WILLIAM STORY AND CLEOPATRA

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The investigator into the byways of art in America in the last century will early discover that the art of sculpture a hundred years ago was not primarily concerned with plastic form, or, as some have it, “the plastic interrelation of three-dimensional forms moving in space.” Sculpture, it seems, was, in that simpler day, but the handmaiden of the Muses; it was, essentially, a branch of polite literature—more particularly, dramatic literature. The sculptors were dramatists writing in stone, polishing an elegant passage here, engraving a telling phrase in marble fringes or tassels and calculatedly significant bijoux. Often when these subtleties would not suffice to tell the whole story they easily turned their hands, in an overflow of romantic inspiration, to poetry that complemented the statue with explanatory ode or sonnet.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this interdependence—might one indeed say confusion—of media, and certainly one of the most famous in its day, was that of the two Cleopatras by the poet sculptor William Wetmore Story. The poem “Cleopatra” first appeared in his volume Graffiti d’Italia in 1868. His marble Cleopatra was carved about 1858 and later re-issued in replica in 1869. The latter “edition” has been a part of the Museum’s collection of American sculpture since 1888.

It first appeared to our visitors as an important work of modern art, but now, with changed tastes, it looms up as a monumental milestone on a long road. It is also a monument, melancholy in a way, to the career of the artist.

Two biographies of William Wetmore Story have been written; in both of them it is to be noted, significantly, that the preponderant emphasis is on the artist’s coterie of brilliant literary friends and on his own literary works; his sculpture is treated as a sort of footnote, an incidental bit of embellishment that, almost by chance, happened to be “published” in marble.

For William Story life held out every promise of happiness and fulfillment. To his contemporaries he seemed richly endowed almost beyond belief. He was brilliant, witty, versatile, wealthy, of good family, a successful lawyer, author, poet, and—as some believed—a sculptor. Added to all this was his impeccable Boston Brahmin background. He was born in Salem in 1819 and at the age of ten was taken to live in Cambridge, where his father, then an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, was a founder of, and teacher in, the Harvard Law School.

Among the intimate friends of William Story’s childhood and youth were James Russell Lowell, Charles Sumner, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and many others who were later to become nationally known figures. In 1838 Story graduated from Harvard, and on his graduation from the Law School in 1840 he entered the Boston law firm of Hillard and Sumner. During his youth he had developed an interest in sculpture, painting, music, and poetry. When his father died in 1845 he was elected by the trustees of Mount Auburn Cemetery, solely on the strength of his kinship and his amateur interest in sculpture, to execute a life-size portrait statue of Judge Story, to be placed in the memorial chapel at the cemetery.

To prepare himself to carry out this commission he went to Italy in 1847 and from that time forth became more and more eager to give up the law entirely in favor of sculpture in spite of strong opposition from his family and friends—not to mention some very weighty misgivings on the part of his own New England conscience. But from the moment he set

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1 Mary E. Phillips, Reminiscences of William Wetmore Story (Chicago, 1897); Henry James, William Wetmore Story and His Friends (Boston, 1903).
foot on Italian soil he was a willing captive to its spell, and a career as a sculptor seemed to offer legitimate reasons for not returning to Boston and the law. In 1856 he settled permanently in Rome, and he rapidly became one of the leading figures in the American colony. In 1877, when his fame was at its height, he made a triumphal tour of the United States. After he returned to Italy he was considered the outstanding American exponent of the arts. He died at Vallombrosa at his daughter's summer villa in 1895.

Among his contemporaries only Nathaniel Hawthorne, a fellow townsman from Story's native Salem, seems to have penetrated beneath the dashing pose and elegant social mask in which the artist poet appeared to his numerous admirers. Hawthorne's keen perception detected, under the glittering panoply of success and promise, the mark of bitter discontent and unhappiness. He says: "Mr. Story is the most variously accomplished and brilliant person, the fullest of social life and fire, whom I ever met; . . . he kept us amused and entertained the whole day long. . . . Still, though he bubbled and brimmed over with fun, he left the impression on me that . . . there is a pain and care, bred, it may be, out of the very richness of his gifts and abundance of his outward prosperity."

Curiously enough, almost every other mention of Story in the Note-Books is in connection with some morbid or violent fantasy related by Story. At one meeting they talk of the evil eye, at another Story dilates on the unluckiness of Friday; again, he proposes a fable on the Bluebeard theme. On a carriage drive through Rome he explains in detail some peculiarly horrible Italian burial customs. Later he tells a tale of a dead body reduced by some mysterious chemical process to a small stone set in a ring which poisons the life of the wearer—an idea for a story worthy of Hawthorne himself and one he admits he wished he had thought of first.

