* (*'He is coming!'* / *A bacchante*), 1875, oil on mahogany panel, 26.7 x 19.6 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool:

http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/sudley/collections/drawingroom/bacchante_alma-tadema.aspx

¹⁵ *Alcibiades and hetarae*, 1st cent. A.-D., marble relief, 45 x 53 cm, Archaeological Museum of Naples, see BECKER 191. <http://bcs.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fe/10/lion/Ima/Antique.jpg>

nude derived from a sketch of 1873-4, *Exhausted Maenides after the Dance*¹⁶. The woman is sleeping without any clothing on a leopard skin. A traditional thyrsus is placed next to her. The specific sources for Alma-Tadema's collapsed woman are the figure of a maenad on a Pompeian wall painting¹⁷ and the sculpture of the *Sleeping Ariadne* in the Vatican¹⁸. According to Standing, the woman's exhausted state results from the bacchante's former activities:

‘He is Coming’ and ‘After the Dance’ are in some sense sequels to one another. In the first, a rose-clad girl waits impatiently for her lover to take her to the feast—the festival of Bacchus; while in the second the dance is ended and the tired Bacchante rests her weary limbs on a wild beast's skin. (Standing 57)

Standing's novelistic approach to the painting is manifest as he provides a narrative sequence between paintings that were not conceived as such originally.

Such commentaries show the links between such painting and contemporary historical novels situated in ancient Rome, Pompeii or Athens, such as Walter Savage Landor's *Pericles and Aspasia* (1836) or Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Alma-Tadema is often considered as having provided visual equivalents of those literary works. Conversely, his paintings tell stories which the critics were only too eager to transcribe in their commentaries. Ebers, for example, evokes the mood of *After the Dance*. ‘The festival of Bacchus is over, the pious frenzy has ended, and the weary Bacchante stretches her beautiful limbs on a wild beast's skin to rest.’ (Ebers 73). Such mildly erotic descriptions perfectly fit Alma-Tadema's titillating representations, which, however, differ from more unsettling Dionysian rites. Even in Greek times, the female followers of Dionysus inspired contradictory emotions, such as piety and fear. Euripides, in *The Bacchae*, evokes peaceful, singing women who suddenly turn wild, tear animals apart and kill Pentheus. Pater reviewed that play, and he was particularly attracted to what he saw as the inherent ambivalence of both Greek gods—especially Dionysus—and men, who are together benevolent and savage. Yet, many critics

¹⁶ Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Exhausted Maenides*, c. 1873, oil on canvas, 59.1 x 132 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. The images are reproduced in an article published by the Van Gogh Museum Journal:

http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_van012199601_01/_van012199601_01_0013.php

¹⁷ *Sleeping Maenad*, Pompeian fresco from the House of the Citharist, 1st B. C., Archaeological Museum, Naples.

¹⁸ *Sleeping Ariadne*, 100 A.D., Roman copy after a model by the Pergamon school, early 2d c. B. C., marble, Vatican Museums, gallery of statues, Rome.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Ariadne#mediaviewer/File:Sleeping_Ariadne_2.jpg

were appalled by what they saw as gross representations of unsavoury worships. To Atkinson, the picture 'After the Dance' offers an impure vision of Greece:

Greek art and its modern derivatives are pure,—what is gross in the actual model has been eliminated; and the high type which nature always aims at in the race, but often misses in the individual, is so exalted that the spectator stands awed in the presence of supreme beauty. With no such feelings of reverence for ideal creations can we look on the nude girl outstretched[.] (Atkinson 404)

To him, proper representations of the Antique would imply idealisation. But the eroticism of the painting as well as the importance of detail are 'gross'. Atkinson was manifestly aware of the erotic potential of the abandoned and intoxicated bacchante, who functions as an eroticized object¹⁹.

As his biographers have shown, Alma-Tadema was keen on establishing analogies between ancient and contemporary people. He even represented himself in several of his paintings, disguised as a Roman citizen for example. For Zimmern, Alma-Tadema was 'convinced that these dead-and-gone folk were in all fundamental essentials like to ourselves, that they lived, loved, joked and chattered just as we do' (Zimmern 40). These ancient people are therefore not constructed as 'others' safely placed in a far-distant world. As a result, the painter offers a highly ironical and unfamiliar mirror to his contemporaries in those Bacchanalian scenes in which the protagonists experience ritualised trances or erotic languor.

The different modes of reception of Alma-Tadema's paintings are emblematic of the conflicting constructions of Antiquity at the time. Not only do these paintings contribute to redefine the aesthetic norm of the 'classic ideal' but they also reverberate concerns about interiority and social identity. They articulate recent approaches to Greek and Roman cultures in their particular medium and with their particular rules of representation, and they also reflect personal as well as contemporary concerns about the self. They respond to the aesthetic and artistic debates of their times, when categories such as 'classicism', 'genre' and 'Aestheticism' were conflated. According to Leighton and Alma-Tadema, beauty was in itself a moral force, which to them had the power to improve people and society. Leighton constantly referred to that ideal in his lectures to his students. And most critics of the times actually took up this rhetoric of the mission of art—i.e., to create beauty and to elevate the spectator. However, the concerns and ambivalence Leighton expressed in his private writings

