The Secret Life of Statues

Angela Voss

In this paper I want to explore the question of representation, resemblance and identity in figurative sculpture. By this I mean considering the varying degrees by which a statue may be seen to be merely 'standing for' or imitating the being it portrays, sharing its qualities in some more dynamic way, or completely embodying it as a living presence. I was led to this enquiry by the ancient magical texts of the Hermetic and neoplatonic traditions in which *telestike* or statue-animation played a major part in theurgic rituals, rituals which were in aid of the alignment of the human soul with the gods and the eventual realisation of its own—embodied—immortality. Both humans and statues could become divine through a process of cultivating an intense form of symbolic perception which brought divine and human worlds into single focus.

I shall be exploring the theme of theurgy a little later, but first I want to point out some of the difficulties we have in our age in entering into a relationship with images in the same way as our pre-Enlightenment ancestors. We are inevitably caught in a Cartesian duality that distinguishes between thought and action, conception and perception; our rational mind has been trained to override our intuitive response and we no longer trust in the 'marvellous truth' revealed to the imagination through sense-perception of image. The claim that a statue could also be a god would not stand up to any empirical investigation. But to apply this rational mode of perception to a time when artistic representation was a way of exposing the innate sympathies of an animated cosmos, where images were signs of a deeper but hidden reality which permeated and ordered the whole of creation, is to risk gross misunderstanding and distortion of a common human experience. Gary Tomlinson talks of "the tiresome play of power by which we habitually make others submit to our ways of knowing",[1] and we must beware of even asking such questions as "how did statue magic work?" in a technical sense, for this desire for explanation implies a forced reshaping of an essentially magical world view to fit the literal paradigms and causal assumptions of our own.

[1] Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago University Press,),

I am interested in responses to images in which the distance between the observer, the observed and its referent closes in, where the distinction between subject and object is overcome. In the 'magical' world view of the practitioners of theurgy and natural magic, any ritual object or sound was understood to resonate with the deity it invoked through its participation in chains of sympathy which exist like hidden organising structures throughout creation. (SLIDE 2) In these vertical series, archetypal principles govern an unfolding of like qualities from heaven to earth, so for example the principle of Love reveals itself through the Goddess Aphrodite, the planet Venus, the Venusian individual, the dove, the lily, lapis lazuli and copper. In a world of sympathetic resonance, like attracts like, and the magician or the artist knows how to create images that intensified the attraction between archetype and its representation in stone, paint or sound. The creation of images then was not simply an artificial activity, but an ontological one, a deliberate "entering into the play of forces" as Plotinus would put it, to create a power-point which would, through force of similitude and resonance, bring the hidden life of the cosmos into the sensory range of the participant or viewer.

In this way, the sign was identical to which it pointed, the resemblance was directly perceived: it was immanent in the world, it revealed a truth through its presence. It was *already there* to be recognised. For us, this is no longer a truth—resemblance is put to the test of comparison; it is displaced onto the ingenuity of the artist or composer, it becomes a mere representation of something, something that we can either be "willing to believe" or not. We can see this rupture between appearance and essence beginning with Plato, for whom most images of things in this world cannot touch an 'authentic' reality and indeed are opposed to it as merely fictive and illusory; only a philosopher who has seen the true immaterial Form would have the ability to convey it through art. Through Plato's analysis of *mimesis,* art becomes separated from philosophy and therefore distinctly untrustworthy, as Iris Murdoch observes: (SLIDE 3)

> The artist begins indeed to look like a special sort of sophist; and not the least of his crimes is that he directs our attention to particulars which he presents as intuitively knowable, whereas concerning their knowability philosophy has grave and weighty doubts. Art undoes the work of philosophy by deliberately fusing knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.[2]

Once the sign took on the function of *representing* the reality that was now separated from it, how very difficult it became to put aside the autonomy of the rational mind! Hierarchies

[2] Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun* (Chatto and Windus, 1977), 32

of similitude were no longer a source of true knowledge about the world, rather the identities and differences of things were analysed and categorised. The post-modern philosopher Michel Foucault has lamented this split between participation and theoretical analysis: (SLIDE 4)

