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The Liquefaction of Desire: Music, Water and Femininity in Victorian Aestheticism

In 1861, Frederic Leighton exhibited *Lieder ohne Worte* (oil on canvas, Tate Britain) (figure 1) at the Royal Academy exhibition in London. His declared aim in this work was, 'by colour and by flowing delicate forms, to translate to the eye of the spectator something of the pleasure which the child receives through her ears'.[1] Leighton re-imagined this pleasure of the ear—the song of a blackbird and the splash of a fountain—in terms of colour and line. He hoped to create a visual analogy for the 'songs without words' of the title. Despite Leighton's statement of intent, this painting is full of ambiguities; early critics struggled to pin it down. They could not place the setting: 'it may be Roman in the luxurious days; it may be Pompeian; it may be Egyptian of Cleopatra's age; it may even be Palladian'.[2] The slippery nature of this painting, and others like it, is the subject of this paper. It uncovers the relationship between implied music, water and femininity in nineteenth-century British art. It analyses two paintings in detail—Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte* and Edward Burne-Jones's *The Depths of the Sea* (1886, oil on canvas, private collection and 1887, watercolour and bodycolour, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum) (figure 2)—placing their watery subjects in the wider context of Victorian images of mermaids and sirens.

From the 1860s, a number of British artists began to produce paintings that looked distinctively different from mainstream Victorian art. They focused on mood and colour, rather than morality and narrative, and rejected popular sentimental or historical subjects. This new style was defined by Sidney Colvin in 1867 as 'beauty without realism'.[3] It came to be known as aestheticism.

1 Frederic Leighton to Edward von Steinle (30 April 1861), quoted in Royal Academy of Arts, *Frederic Leighton, 1830–1896*, London: Royal Academy of Arts with Harry N. Abrams, 1996, p. 122.

2 *Athenaeum* (London, 4th May 1861), quoted in *Frederic Leighton*, p. 122.

3 Sidney Colvin, *Fortnightly Review* (London, 1867), quoted in Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art, 1750–2000*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 139.

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Figure 1. Frederic Leighton, *Lieder ohne Worte* (1861, oil on canvas, Tate Britain).

Musical subjects lay at the heart of the aestheticism. As Jonathan Freedman has shown, the defining quality that underpins the diversity of aestheticist productions was the 'desire to embrace contradictions'.[4] The critic Walter Pater encapsulated this desire when he exhorted his readers to burn always with 'a hard, gemlike flame'.[5] The paradox of representing the unrepresentable appealed to artists like Leighton and Burne-Jones; this is why they returned time and again to the image of music. They sought to convey sound and movement in the static medium of paint. They were 'touching the impossible'.[6]

The fascination with music in art can be seen as a dialogue between artists and critics. Art audiences became attuned to looking for the musical in pictures by progressive artists like Burne-Jones. Critics were not just aping the musical terminology made fashionable by Walter Pater or James Whistler. Instead, they contributed to the development of this distinctive theme in Victorian art, with articles on 'The Musical Work of Art'[7] and repeated phrases such as the 'chord of colour'.[8] By the 1880s,

4 Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture*, California: Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 6.

5 Walter Pater, 'Conclusion', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, London: Macmillan, [1873, 3rd edn 1888] 1935, p. 220.

6 *Art Journal* (London), June 1865, p. 174.

7 *Art Journal*, June 1865.

8 'The Royal Academy', *Punch*, 14 July 1860, p. 17.

Figure 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea* (1887, watercolour and bodycolour, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.462).

these musical terms had become so commonplace in art criticism that they could be parodied by *Punch*.[9]

Artists associated with aestheticism also created artworks that radically reworked the conventions of female sexuality. The controversies generated by their images have been unpicked by J. B. Bullen in his study of *The Pre-Raphaelite Body* (1998). They ranged from disquiet at the predatory sexuality of some female figures, notably in works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to anxiety about the effeminacy and androgyny depicted by Burne-Jones and his friend Simeon Solomon. The musical themes chosen by aestheticist artists

9 *Punch* (London), 18 June 1887, p. 294. In 'A Jubilee Private View', a Lady Art-critic describes a portrait as 'an impassioned *adagio* in the minor key of blue, tenderly embroidered with a sub-dominant fugue in green and gray and gold!'

seem to offer a key to these shifting notions of femininity. Their depiction of musical women represented a move away from binary concepts of female sexuality, to an increasingly equivocal viewpoint.