William Story's mother thought him an utter fool—and said as much—for abandoning an assuredly successful career as a Boston lawyer for the questionable pursuit of an art he was never able to master. Story's tragedy, which doubtless gave him the air of unhappiness that Hawthorne felt, was the early realization that he could never achieve his romantic ideal of being a great sculptor, though he could, and did, act the part to perfection. His tragedy was the tragedy of too easy success, too many kinds of success. Though many people believed him to be a genius and though he lived in a Roman palazzo for over forty years surrounded with all the necessary scenery and props appropriate to the role of a great artist, the man knew himself to be a gilded amateur. He was too intelligent not to realize that it takes more than praise and versatility to make a sculptor, and he knew that there was no substitute for his lack of early training.

This "pain and care," this underlying unhappiness, was the product of inner tensions and pressures. Under a surfeit of charming circumstances his spirit was chafed by the snaffle of frustration and indecision. This may account for his interest in the morbid and dramatic and for his unbridled activities in all directions.

Story found himself, as it were, suspended in a delectable Italian dream world, vacillating amid half careers, a victim of the meager, cold "art-life," or what passed for "art-life," in New England during his formative years. The scholastic atmosphere of Cambridge had burdened him with such a literary turn of mind that, even as a boy, he called the old swimming hole up the Charles River "the Bowre of Blisse" after Spenser. And so one discovers him well along in life, holding in his hands the fragments of three or four careers. Only one of these came anywhere near completion—the career he enjoyed most, naturally, the career that was the most perfect escape from reality—the career of being a Roman. From his love of all things Roman grew his book Roba di Roma, a collection of essays on the endlessly multiplied curios and treasures of old Rome. His other careers were all unfinished, unresolved to any satisfying completion. That of lawyer, the career for which he was best fitted by tradition and training, he gave up at its beginning. That of sculptor, for which, pos-
Cleopatra, by William Wetmore Story (1819-1895)
sibly, he was best suited temperamentally, he started with no preparation except a romantic desire that served but weakly in place of strong plastic perceptions and long labor. As poet and essayist he could do no more than follow in the footsteps of others.

But time has a way of covering most wounds: as his successes multiplied, the outward man gradually became more real than the inner. As his contemporaries read significance into the cold attitudes of his sculptural works, so did they find ineffable satisfaction in the pose of the actor artist who appeared to them in velvet beret and Norfolk jacket, amidst romantic Italian scenery, associating with the Browning's and other famous authors, Roman nobility, and good blue Boston blood.

Yet in spite of wide popular esteem, Henry James, writing only a few years after Story's death, says: "His imagination, of necessity, went in preference to the figure for which accessories were of the essence; which is doubtless a proof . . . that he was not with the last intensity a sculptor. Had he been this he would not, in all probability, have been also with such intensity . . . so many other things; a man of ideas—of other ideas, of other curiosities. . . . And we see that, if the approach to final form be through concentration, he was not concentrated. If sculpture be a thing of supreme intimacy he was not supremely intimate. He had, in a word, too many friends for any one of them ever to have succeeded in establishing absolute rights."

Story's imagination was, indeed, almost entirely literary, two-dimensional, and literal. His knowledge of anatomy was sufficient to enable him to write a book on the subject, but his plastic grasp of the sculptural problems involved was so feeble that he scarcely ever attempted a full-length standing figure, and he avoided the nude not, we suspect, because it was unsuited to the moral and sculptural needs of his time. Apparently very few of his effigies had sufficient vitality to stand upright—heavily draped against their self-generated cold, they recline in elegant chairs of classic design. All of them are well bolstered with poetic libretti and all sorts of legally provable facts and accessories before and after the facts, to explain their imprisonment in stone. A strain of operatic tragedy threads throughout his written works in poem, essay, and drama and in the violent scenes he tried so valiantly to portray in marble. As a sculptor his concerns were the concerns of a lawyer, and his works seem to constitute a chamber of horrors where all the criminals and madmen of history and legend pay the price of eternal immobility. Here is Cleopatra, the victim of violent passions, contemplating suicide; there is Medea, the unnatural mother, preparing to murder her children; here is Salome awaiting the beheading of her beloved; there is Saul in his madness; old Lear; and, last but not least, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, a subject chosen with incongruous felicity.

Today his writings, with, ironically enough, the possible exception of his legal works, are of value and interest only to the historian of manners who, like Henry James, seeks to evoke the ghosts of a forgotten and vanished society. Unquestionably his best works were the monumental biography of his father and the legal treatises compiled before he went to Rome. His fame is limited almost exclusively to literary historians tracking down hints and traces of Thackeray or Walter Savage Landor. Perhaps he is best known for his long, intimate friendship with Robert and Elizabeth Browning, the companions and literary models of his early Italian days.