¹⁹ The motif of the exhausted maenads recurs in *The Women of Amphissa* (1889).

show that such discourse is ridden with tension. Beyond his poetical and sensuous evocations of a bygone age of beauty peopled by smooth and wax-like women, Antiquity provides Leighton with alternative models of identity. These painters use Greek myths to refer to structures of the psyche and to explore the problematic relationship between the self and sexuality. These representations of Antiquity are highly ambivalent: they reinforce dominant hierarchies by drawing boundaries between savagery and civilisation, impulsiveness and control—as well as between ‘male’ and ‘female’ behaviours; but they also point to the instability of such borderlines—an idea which is reinforced by Alma-Tadema tongue-in-cheek generalized analogies between the mores of ancient people and those of his contemporaries. Antiquity enables artists to address questions that were problematic in the period: sexuality, the disorder of the senses, trance-like states, intoxication, archaic impulses, the unrepressed expression of the body through dancing or rituals, and the possibility of a secret self more or less repressed beneath the visible one. The Winckelmannian art historical discourses on Hellenic grandeur and noble classic forms are counteracted by modern preoccupations for a more complex consciousness and body. In a way, paganism has contaminated the *Beau ideal*. Beyond the conventional codes of representation of the body—classic drapery or postures derived from antique archaeological artefacts—these paintings construct a subtle yet transgressive *ars erotica*. The ‘classical’ movement that took place in painting, therefore, did not only aspire to the quest for an ideal world; it was also a site for the Victorian repressed to return. In their interest in both Greek *ascêsis* and unbridled paganism, these painters reflect the contemporary revisiting of the canon of Antiquity that affected other fields of intellectual activity. All in all, Alma-Tadema’s paintings are pictorial preludes to the later Symbolist or *Art Nouveau* afternoons of fauns and dancing maenads as well as of the liberating Dionysian dances of Isadora Duncan, whom he led to study the Greek vases of the British Museum. The British pictorial revival of Antiquity, therefore, is close to European Symbolism, albeit in a more academic and less audacious mode. Both the British ‘classical’ painters and the late-nineteenth-century Symbolists turned to antique myths, subjects and forms to explore complex models of identity.

Bibliographie

[ANON.]. ‘Royal Academy’. *Athenaeum* 2019 (May 5 1866): 602-3.

[ANON.]. ‘The Royal Academy’. *Art Journal* n.s. vol. V, (June 1 1866): 161-72.

[ANON.]. ‘Alma Tadema’s “Vintage”’. *Art Journal* n.s. vol. X (May 1 1871): 166.

[ANON.]. ‘Note on Alma-Tadema’s *Bacchante*’. *Academy* vol. 13 (Feb. 9 1878): 131.

- ATKINSON, J. B. 'Contemporary Art—poetic and positive: Rossetti and Tadema—Linnell and Lawson'. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 133 (March 1883): 392-411.
- BARRINGER, Tim, & PRETTEJOHN Elizabeth, eds. *Frederic Leighton : Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999.
- BARRINGTON, Russell. *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*. London: G. Allen, 1906.
- BARROW, Rosemary J. *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. London: Phaidon, 2001.
- BECKER, Edwin, EDWARD MORRIS, Elizabeth PRETTEJOHN, & Julian TREUHERZ, eds. *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. Exhibition catalogue, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, & Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 1996.
- BULLEN, Barrie. *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- EBERS, Georg. *Lorenz Alma-Tadema: His Life and Works* (trans. Mary J. Safford). New York: William S. Gottsbergen, 1886.
- FORBES, Christopher. *Victorians in togas: paintings by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema from the collection of Allen Funt*. New York: Metropolitan museum of art, 1973.
- INMAN, B. A. *Walter Pater and his Reading: A Bibliography of his Library Borrowings and Literary References 1858-73*. New York; London: Garland, 1981.
- Walter Pater and his Reading 1878-94, with a Bibliography of his Borrowings*. New York; London: Garland, 1990.
- LEIGHTON, Frederic. *Addresses to the Students of the Royal Academy*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1896.
- LIPPINCOTT, Louise. *Alma-Tadema: 'Spring'*. Malibu: California, Getty Museum Studies on Art, 1990.
- LOUIS, Margot K. "Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century Author". *Victorian Studies* 3, vol. 47 (Spring, 2005): 329-361.
- ORMOND, Leonée & Richard. *Lord Leighton*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1975.
- PATER, Walter. *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays*. London, MacMillan, 1910.
- . *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry [1877]*. Ed. D. HILL. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- PRETTEJOHN, Elizabeth. *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007.

- RHYS, Ernest. *Sir Frederic Leighton: an illustrated chronicle; with prefatory essay by F. G. Stephens*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1895.
- SCOTT, W. B. 'Alma-Tadema's *Vintage: Ancient Rome*'. *Academy* (May 1 1871): 237.
- STANDING, Percy Cross. *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. London: Cassell, 1905.
- SWANSON, Vern Grosvenor. *The biography and catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. London: Garton, Scholar press, 1990.
- WOOD, Christopher. *Olympian Dreamers: Victorian classical painters, 1860-1914*. London: Constable, 1983.
- ZIMMERN, Helen. *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. London: George Bell & Sons, Bell's Miniature Series of Painters, 1901.