To add a further twist, in several images where contemporary critics would have expected music to be visible, it was effaced, to be replaced by water. These images are the particular focus of my paper. So, in Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte*, the title leads the viewer to anticipate a musical subject. The viewer is encouraged to look for the 'song without words', but there is no music making depicted. Instead, the mobile, flowing, sounding medium within the static image is the fountain. Mendelssohn's piano piece is evoked by the sound of running water, in combination with the patterns of colour and line created by Leighton.

The relationship between anticipated music and water in Burne-Jones's *The Depths of the Sea* is rather different. As we will see, conventional Victorian images of mermaids conflate their sensuality and their musicality: a mermaid's singing lures men to their deaths. However, in Burne-Jones's mermaid picture, the conventions are reworked to produce a new and challenging vision of female sexuality.

Lawrence Kramer's study of *Musical Form and Fin-de-siècle Sexuality* (1990) offers a useful theoretical framework for this investigation. Kramer suggests that during the late nineteenth century a new understanding of the nature of sexuality emerged. This was crystallised in 1905 with Freud's publication of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*,[10] but Kramer argues that Freud's theory of the libido was anticipated by artists, musicians and writers. In particular, Kramer points to the 'liquefaction of desire', the idea that sexuality is fluid.[11] Through a study of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* he demonstrates how 'the fire of classical desire [was] replaced by that endlessly circulating, endlessly rhythmic, medium—water'.[12] My research suggests that this emerging concept of desire as liquid was also made visible in British Aesthetic paintings in the years leading up to the publication of Freud's *Three Essays*.

It is almost impossible to separate nineteenth-century images of music from issues of gender and sexuality. Music's association with femininity was pervasive and worked at a number of levels and included the idea of music as a domestic accomplishment. In particular, the discipline of music making became an act that could define middle- and upper-class female experience—what Ruth Solie calls 'girling' at the piano.[13] Alternatively, with a little change in perspective, playing the piano could be interpreted as a seduction technique. This figure of the seductive musician was exemplified by the mermaid or siren. The inherent instability in interpreting music's meaning—was performance inspired by devotion or desire?—was part of its charm for artists and novelists in search of a subject.

10 Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 7, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, London: Penguin, 1977.

11 Lawrence Kramer, 'Musical form and *fin-de-siècle* sexuality', in *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900*, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1990, p. 142.

12 Kramer, 'Musical form', p. 141.

13 Ruth Solie, 'Girling at the Parlour Piano', in *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations*, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2004, p. 85.

Although music was predominantly associated with femininity, or even effeminacy, certain aspects of musical debate were gendered male—notably musical composition, orchestral conducting and 'virtuosic' public performance. All three were bound up with the concept of artistic genius. It was private music making that was associated with the feminine—music that was linked to domesticity, courtship, religious devotion, nostalgia and broader ideas of otherness, including the exotic. However, despite the fact that these stereotypes were undermined in practice by men who made music at home, and by numerous women who had their compositions published, we have to acknowledge that the gender divide persisted in the Victorian imagination.[14]

Perhaps this way of thinking about music is best demonstrated in a project created by a group of artists that consisted of Burne-Jones and several of his colleagues, including D. G. Rossetti, William Morris and Ford Madox Brown. The *King René's Honeymoon Cabinet* (1860–62, painted wood, Victoria and Albert Museum, London) is decorated with scenes showing the multi-talented king René: he is an architect, a painter, a sculptor. (Four of the scenes were later reworked as stained glass panels.) There is only one art at which he does not excel—music. In this image (figure 3), it is his wife who performs on a positive organ. Furthermore, the representation of the queen is sexualised, whereas the sensuality of the honeymoon is played down in the images of the king as artist. Her fur-lined mantle slips to her hips, implying an act of undressing, as her new husband leans across the instrument to kiss her. In the other scenes of 'masculine' art, the Queen simply gazes in admiration at her husband, or gives him a peck on the cheek. Musical performance alone is imagined both as a female skill and as erotically charged: under the influence of music, the couple enjoy a kiss, lip to lip.

The Victorian music critic H. R. Haweis expressed the prevailing connections between the sensual female body and music in particularly vivid terms. He suggested that 'the emotional force in women is usually stronger, and always more delicate, than in men. Their constitutions are like those fine violins which vibrate to the lightest touch.'[15] Of course, these assumptions about music and gender are not confined to the nineteenth century. Lucy Green has shown that throughout the 'western art tradition, musical performance is . . . discursively feminine, despite the fact that it has traditionally been carried out by men'.[16] This is particularly true of singing, because the performer has no instrument to hide behind, and the audience is aware of the spectacle of the body at the heart of the performance.