For many years the Story's apartment in the Palazzo Barberini was a gathering place for all the noted visitors staying in Rome. The roster of their guests is very nearly a complete list of the brilliant people who traveled in Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. Besides the literary figures already mentioned, there were dignitaries of the Roman Church, Roman princes, musicians, actors, statesmen, and Bostonians. By one of those marvelously odd tricks of fate which bring about the most unimaginable occurrences, William Story's daughter Edith married the Marchese Simone Peruzzi de' Medici, a descendant of the ancient ennobled family of bankers and legal heir to the exalted name of Medici. Thus was the grand-
daughter of an American Supreme Court Justice transformed into a Medici, a figure in Italian court circles, where her husband was chamberlain to King Victor Emmanuel II and King Humbert.

Story's fame as a sculptor was chiefly due to Pope Pius IX, who generously paid the expenses of shipping his Cleopatra and his Libyan Sibyl to the London Exposition in 1862, where they became the sensation of the Roman sculpture display and the especial favorites of Victorian critics. But Story was also indebted to Hawthorne, who, in his novel *The Marble Faun*, describes at length the Cleopatra, which thereby gained a tremendous notoriety among novel readers and a literary fame that was, all things considered, quite in keeping.

In his *Note-Books* Hawthorne says of the Cleopatra: "We have seen . . . William Story's Cleopatra—a work of genuine thought and energy, representing a terribly dangerous woman; quiet enough for the moment, but very likely to spring upon you like a tigress." Story's poem "Cleopatra"—too long to be given here entire—furnishes whatever vitality and fire the sculpture seems so notably to lack today. Considering its Victorian date it shows an astonishing passion and sensuality. The poem is in reality the script of a drama without which the statue is a limp marionette—the tigerishness is now perceptible only in the words of the poem.

Henry James, unwilling to commit himself, speaks of the poem and the statue with admirable restraint: "It was impossible to be more interested in the things of the mind and in the forms and combinations into which they overflow. The question of expression and style haunted him; the question of representation by words was ever as present to him as that of representation by marble or by bronze. Once in a while these ideas move him in the same direction with equal force; he produced, for instance, two Cleopatras, and it is difficult to say that the versified, the best of his shorter poems, is not as 'good' as the so interesting statue with which it competes."

The versified Cleopatra reads in part:

Here, Charmian, take my bracelets, They bar with purple stain My arms; turn over my pillows— They are hot where I have lain: Open the lattice wider, A gauze o'er my bosom throw, And let me inhale the odours That over the garden blow.

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I will lie and dream of the past time, Aeons of thought away, And through the jungle of memory Loosen my fancy to play; When, a smooth and velvet tiger, Ribbed with yellow and black, Supple and cushion-footed, I wandered, where never the track Of a human creature had rustled The silence of mighty woods, And, fierce in a tyrannous freedom, I knew but the law of my moods. The elephant, trumpeting, started, When he heard my footsteps near, And the spotted giraffes fled wildly In a yellow cloud of fear. I sucked in the noontide splendour, Quivering along the glade, Or yawning, panting, and dreaming, Basked in the tamarisk shade, Till I heard my wild mate roaring, As the shadows of night came on To brood in the trees' thick branches, And the shadow of sleep was gone; Then I roused and roared in answer, And unsheathed from my cushioned feet My curving claws, and stretched me And wandered my mate to greet. We toyed in the amber moonlight, Upon the warm flat sand, And struck at each other our massive arms— How powerful he was and grand! His yellow eyes flashed fiercely As he crouched and gazed at me, And his quivering tail, like a serpent, Twitched, curved nervously. Then like a storm he seized me, With a wild triumphant cry, And we met, as two clouds in heaven When thunders before them fly. We grappled and struggled together, For his love like his rage was rude; And his teeth in the swelling folds of my neck At times, in our play, drew blood.

Often another suitor— For I was flexile and fair— Fought for me in the moonlight, While I lay crouching there, Till his blood was drained by the desert; And, ruffled with triumph and power, He licked me and lay beside me To breathe him a vast half-hour.

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Come to my arms, my hero, The shadows of twilight grow, And the tiger's ancient fierceness In my veins begins to flow. Come not with cringing to sue me! Take me with triumph and power,
As a warrior storms a fortress!
I will not shrink or cower.
Come, as you came in the desert,
Ere we were women and men,
When the tiger passions were in us,
And love as you loved me then!

Story's fame as a sculptor was indeed short-lived, and as early as 1873 we find one outspoken visitor to his studio remarking, "We went to Mr. Story's studio, and oh! how he does spoil nice blocks of white marble. Nothing but sibyls on all sides, sitting, standing, legs crossed, legs uncrossed, and all with the same expression as if they smelt something wrong. Call him a genius! I don't see it." The judgment is unkind perhaps, but it set the keynote for the judgment of future generations.