The program booklet for the 2009 joint meeting of the North American Victorian Studies Association and the British Association for Victorian Studies featured an image of *The Greek Slave*: there it stands, the controversial nineteenth-century statue by Hiram Powers, looking obliquely toward the conference title as if to ponder the possible readings of “Past Versus Present,” and prompting us to read the relation between past and present—the “versus”—as another controversy. Modeled on Greek and Roman statuary, the classic repose of *The Greek Slave* is nakedly exposed to public view, posing in neoclassical white marble a recurring question for Victorians and Victorianists to contemplate. What is the appeal of this feminized, classicized figure to viewers, both then and now, and on both sides of the Atlantic?

This very question is addressed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning as an imperative, even an admonition, to readers in her famous sonnet, “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” (1850). Standing on the threshold between the temple of “Ideal beauty” and the “house of anguish,” *The Greek Slave* (or rather the sonnet’s reading of that figure) refuses the opposition of past “versus” present, and insists on the entry of the past into the present:

They say Ideal beauty cannot enter
The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
An alien image with enshackled hands,
Called the Greek slave! As if the artist meant her
(That passionless perfection which he lent her,
Shadowed, not darkened, where the sill expands)
To so confront man’s crimes in different lands
With man’s ideal sense; pierce to the center
Art’s fiery finger; and break up erelong
The serfdom of this world! Appeal, fair stone,
From God’s pure heights of beauty, against man’s wrong!
Catch up, in thy divine face, not alone
East griefs, but West; and strike and shame the strong,
By thunders of white silence, overthrown. (1-14)

In response to what “they say”—an aestheticized view of a classical ideal often attributed to Victorian classicism—Barrett Browning suggests a more radical reading of “that passionless perfection” to reveal “the serfdom of this world.” Between “that” and “this” world, between the ideal and the real, between antiquity and modernity, The Greek Slave is represented in the sonnet to confront us in the present tense. Although the statue is passively “called the Greek slave,” here it is actively called upon to point “art’s fiery finger” at viewers and at readers: “Appeal, fair stone.” Through this rhetorical apostrophe, the sonnet animates a motionless (and seemingly emotionless) figure in order to mobilize a passionate response. The double meaning of “fair” turns an aesthetic into an ethical appeal “against man’s wrong,” exposing the unfair suffering of slaves everywhere, “not alone East griefs, but West.” Thus the “alien image” of a Greek Christian woman enslaved by Turkish Muslims is made into a familiar figure within nineteenth-century abolitionist debates, as Barrett Browning invokes the statue’s “thunders of white silence” to break the silence of its white viewers.

Of course the controversy of The Greek Slave was (and is) precisely the appeal of, and to, its whiteness. Like so many other poems of the period, Barrett Browning’s sonnet is responding not only to the statue itself but to other responses in Victorian England and America, where, as art historian Charmaine Nelson points out, “it was not just the subject and its imaginary and social contexts that were racialized, but the very practice of viewing itself” (111-12). The statue caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in London in 1845, and again at the Great Exhibition in 1851, where Barrett Browning was among the many thousands (including Queen Victoria herself) to see it in the central nave of the Crystal Palace. During a previous visit to Hiram Powers in 1847, Barrett Browning had already encountered The Greek Slave in his Italian studio, and later she wrote in his visitors’ book: “It takes a soul / to move a body; it takes a high-souled man / To move the masses.” But exactly how the bodies and souls of the masses were to be moved by this statue in particular became a hot topic for transatlantic debate, when another life-size version of The Greek Slave went on tour through American cities, north and south, from 1847 to 1851. “As this eloquent statue traverses the land, may many a mother and daughter of the Republic be awakened to the sense of the enormity of slavery, as
it exists in our midst,” wrote a New York correspondent for the National Era, warning the “fair women” of America to “waste not your sympathies on the senseless marble, but reserve some tears for the helpless humanity which lies quivering beneath the lash of American freemen” (3). The appeal of the “fair stone” to “fair women” depended on sympathetic identification with a classical ideal of white womanhood subjected to “black” Turks. This racial reversal is also implicit in “God’s pure heights of beauty” that Barrett Browning invoked in “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave,” as a whitened, racially purified vision of ancient Greece held captive by the East, but ready for liberation by the West.