Other contemporary commentators have also addressed some of the broader issues that surface in aestheticist paintings. In their discussion of

14 For a fuller analysis of women's roles in professional music making and composition, see Derek Hyde, *Newfound Voices: Women in Nineteenth-century Music*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 3rd edn, 1998, esp. pp. 47–85.

15 H. R. Haweis, *Music and Morals*, London: Daldy, Ibster, 1871, p. 109.

16 Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, quoted by Jill Halstead in 'The Night Mrs Baker made History: Conducting, Display and the Interruption of Masculinity', *Women: a Cultural Review* 16:2, Summer 2005, p. 226.

Figure 3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Music: King René's Honeymoon* (1864, stained glass panel, V&A Museum, London).

the 'Diva', Leonardi and Pope suggest that singing women in literature become conflated with the mythical figures of sirens and mermaids: they are both powerful and destructive characters. Leonardi and Pope have also shown how the musically skilled female 'creates anxiety and ambivalence' and even becomes 'the sign of femininity itself'.[17] Paintings of sirens, mermaids and musical women made in nineteenth-century Britain can be seen through the lens of these long-range discourses. They can be read in conjunction with interdisciplinary studies of music and Victorian literature that help to establish a tighter understanding of the relationship between women, sexuality and music in Burne-Jones's Britain. Mary Burgan has pointed out that musical displays had to be deployed with care. In Victorian novels, a woman who 'uses her artistic skill for social advancement is seen as nothing better than a schemer'.[18]

We can see how this image of the musical woman was played out in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (serialised 1871–2). Eliot explored the subtexts of musical intimacy in her characterisation of Rosamond Vincy. The first target of her performance was Mr Lydgate. He recognised the

17 Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996, p. 49.

18 Mary Burgan, 'Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-century Fiction', *Victorian Studies*, Indiana University Press, vol. 30, Autumn 1986, p. 62.

game she was playing, but imagined that he would prove the stronger partner. Lydgate fantasised that Rosamond would be

> that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone.[19]

The dangerous implications of her siren song seemed lost on him. For, once she was married, Rosamund redirected the seductive power of her piano playing towards Will Ladislaw. As a married woman who sang duets in private with a bachelor, she became the subject of village gossip.[20]

Sirens and Mermaids

In her account of Rosamond Vincy, Eliot invoked the myth of the predatory musical mermaid. The image of the mermaid was pervasive in Victorian culture, symbolising fear of feminine sexuality, and dramatising the 'otherness' of women. Rosamond's music making highlighted the tension inherent in performing—she overstepped the boundary between acceptable domestic practice and the sensual, disruptive aspects of playing. Music allows the mermaid to enter the drawing room. However, this doubleness in music, its ability to symbolise both domesticity and desire, was what made it an appealing subject to progressive Victorian artists. In particular, the figure of the mermaid—the archetypal musical female—encouraged Burne-Jones to sidestep the conventional binary depiction of femininity and present an alternative vision. In his art, the mermaid emerged as a figure embodying powerful, self-sufficient sexuality.

How did Burne-Jones's picture fit into its Victorian context? In the nineteenth-century imagination, mermaids and sirens were interchangeable, both being beautiful, deadly creatures. However, their origins were distinct. The earliest recorded and most famous encounter with sirens came in Homer's *Odyssey* (book XII), when Odysseus was able to sail past their lair by filling the ears of his companions with wax and having himself lashed to the mast of his ship. Homer described the disjuncture of the sirens' sweet song:

> Celestial music warbles from their tongue,
> And thus the sweet deluders tune the song
> and their deadly intent:
> . . . wide around
> Lie human bones that whiten all the ground:

19 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Oxford University Press, [1871–72] 1986, p. 475.

20 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 355.

The ground polluted floats with human gore,
And human carnage taints the dreadful shore.[21]

He emphasised the pleasure that their music brought, so that men went willingly to their deaths. However, it was not until the third century BC that the characteristic 'unnatural' shape of the sirens became established. Apollonius Rhodios, the Alexandrian librarian, said that these creatures were half-woman, half-bird. Apollodorus, writing around 140 BC, expanded their story, giving their names as Pisinoe, Aglaope and Thelxiepia. They were the daughters of one of the Muses, and each had her own music. One played the lyre, another the flute, while the third sang. Apollodorus confirmed that they were birds from the thighs down. Ovid, in his account, said that they had been granted wings so that they could look for their friend Persephone, who had been carried to the underworld.

