

# Painting in the Dark: Greed and Hubris in James' "The Last of the Valerii"

Michael Salib

May 14, 2002

In Henry James' "The Last of the Valerii", we watch the story unfold through the eyes of our narrator, a painter. Although James does not call attention to it, we see that the narrator is wrong, time and time again in his descriptions of Marco, the Italian Count wedded to his goddaughter. He claims that Marco will bring unhappiness to the family through his arrogance, his greed, and his faithlessness. Ironically, all his fears and criticisms of Marco fall under the rubric of Marco's Roman ethnicity. The irony is threefold. Not only does the painter suffer from every flaw he attributes to Marco, but those flaws result directly from the painter's Americanness. Furthermore, it is the painter's (and his goddaughter's) own flaws that bring about the family's unhappiness, not Marco's. As we uncover the multiple layers of meaning in this story, we'll see how James is using the Americans as a symbol for his own society. In doing so, he criticizes the arrogance, greed and the fickleness of western societies. For each of these traits, we show how the narrator attributed them to Marco as well as how the narrator possessed them and how they brought unhappiness to the whole family.

The painter exposes his belief in Marco's arrogance when he says, "a Frenchman, an Italian, a Spaniard might be a very good fellow, but that he never really respected the woman he pretended to love" (20). And yet Marco could have just as easily claimed that an American never really respected the statues, the culture he pretended to love. Although the Americans studied a great deal about the old Roman ways, they never respected the power hiding just beneath the surface.

The Countessa knows a great deal of the old Roman culture as the narrator reminds her of "the pedigrees you used to dog's-ear your school-mythology with trying to get by heart" (38) and further explains that "she took learned advice on the subject" (21) of antiquities. Yet despite her knowledge, she refused to listen to the Count when he exclaimed, "Let them lie, the poor disinherited gods, and don't break their rest. What do you want of them? We can't worship them. Would you put them on pedestals to stare and mock at them? If you can't believe in them, don't disturb them!" (21). She also ignored him when he begged, "Don't dig up any more, or I won't answer for my wits!" (22). The narrator ironically asks "How could he advise her, instruct her, sustain her?" (19) when it seems that Marco had a great deal of instruction to provide.

The narrator fares little better in this regard. Although he recognizes Marco's keen awareness by saying that "his eye was excellent and his measurement [was] as trustworthy as that of a mathematical instrument", the narrator too completely disregards the observations Marco makes when he says "there have been things seen and done which leave strange influences behind! They don't touch you, doubtless, who come of another race. But me they touch often, in the whisper of the leaves and the odour of the mouldy soil and the

blank eyes of the old statues. I can't bear to look the statues in the face." (21). If only the Americans had heeded Marco's warnings, they would have been spared the misery that befell them, but in their arrogance, they assumed they knew more than a mere Italian who was "fundamentally unfurnished with anything remotely resembling an idea" (19). Even after all he had seen, the narrator still writes of Marco, "he had no beliefs, nor hopes, nor fears" (19).

In a similar manner, the narrator demonstrates his conviction that Marco cares only for his goddaughter's fortune when he says "it was impossible to believe that he had more thoughts for all this than for the equally pretty fortune" (14). Yet the narrator soon realizes that "Marco was a perfect original, and seemed quite content to be appreciated" (18). Instead of Marco's greed, we hear the Countessa's mother say "it's the Villa she's in love with, quite as much as the Count" (14), while the narrator opines that the Countessa "had persuaded herself that the villa was full of buried treasures" (21). Her lust for wealth entombed beneath the Villa compelled the Countessa to excavate, heedless of the dangers of which her husband tried to warn her. Even though she lived in a paradise where she "was idyllically happy and absolutely in love" (18), she could not grant her husband's one request.