Since the NAVSA/BAVS conference included Americanists as well as Victorianists, and since the field is increasingly expanding into transatlantic and transnational Victorian studies, I would have expected more responses to the provocation of the conference poster. The only direct response to that challenge came from Churnjeet Kaur Mahn, who begins her paper with a discussion of The Greek Slave in order to think about the problematic place of modern Greece within the discourses of Victorian Hellenism. She points out how the “classical” past and the “oriental” present of Greece are rendered simultaneous in The Greek Slave, posing further questions: were modern Greeks really the descendants of the ancients, and where else but in a statue could Victorian viewers find the Hellenic ideal that they projected onto Greece? Mahn considers Fanny Blunt and Lucy M. J. Garnett, two Victorian women who turned away from archaeological discovery of Greek antiquity to ethnography and folklore studies of modern Greeks. But in looking for the characteristic traits and features of modern Greek women living in Turkey (“such pure and perfect types,” according to Blunt; “forms of almost classical purity,” according to Garnett [qtd. in Mahn 14, 15]), these ethnographies were “caught somewhere between a harem and a museum” (13), according to Mahn: “just as The Greek Slave found its cultural and commercial success through the admixture of a variety of discursive contexts,” so also “ethnographical descriptions by British women were refracted through a series of debates and contexts that were perhaps more pertinent to a discussion of The Greek Slave, than modern Greek womanhood” (12). In this reading, the statue embodies the paradox of modern Greece enslaved to a classical past that must be rediscovered in order to make Greece “modern.”

The complex, often contradictory reception of The Greek Slave demonstrates the dynamics of classical reception more broadly, as we
see how an image of ancient Greece was actively reimagined by Victorians for their own purposes, mediated through many layers of history and contemporary debates. Projecting the present into the past and the past into the present, their historical imagination was defined by multiple mediations of classical antiquity. Another example is the nineteenth-century fascination with the ancient Roman city of Pompeii, as described by Mary Beard in her keynote lecture, “Pompeii for Victorians.” Victorians who visited the site imagined themselves stepping into the living past, turning the City of the Dead into a city of living history, where they could reenact the experience of discovering the past in the present. This self-consciously historicized recreation (sometimes performed in historical reenactments, or in the carefully staged “rediscovery” of objects already excavated at Pompeii) was made accessible to mass audiences in London as well, in panoramas and dramatic productions based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1834 novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* and (again) at the Crystal Palace, where visitors to the Pompeian Court entered a reconstruction that felt more historically “present” than the original.³ Did they recognize Pompeii as a fiction, perhaps even a fake? An excellent panel on “Displaying the Past” followed up on this question, in particular a paper on “Recreating Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham” presented by Kate Nichols, who argued that such archaeological reconstructions took on a life of their own precisely because of their inauthenticity. In other words, they appealed to the Victorian imagination as an experience of history in quotation marks, as “authentic” rather than authentic.

The popular engagement with classics was also the topic of a conference workshop led by Simon Goldhill on “Classics for Victorians.” As a classicist and as one of the coordinators of the Cambridge Victorian Studies Group, Goldhill is especially interested in the role of Greek and Roman culture in the Victorian imagination, and his workshop revolved around a series of useful who-what-when-where-why-how questions. Who contributed to the circulation of classics in Victorian England? What did classics mean in the nineteenth century, and what were the competing theories about its importance? When and where did specific debates take place, to produce shifting canons of classical texts? Why did classics emerge as one of the dominant discourses in Victorian culture? How do we historicize these classical discourses in relation to our own? Far from assuming a single body of classical knowledge or a continuous classical tradition, Victorians turned to classics as
a site for the multiplication of meaning and different ways of knowing; their reception of classics was a cultural performance that created a space for public debate and display, working across a broad range of genres and continually moving between elite and popular cultures.

To consider this dynamic Victorian interaction with classics, the workshop discussed several examples from the Waterhouse Exhibit at the Royal Academy of Art, coinciding with the conference and beautifully curated by Elizabeth Prettejohn et al. As Goldhill has argued, it is important to historicize and theorize the role of the viewer at the scene of reception, especially in paintings by Waterhouse, whose “art of classical reception” opens up a broader view on classical reception studies: “[Waterhouse] lets us see how the unilinear model of reception is inadequate to the interplay of discursive fields involved in the act of representation; and inadequate to the integral engagement of the viewer, the viewer’s knowledge, and ideological self-positioning, in the process of reception” (179). In making this argument, Goldhill seeks to expand current work on reception among classical scholars, who have tended to focus on the point of reception by analyzing the transposition of a classical text into another context, rather than approach reception as a multi-layered and multi-directional cultural process. The debate about how to do classical reception studies, as this new field has emerged in England over the past decade, seems to assume an opposition between history and aesthetics, with some advocating for “a model more sensitive to the role of cultural history in the process of reception” (Goldhill 180) and others arguing against a positivist history that “seems to be part of a wider trend to collapse reception into cultural studies” (Martindale and Thomas 9). According to Charles Martindale, “we need to avoid privileging history over . . . the present moment in which the text is experienced, received, partly aesthetically (though that moment too is always potentially subject to historicization)” (5).