In Victorian art and literature, the grotesque bodies of the sirens tended to be passed over. John William Waterhouse (1849–1917) was unusual in remaining with the classical texts, in *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). This work plays down the seductive qualities of the sirens, and instead focuses on the archaeological detailing of the boat and the costume of the sailors. In a later image of *The Siren* (c.1900, oil on canvas, private collection) Waterhouse reverts to the conventional Victorian vision of an alluring young woman; only the flash of a fish-scaled ankle betrays her real nature. The historical context has vanished, and we are left with a non-specific setting in which the power of her music has drawn a sailor to his death.

Waterhouse's image suggests a universal reading: all young women, not just the deformed creatures of myth, can lure men by their song. The implication of this work is shared by numerous Victorian images of so-called sirens, from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's early *Boatmen and Siren* (c.1853, pen and ink, Manchester City Art Gallery), to his *Ligeia Siren* (1873, chalk on paper, private collection), or Edward Poynter's statuesque beauty, *The Siren* (1864, oil on canvas, private collection). In each case, their monstrous bodies are concealed.

Victorian pictures of mermaids, on the other hand, did not avoid the issue of their misshapen bodies. The distinctive fishtailed woman emerged from the siren myth in about 250 BC, but it was not until the Christian era that she gained her reputation as a destroyer of men. In medieval Bestiaries she was depicted as a vain creature, holding a comb and mirror, and 'enchanting folk by her song'.[22] In some accounts she was confused with the 'seal women' of the North Sea and, in others, with the manatees and dugongs found in warmer waters. However, despite her deformity, the beautiful singing of the mermaid ensured that she was always alluring to mortal men.

21 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Alexander Pope, book XII.

22 For a fuller discussion of the siren and mermaid myths, see Sir Arthur Waugh, 'The Folklore of the Merfolk', *Folklore*, vol. 71, London: William Clashire, 1960, esp. p. 77.

Waterhouse was drawn to mermaids, as he was to sirens. He demonstrated the importance of the motif in his oeuvre by choosing to paint *A Mermaid* for his 1900 Royal Academy diploma picture (oil on canvas). This image of a young fishtailed woman combing her hair represents the climax of his fascination with the *femme fatale*. The subject allowed the dangerous collision of seductive music, nudity and the proximity of water.

Women at the water's edge had a particular resonance for Victorian audiences; they carried connotations of prostitution and self-destruction. Images of fallen women washed up on the banks of the Thames were familiar to gallery-goers; they ranged from G. F. Watt's *Found Drowned* (1848–50, oil on canvas, Watts Gallery, Compton) to A. L. Egg's *Past and Present no. 3* (1858, oil on canvas, Tate Britain). Other artists, including J. E. Millais (1858, etching, V&A Museum), had felt compelled to illustrate Thomas Hood's poem *The Bridge of Sighs* (1844), a work that had caused a sensation with its description of a girl's decision to drown herself. James Whistler and John Rodham Stanhope both presented more prosaic versions of a similar subject. In Whistler's *Wapping* (1860–64, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington) and Stanhope's *Thoughts of the Past* (1859, oil on canvas, Tate Britain), encounters with prostitutes were explicitly situated on the riverside. Even Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–52, oil on canvas, Tate Britain) reinforced the potent mixture of water, undisciplined sexuality, and death in the Victorian imagination. And of course, Ophelia was singing as she died.

So the mythical figure of the mermaid in Victorian art coincided in many respects with her modern equivalent, the fallen woman. They shared a watery setting, they put their bodies on display, they were the objects of a judgemental gaze, although that judgement could range from condemnation to pity. Like the mermaid, the prostitute was defined by her unnatural sexuality. Her promiscuity underpinned her 'unwomanliness'. Only the musical element was missing.