Finally, we can see the narrator cursing Marco for his faithlessness, his inability to remain true. When the Countessa and her godfather are at their most desperate, he exclaims, "An Italian Count may be mighty fine, but he won't *wear!* Give us some wholesome young fellow of our own blood, who will play us none of these dusky old world tricks" (29). Like his other criticisms, the narrator soon contradicts this one as well. He notes that Marco has "a beauty which was less a matter of mere fortunate surface than usually happens in the handsome

Roman Race” (14) but “little of the light, inexpensive urbanity of his countrymen” (14). His gaze belied “a stupid sincerity” (14).

And yet it was the narrator and his goddaughter who were quick to forget the old ways. The narrator displays a dim awareness that “we were out of the modern world and had no business with modern scruples” (20), but, as an American, has forgotten too much to navigate the danger before him. Even though they both felt that the villa was “haunted by the ghosts of the past...there were memories in the fragrance of the untended flowers, in the hum of the insects” (17), that “the place was so bright, so still, so sacred to the silent, imperturbable past” (20), they ignored their instincts and plunged ahead with the excavations. The narrator even felt something of the presence that Marco felt since he says, “the statues used to stand in perpetual twilight like conscious things...I used to linger near them, half expecting they would speak and tell me their stony secrets” (18). Unlike Marco, the Americans had long since abandoned the ways of their ancestors and now stood blind and deaf to the spiritual hunger that burns in the human heart.

Weaving these elements together, we can see that that this is not a story about Marco, but about the narrator. More precisely, it is a story about an entire people, the Americans, who in their arrogance have forgotten that humans are spiritual beings and have spiritual needs. They still maintain some vague awareness, yet that flicker of recognition drives them not toward deeper understanding, but rather toward exploitation. They study the mythologies extensively and devote their lives to drawing, painting and discussing the old statues and religions, because they are lured by a spiritual impulse they don’t understand. Despite their incomprehension, they insist on uncovering the works because of their greed to harness, in

some small measure, a power larger than themselves. Thus, the story is really about the latent power of the spiritual hunger in all humans and the perils of ignoring it when blinded by an arrogant greed to control it.

While James deals harshly with the Americans, modern day Italians hardly fare better. Having lost the spirituality that is their Roman heritage, the Italians are left with mere vestiges of an older way of being. The narrator thus attributes the positive characteristics he sees in Marco to the ancient Romans while comparing Marco to modern day Italians when looking for character flaws. By examining who the narrator criticizes, we can determine that James condemned the church, the *forestieri*, and especially the archaeologist who uncovers the statue. Like the Americans, the modern Italians are incapable of producing a “real” religion that actually connects with people: Marco tells his fiance, “if you should attempt to embrace [Catholicism], I am afraid you would close your arms about a shadow” (16) and bluntly adds, “this heavy atmosphere of St Peter’s always stupefies me” (17).

In a similar manner, we can see that James condemns the *forestieri* who know many facts, but understand so little. The Count claims they “go about with their red books and their opera-glasses, and read about this and that, and think they know it. Ah! you must *feel* it” (32). He even forbids an archaeologist from viewing the statue, telling the narrator, “he was going to make some hideous drawing of her” (27). It is not the drawing that disgusted the Count, since he had offered the narrator the opportunity to sketch the statue. Rather, it is the disrespect implied by unconscious drawing that the Count despised.

But the narrator reserves most of his hatred for the little archaeologist. He is, in some sense, a bridge between two worlds: that of the modern day man and that of the ancient

Roman. Unlike the others, he appreciates the power imbued in the statue, but instead of respecting it, he chooses to prostitute it. He discounts the harm that has befallen the Count and his family saying, “Ah, but the Juno is worth fifty thousand scudi!” (37). Although he would put the statue on display for all the world to see, he is, in some sense, a tomb robber, desecrating the dead to enrich himself. This is what James fears most, a Faustian willingness to learn just enough so as to gain wealth and power. Ultimately, the story is a plea to avoid such dangers, as well as the dangers of arrogance and greed.