Victorianists have much to contribute to this debate. Classicists often refer back to the nineteenth century to trace the history of classics as a discipline, but to trace the historical circulation of classics beyond these disciplinary boundaries, scholars in classical reception studies could pursue more active dialogue with scholars in Victorian studies, and vice versa. Rather than opposing history and aesthetics, it would be productive to analyze their mutual implication according to a logic articulated by Carolyn Williams in Transfigured World: Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism, a book that treats Pater as an important critic in the historical
development of aesthetics and as an equally important chapter in the literary history of historicism. Through a deep reading of Pater, Williams shows how he incorporated the problem of historical knowledge (the impossibility of direct access to the past) into an aesthetic revival (a figurative representation of present access to the past), producing an aesthetic historicism that is “close in meaning to ‘history’ as such, but with an intensified consciousness of its aims and operations” (54). Drawing on the intensified consciousness of his own Victorian classicism, Pater used the figure of the frieze to illustrate how the high points of the past—as they are remembered in the present—are thrown into relief against the ground of forgotten historical process. As Williams observes, Pater’s “developmental view of history plus an aesthetic practice of ‘fixing’ the high points against the passage of time yields the model of the past as frieze in sculpted relief” (158). But if the frieze represents a recreation of historical process, Williams shows that the archaeological metaphor, another dimension of Pater’s aesthetics of relief, figures the moment of recovery and reception; the Renaissance is the exemplary case in point for Pater of the moment when figure rises out of ground, “when . . . the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil” (167). Thus the fiery finger of art surfaces again, pointing at the interplay of foreground and background, and exemplifying a form of aesthetic historicism that combines the aesthetic point and the historical process of reception: a powerful gesture toward the connection between literary and cultural studies.

The recognition that history is itself the result of an aesthetic reconstruction leads to a deeply historical view of cultural forms, played out not only in the literary transfigurations of history in Pater’s aesthetic prose, but more broadly in the aesthetics of Victorian popular culture as well. A widespread interest in the reimagining of classical myth was part of this aesthetic historicism, as has been noted by Catherine Maxwell in her recent introduction to “Victorian Literature and Classical Myth,” and at the conference Maxwell chaired a panel on “Aesthetics and Antiquity” that further pursued this line of thought. The three papers presented by Lene Østermark-Johansen, Stefano Evangelista, and Isobel Hurst at this panel explore how the aestheticizing of classical antiquity created new modes of historicizing that emphasized the perception of the past as received in the fictions of the present. These imaginative recreations of the past, written in literary genres that circulated around the boundaries of classical scholarship, demonstrated the popular appeal of classics for Victorians.
Reflecting further on Pater’s aesthetics of relief, the paper by Østermark-Johansen considers the frieze in aestheticist painting and writing as a spatial and temporal progression that is made present in the moment of viewing: “arrested in stone, movement becomes moment,” in a dialectic that creates complex transpositions of time (20). The procession of horsemen in Phidias’s Parthenon frieze, for example, viewed by many at the British Museum and admired in particular by Pater, was depicted in various nineteenth-century paintings that problematized the relation between foreground and background: the emergence of a figure from the ground calls attention to the ground as a figure, producing the metafigural reflection that defines Pater’s aesthetic perception of history as well. Østermark-Johansen argues that this aesthetics of relief can be seen on the surface of Pater’s prose and in the deep structure of his narrative in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), beginning with a procession that turns into a part of the Parthenon frieze, and placing the central figure of Marius “in relief” against a series of friezes and frieze-like processions that are rhythmically repeated throughout the novel. The receptivity of Marius to these moments is paradigmatic for a distinctively Victorian mode of classical reception, superimposing on the ancient plot a modern museum experience that was not only Pater’s own.