In Waterhouse's treatments of the mermaid subject, in common with those of many of his contemporaries, the mermaid's song was less important than the spectacle of her body. Her allure was visual rather than musical. Of course, this is understandable in a painting. The audience expected to consume her with their eyes rather than their ears. The picture would always remain silent, despite its implied music. But Waterhouse's insistent focus on the mermaid as an object of visual rather than aural pleasure suggested that she was indistinguishable from the other dangerous women in his repertoire. The same face, hair and nude body were repeated in numerous studies. Waterhouse's adolescent temptresses include the nymphs who lure Hylas to a watery grave

(1896, oil on canvas, Manchester City Art Gallery), a *Naiad* (1893, oil on canvas, private collection) who rises from a stream to gaze at a sleeping boy, and *Lamia* the snake-woman (1905, oil on canvas, private collection). One model seemed to have filled all these roles in Waterhouse's art. As a result, it became difficult to disentangle the details of each myth; his images were a recurring nightmare in which the same nubile young woman with flowing hair and imploring eyes entrapped the knight/ sailor/classical hero.

Burne-Jones's approach to the mermaid motif in *The Depths of the Sea* was radically different. She has already taken the plunge into the water, rather than remaining high and dry. Because she has achieved her desire, she no longer needs her music. In Waterhouse's image, the mermaid was unaware that she was being watched. As a result, she appeared almost vulnerable to our gaze; her downturned eyes and naked body made her an object of male fantasy as well as fear. Burne-Jones's fish-woman, on the other hand, knows she has an audience and smiles directly at us, expecting us to admire her cunning and beauty. She also has a distinctive character, and various stories were told to account for her unnerving expression. Georgie Burne-Jones said that her husband repainted the mermaid's face after hearing of the death of their friend Laura Lyttleton in childbirth. This picture became a memorial to the young 'Soul'. Lady Lewis offered an alternative version of the story, saying that the face was drawn from memory, after Burne-Jones saw a girl in a wood whom he believed was 'a nixie and had come up from the well'.[23]

Whatever the truth of the tales, it is clear that this mermaid is not a stock model. Her 'look of triumph ... worthy of Leonardo da Vinci himself' forces the viewer to engage with her directly.[24] Burne-Jones re-imagines an over-familiar theme, showing us the mermaid in her natural element—water—rather than exposed on the rocks. We can begin to see the world through her eyes, and almost feel sorry for her, as she has not yet realised that the man she has seduced is already dead and useless. Georgie's suggestion that she was modelled on a well-loved young wife reinforces the idea that Burne-Jones was presenting his mermaid in a sympathetic light.

In *The Depths of the Sea* the mermaid's female form is only partially revealed. She is also as strongly muscled as the sailor. In fact, it is the male body that is more obviously offered as an object for the viewer's delight. The mobile sensuality of the image is also underlined by other elements. In particular, the sweep of the mermaid's arm, combined with her smile, reminds the audience of Leonardo da Vinci's *St John the Baptist* (1513–16, oil on wood, Louvre). Burne-Jones seems to be playing upon the celebrated description of da Vinci's picture by Walter Pater

23 Quoted in S. Wildman and J. Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-dreamer*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, p. 264.

24 *The Times* (London) 8 May 1886, p. 8, quoted in Wildman and Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones*, p. 264.

(1869), which questioned the saint's 'delicate brown flesh and woman's hair'.[25] The sexual ambiguities that attracted Pater to da Vinci's work were resurrected in Burne-Jones's work. In *The Depths of the Sea* he challenged Victorian gender stereotypes by sympathetically depicting the mermaid's active desire, while the man becomes a passive victim and art object.

In Bram Dijkstra's reading of this picture, Burne-Jones is condemned for a misogynistic fear of female sexuality. In *Idols of Perversity* (1986), Dijkstra describes *The Depths of the Sea* as a 'masochistic fantasy'. He suggests that it portrays the 'oblivion of sensuality' that is the fate of sailors who succumb to the 'hypnotic eyes and vampire's mouth' of the mermaid.[26] Dijktra tries to explain the Victorian fascination with mermaids and sirens but his interpretation is too heavy-handed. He fails to address the differences between artists and the fact that the subject is, by its very nature, slippery and shape-shifting. Victorian mermaids ranged from entwining, pneumatic figures to docile pin-ups. Dijsktra points to the increasing visibility of independent women in Victorian society as the catalyst for works like these. But mermaid pictures were popular long before the rise of the New Woman.

Dijkstra also misses an essential point. Mermaids are sexually desiring, but this desire can never be consummated because of their deformity. Their fishtails, like the bird-bodies of the sirens, mean that the promise of their song will always remain unfulfilled. Dijkstra accounts for the predatory aspect of the mermaid or siren, her 'insatiable urges forever unstilled', by dwelling on the bestial half of her nature.[27] Her sexual deviancy is inscribed on her body. But he fails to realise that the very animality that defines her desire also makes it impossible that she should take her ultimate revenge on Man by forcing herself upon him. Instead, her own smooth and supple lower body suggests a satisfying and self-sufficient alternative to the lifeless form of the sailor.

Music, Water and the Libido

While Dijkstra sees mermaids gloating over their victims and constantly on the lookout for the next unwary man, Burne-Jones presents a different viewpoint. In the topsy-turvy, underwater world of the mermaid, gender differences can be blurred and androgyny becomes attractive, rather than repellent.

Burne-Jones's mermaid may be silent, but that is because in *The Depths of the Sea*, her music is no longer needed. Her feminine desire is represented instead by the water that supports her. At the end of the

25 Walter Pater, 'Leonardo da Vinci', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, London: Macmillan, [1873, 3rd edn 1888] 1935, p. 109.

26 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 269.

27 Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 259.

century, the relationships between moving water, gender and sensuality were themselves in a state of flux. These shifts were documented in Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Lawrence Kramer has shown that Freud recognised a change in cultural perceptions of desire. Traditionally, desire was equated with fire: ardour, for example, derived from the Latin word 'to burn'. However, in the nineteenth century a new language of love emerged, which imagined desire as fluid.[28] Freud's concept of libidinous desire was already fully developed by the summer of 1897,[29] but was not published until 1905. In his essays, Freud likened the libido to a flow of liquid that can be redirected. He suggested, for example, that the 'various channels along which the libido passes are . . . like interconnecting pipes',[30] or that the libido could behave 'like a stream whose main bed has become blocked'.[31] The focus of desire was no longer single and static, but multiple and mobile.

Kramer argues that this new model of sensuality surfaced in artistic and musical forms long before it was theorised by Freud. In his study of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (composed 1857–9, first performance in London 1882), Kramer suggests that the fluid nature of Wagner's musical forms echoes the libidinal concept of desire. As Wagner wrote in his programme notes, it is 'forever renewing itself, craving and languishing'.[32] Kramer shows how this libidinal model encourages the deconstruction of traditional gender roles in Wagner's work, so that Isolde is imagined as the active partner, while Tristan is passive, wounded and dependent. In addition, the consummation of their desire is constantly deferred and only achieved with the death of the male. In her Transfiguration scene, Isolde descibes her union with the dead Tristan in language that brings together song, moving water and female desire. Finally, she can 'complete the cadence' that was shattered by a shriek in act 2, scene 2:

> Can it be that I alone
> hear this wondrous, glorious tune, . . .
> from him flowing,
> through me pouring,
> rising, soaring,
> boldly singing?[33]

The parallels between Wagner's Isolde and Burne-Jones's mermaid should not be exaggerated. However, they both provided an alternative vision of female sexuality. Unlike most of their contemporaries, Wagner and Burne-Jones refused in these works to categorise or condemn their female subjects. Isolde and Burne-Jones's mermaid are at once desiring and sympathetic. At first sight, their longing is intensified as it is left unfulfilled by the object of their desire: in Isolde's case, because of

28 Kramer, 'Musical Form and *Fin-de-siècle* Sexuality', p. 141.

29 Freud, *On Sexuality*, p. 36.

30 Freud, *On Sexuality*, p. 63.

31 Freud, *On Sexuality*, p. 85.

32 Richard Wagner's programme notes for the concert version of the *Prelude*, quoted in Kramer, 'Musical Form and *Fin-de-ièecle* Sexuality', p. 147.

33 Libretto for *Tristan und Isolde* quoted in Kramer, 'Musical Form and *Fin-de-siècle* Sexuality', p. 163.

Brangäne's intervention, and in the mermaid's because she is only half-woman. But both achieve satisfaction through immersion. Isolde is enraptured as her love for Tristan washes over and pours through her, while the mermaid is triumphant as she submerges herself in the sea, even though the sailor she clasps in her arms is already limp. They are experiencing a new, fluid model of sensuality, which is no longer focused on one object, nor is it specifically genital: the fishtailed mermaid, of course, is denied that pleasure. Female libidinal desire does not in fact require a male object at all. Kramer points to *fin de siècle* works by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt, which privilege the independent and narcissistic sensuality of women underwater.[34] Klimt's floating nudes, with parted lips, may be singing or simply aroused by their total submersion, but like works by Wagner and Burne-Jones, they represent a challenge to the dominant phallocentric model of the erotic.