The reception of classical art in the museum is also taken up by Evangelista’s paper, focusing on art historical writing by Vernon Lee as a less familiar but equally important example of aesthetic historicism. Although Lee rejected the classifications of art proposed by art historians and classicists, and although she was skeptical about the new emergence of archaeology as a science, she drew on archaeological method to encourage an imaginative reconstruction of the sculptural ensemble known as the Niobe Group: inviting the viewer to imagine the aesthetic arrangement of these statues with “powerfully rhythmmed attitudes” in their original setting, she (like Pater) sought to recreate this aesthetic attitude in the reader through the very rhythms of her prose (qtd. in Evangelista 36). Lee’s aestheticism appealed to the growing authority of cosmopolitan female amateurs, as Evangelista points out: “By privileging imagination over scholarly training, the aesthetic reception of ancient Greece can therefore be seen to have aided a popularizing turn in classical studies, opening Victorian classicism to the intervention of women and social groups that had traditionally been excluded from institutionalized education” (32).
Or conversely, it is possible to argue that the entry of Victorian women into classical studies coincided with, and contributed to, this popularizing turn. Isobel Hurst reads through the pages of Oscar Wilde’s fashionable periodical, the *Woman’s World*, to show how the popularizing of Hellenism in the 1880s was associated with the image of the educated woman. For example, Jane Harrison contributed an essay that turns Sappho (and, by implication, Harrison herself) into a model for the life of the intellectual woman in an intellectual community that, as Hurst points out, was simultaneously projected out of and into the female readership for the periodical. In “The Pictures of Sappho,” Harrison appealed to this imagined community of readers not through philological reconstruction of Sappho’s Greek fragments, but through archaeological evidence that would allow the reader to picture Sappho in a process of imaginative reconstruction. Here the illustrious Harrison (who had completed classical studies at Newnham College but not yet returned to teach classics at Cambridge University) illustrated a form of aestheticism on the margins of classical scholarship that would continue to inform the future development of her own scholarly career. According to Hurst, “The *Woman’s World*’s focus on the lives of women in the ancient world offers an unfamiliar version of the reception of ancient Greece and Rome in Victorian culture, accessible to a wide readership, based on images rather than classical texts” (43). What may seem like “an unfamiliar version” of classical reception to us now, was all too familiar in the nineteenth century where many women contributed to the popular circulation of classics. Reading the *Woman’s World* was like visiting a museum filled with classical antiquities, allowing Victorian women to discover and articulate their own versions of aesthetic historicism.

From different points of view, the four essays collected here throw into relief the historical role played by women in defining classics for Victorians. Østermark-Johansen refers to Albert Moore’s “Reading Aloud,” the 1884 painting that shows three girls in classical setting, with one reading aloud as if they might be “listening to a passage of undulating Paterian prose” as “the wavy patterns in background are suggestive of the imaginative or associative movements of the mind” (25). Before, through, and beyond Pater, an increasing number of women were reading Greek and Latin, in the original texts and in other contexts, through translations and imitations and other cultural transformations, as a way of tracing the imaginative move-
ment of the mind. Furthermore, in their own writing, women were actively engaged in the reimagination of classics as well. As Shanyyn Fiske has argued in *Heretical Hellenism*, nineteenth-century women writers “evolved alternative approaches to the ancient world and developed applications of ancient literature and ideas to Victorian culture that subverted the traditional status of the classics as an elite, exclusively masculine field of knowledge” (9). For some women this engagement produced the unorthodox and heterodox Hellenisms described by Fiske, while for other women, as Hurst demonstrates in her reading of the *Woman’s World*, these classical discourses were a way to “appeal to conservative readers as well as feminists” (42). Classics served a wide range of ideological purposes for Victorian women, as Mahn further emphasizes in her reading of Blunt and Garnett; even while their texts “exhibit classic elements of Victorian Hellenism,” they also “used their description of modern Greek women as another access point to a larger engagement with the difficulty of knowing Greek(s)” (17-18). And Evangelista demonstrates how the uneasy alliance of aestheticism and archaeology was productive for the writing of Vernon Lee, who sought “a sublime experience of the archaeological object, which takes it outside the terrain of science and precise knowledge,” in an “anti-theoretical gesture . . . characteristic of aesthetic criticism, with its desire to expose and subvert the role of institutions in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge” (38, 39).

This “anti-theoretical gesture” can itself be seen, and theorized, as another form of classical transmission. It is the gesture that is posed as both a theoretical and historical question in Barrett Browning’s reading of *The Greek Slave*, where “art’s fiery finger” points, through its own multiple mediations, to an aesthetic historicism that reaches back to the past and imagines the past reaching into the present. While this gesture is embodied in a seemingly passive feminine figure, it also points to the active reception of classics not only by educated men but also for and through women. Mediating between the professionalization of classical scholarship and the popularization of classics, nineteenth-century women became an increasingly important medium for classical transmission, creating new versions and subversions of classics for Victorians.

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NOTES

1On Anglo-American responses to The Greek Slave, see also Green; Hyman; Kasson; Stone; Stone and Taylor; Winterer; and Yellin.

2These lines from Aurora Leigh were inscribed by Barrett Browning in June 1858, in the book that Powers kept in his studio in Florence; see Gaja 17.

3On the popular reception of Pompeii as mediated by Bulwer-Lytton, see Meilee Bridges, “Objects of Affection: Necromantic Pathos in Bulver’s City of the Dead,” along with other essays on Pompeii in the public imagination, in the forthcoming conference volume edited by Hales and Paul.

4See for example Martindale, “Thinking Through Reception” and William W. Batstone, “The Point of Reception Theory,” in Martindale and Thomas. For general introduction and other approaches to classical reception studies see also Hardwick; Hardwick and Stray; Kallendorf; and Leonard and Prins.

WORKS CITED