Burne-Jones recognised that his image was controversial. Before he put it forwards for public exhibition, he consulted Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy. He knew that Leighton had succeeded in satisfying the Establishment world of the Academy by his faultless technique and preference for classical subjects, while still creating images that played with the aesthetic ideal of 'beauty without realism'. Burne-Jones recognised that, in their joint exploration of musical motifs and sensual surfaces, he and Leighton shared a vision for the future of British art.

Picturing Pleasure

Leighton had demonstrated his desire to produce art that walked the tightrope between the Establishment and the avant-garde early in his career. Like Burne-Jones's mermaid picture, Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte* of 1860 also wove together a musical theme, moving water and libidinal desire. In this work he explored the narcissistic sensuality identified by Kramer as a keynote of Freud's theory.[35] From the outset Leighton intended his picture to be about pleasure, aural, visual and physical.

Where is the music in this picture? Leighton inscribed it in the title, encouraging the viewer to consume the image as if it were a piece for piano. Of course, Mendelssohn's idea of a 'song without words' was in itself paradoxical, and Leighton was playing with that paradox. There is no obvious music, but we are encouraged to appreciate the picture with the same open-mindedness as we would appreciate a melody. We should be thinking about mood and structure rather than about narrative or morality. It is worth remembering that Leighton's use of an explicitly musical title to frame a non-musical subject predates Whistler's *Symphonies in White* by several years. The *Symphony in White no. 3* (1867, oil on

34 Kramer, 'Musical Form', illustrates Klimt's *Fish Blood*, from *Ver Sacrum*, Vienna, vol. 1, February 1898, p. 144.

35 Kramer, 'Musical Form', p. 146.

canvas, Barber Institute, Birmingham), the first of Whistler's works exhibited with a musical title, was not shown in public until 1867, seven years after Leighton's 'Song without words' was conceived.

Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte* presents the female form in a purely decorative fashion. The veiled figure carrying a water jar on her head moves away from the viewer with a graceful tilt of her hips, but her face, indeed her whole body, is hidden by her drapery. We can only study her outline and the folds of cloth that suggest her limbs. She has become the visual equivalent of the vase she holds. We enjoy the exotic silhouettes of the water jars with their restrained ornament in the same way that we consume the sway of her back. In fact, the shapes of the vases correspond directly with those of the figures: the tall, red-and-black vase on the steps echoes the form of the veiled woman, while the rounded white vase repeats the colours and shape of the seated figure. The forms of the female body, suggested by the masses of flowing cloth, are studied and carefully placed, but Leighton denies his viewers the usual voyeuristic pleasures associated with pictures of servant girls in far-away palaces. One figure is totally concealed so we can only imagine what she looks like. The other is more immediately alluring, with folds of blue drapery emphasising the outline of womanly hips and a tightly bound waist. Her hands and feet are bare, her top slips provocatively from her shoulder and she wears gold hoop earrings and necklaces. But these first impressions are deceptive. The servant's blouse falls open, but we see only the flat chest—of a boy.

Ambiguity of gender, of location, of the site of pleasure, is woven into every element of this painting. The figure in the foreground appears at first glance to be a girl, but when we look again, we see the distinctive features of one of Leighton's favourite models, John Hanson Walker. The identity of the sitter was certainly known to Leighton's friends; Emilia Barrington raised it with the artist in the early 1860s.[36] Leighton was not trying to deceive his audience, but to encourage them to question their assumptions about artistic conventions. As a result, when this painting was first shown, critics did not know quite what to make of either the subject or the setting.

Leighton offers only hints and suggestions, in the apparently archaeological detailing, and the delightful way he wraps and reveals his model's body, but everything in the picture is elusive and artificial. Most importantly, the focus of pleasure is slippery. Initially, the audience expects to enjoy the sight of a beautiful body. But this body is sexually ambiguous; it can be read as male or female, adult or child. Leighton made it clear in his letter to his mentor Edward von Steinle that the pleasure experienced by the servant was his starting point.[37] Any pleasure experienced by the audience was secondary.

36 *Frederic Leighton, 1830–1896*, p. 122.

37 Frederic Leighton to Edward von Steinle, 30 April 1861, in *Frederic Leighton, 1830–1896*, p. 122.

This painting is, at least in part, about self-pleasuring. Its musical and watery environment points to the developing notions of libidinal (fluid) desire which does not need a single external focus, nor is it bound by gender stereotypes. *Lieder ohne Worte* illustrates a Freudian narcissistic model of desire, which according to Kramer occurs 'when libido is . . . allowed to flow back onto the self'.[38] Leighton's depiction of auto-eroticism at one level conforms to Victorian fears of the ill-effects of masturbation on the young body. As the servant caresses her/his foot, we notice the blank pale face and dark shadows under the eyes. Victorian medics and clergymen warned of these physical side effects, the 'pallid bloodless countenance' and the 'black and blue semi-circles under his eyes'.[39] J. B. Bullen sums up the conventional discourse: masturbation led to 'effeminate self-absorption'.[40] Leighton deliberately engages with these conventions by portraying exactly these characteristics in the face and body of the servant. He also draws attention to the touch of the servant's hand, by the careful positioning of the two vases on the steps. But although his image hints at the dangers of self-pleasuring, he refuses to condemn it. Instead, he offers narcissistic desire as an alternative to conventional gender relations, in the same way that he challenges our expectations about looking at young female models, and undermines the fantasy of the typical harem picture. The servant's pleasure in listening to birdsong and water is combined with the enjoyment of touch. This pleasure is self-contained and contemplative.

Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte* is full of paradoxes. The architectural space seems solid enough, but it is only a stage on which a sequence of beautiful shapes and colours unfold. The painting celebrates self-sufficient sexuality while, at the same time, it reduces the female body to merely decorative forms. It warns us of the hazards of sensual indulgence, but encourages us to imagine the multiple pleasures—of touch and sound—experienced by the servant. How can we account for this ambivalence? The music and the water are faint in this picture—a single blackbird and the trickle of a fountain. This work was painted more than forty years before Freud published his theory of the libido. It represents the beginning of a development rather than its climax. Although it cannot fully escape its mid-Victorian context, it does open up the possibility of an alternative realm of the senses.

Conclusion

Leighton and Burne-Jones, in their aestheticist images, demonstrated the potency of the interplay between musical ideas, water and female sexuality. Although their watery works looked very different—one

38 Kramer, 'Musical Form and *Fin-de-siècle* Sexuality', p. 146.

39 O. S. Fowler, *Amativeness or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality*, London, 1881, quoted in J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 209.

40 Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 208.

centred on the splash of a fountain, and the other imagined total submersion—they used these motifs to suggest some radical ways of rethinking the relationship between art and desire.

Firstly, Burne-Jones's mermaid and Leighton's boyish girl imply that definitions of masculinity and femininity can be refigured. In these images, sexuality becomes porous and unstable. The artists acknowledged and then subverted the close connections between music and gender in the Victorian imagination. Androgyny is presented as seductive. As we have seen, the suggestion that desire is fluid rather than fixed ties in with ideas that are circulating in the work of other progressive artists, notably that of Wagner. Both Leighton and Burne-Jones produce images that are highly sensual and expect an erotic engagement with the viewer. But it is the slippery nature of this sensuality that causes anxiety among the critics. The mermaid is self-sufficient in her desire, and the servant's androgyny disrupts our response. Both the musical subtext—a mermaid being defined by her musicality as well as her animality, and Leighton's choice of title—and the watery setting in these images underline the fluidity of the sexual object. They are mobile and ungraspable. The mermaid will disappear with a flick of her tail, and the servant will collapse into a pile of cloth.

Secondly, by weaving music and water into their work, Leighton and Burne-Jones were testing the boundaries of their own art. They were engaging with the central aestheticist idea of embracing contradictions in their attempts to touch the impossible. Sound and water are both constantly shifting, and yet these artists were trying to capture them in paint. There is always a tension between the stasis of the painted surface and the onward movement of music/water. So they were highlighting the limitations of painting, and hinting at the possibilities of other ways of engaging with the realm of the senses. The fantasies of the mermaid and the harem girl were just the beginning of these artists' attempts to open up a space for exploring a world beyond the mundane. Their art, with its evocation not only of colour and line, but also of sound and lapping water, offers a window into a world of beauty and sensory pleasure.

This aesthetic combination of desire, music, water and visual delight came to a climax in Walter Pater's 1877 essay on the Venetian Renaissance. Although ostensibly a description of the art of Giorgione, it was also a commentary on the ideal aestheticist image. Pater dwelt on the idylls of 'music at the pool-side ... or mingled with the sound of the pitcher in the well, or heard across running water.'[41] In these works, 'life itself is conceived as a sort of listening—listening to music ... to the sound of water' and to 'time as it flies'.[42]

41 Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, London: Macmillan, [1873, 3rd edn 1888] 1935, p. 139.

42 Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', p. 140.