> The simultaneously endless and closed, full and tautological world of resemblance now finds itself dissociated and, as it were, split down the middle; on the one side, we shall find the signs that have become tools of analysis, marks of identity and difference, principles whereby things can be reduced to order, keys for a taxonomy; and on the other, the empirical and murmuring resemblance of things, that unreacting similitude that lies beneath thought and furnishes the infinite raw material for divisions and distributions. On the one hand, the general theory of signs, divisions and classifications; on the other, the problem of immediate resemblances, of the spontaneous movement of the imagination, of nature's repetitions… the sign ceases to be a form of the world, and it ceases to be bound to what it marks by the sold and secret bonds of resemblance or affinity.[3]

Somewhat paradoxically, an antidote to Plato's division between 'seeming' and 'being' is found in neoplatonic image theory, where for the first time the imagination is granted the power of philosophy in its ability to apprehend and represent the immaterial world of divine ideas. "Nothing can stop the imagination" says Philostratus in the 2nd century CE, "for it proceeds undismayed to the goal which it has itself conceived". [4]This is the *phantasia* by means of which classical sculptors such as Phidias and Praxiteles were able to astound their contemporaries, and which opened a channel to the divine through human creativity. Through the transforming agency of *imaginal* perception, images could become symbols, offering the possibility of an unbroken train of vision from sense-object to noetic revelation. Now all this is by way of introduction to my chief concern in this paper, which is with the power of the imagination as a mode of knowledge, and how poetic vision may be harnessed as an authentic means of research, despite the irrevocable shift in human consciousness that has occurred in the past four hundred years. Plato's metaphor of the cave may still have relevance in illustrating the danger of taking our prevailing mode of literal vision as the only one. If we are to heal the split between the intuitive imagination and the rational mind, and to value *participatory* knowledge as a mode of deep investigation into the nature of our relationship with image, we must not resist the lure of the image itself.

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[3] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* 1966 (repr.Routledge, 2002), 57-8

[4] Quoted in Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals* ( ).

On that note, let's consider a poem by the German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaic Torso of Apollo*.[5] (SLIDE 5) As Rilke contemplates the statue, he becomes aware of a life or power with it, an inner brilliance which sees *him*. This experience of recognition, of direct contact, makes him realise with a shock that he must change his life. Why should this be? His reaction raises the question of emotional engagement with an image that goes far beyond a conventional aesthetic response. Rilke's relationship with the statue is no longer 'I – it' , as Martin Buber would put it, but 'I-thou'. His attention to it seems to allow an inner eye to open and a voice to speak – with rational mind disengaged, the sturdy defence of common sense subdued, his imagination is free to dialogue with – well, what exactly?

Most of us tend to strongly resist the emotions aroused in us by images, and deny an affective response for fear of losing intellectual control over our object of scrutiny, a reaction explored by the Jungian psychologist Aldo Carotenuto in relation to the supremely irrational experience of falling in love: (SLIDE 6)

> Whenever one rejects the experience of love by rationalising it away, one is obeying a collective law that has been internalised. We have all absorbed this law that negates the free realisation of desire in the face of life's continual invitations. Thus while life conspires to arouse us, it can – and does – often happen that we deny our desire in obedience to an external veto that by now is fatally alive within us without our even being conscious of it.[6]

In relation to statues, the 'external veto' is that matter is inanimate – it is only stone after all, so it is foolish to feel fear, or desire. As David Freedberg has pointed out in *The Power of Images,* "we go into a picture gallery, and we have been so schooled in a particular form of aesthetic criticism that we suppress acknowledgement of the basic elements of *cognition* and *appetite*, or admit them only with difficulty".[7] Or as James Elkins bluntly puts it, "when pictures are openly out to move us, we find reasons not to be moved".[8] He laments the fact that we no longer feel comfortable crying in front of paintings, and partly blames the deadness and artificiality of the exhibition space with its bland, anaesthetising information guides and "low-volume emotion".[9] Galleries secularise the sacred, as though

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[5] Stephen Mitchell (trans.) *Ahead of All Parting: Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Modern Library, 1995) at http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15814; reproduced by permission of Modern Library.

[6] Aldo Carotenuto, *Eros and Pathos*(Toronto: Inner City Books, 1989), 22

[7] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago University Press, 1989), 17

[8] James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears* (

[9] Elkins,

creating a comfort zone to minimise the possibility of direct encounter with a power greater than ours. "Everyone knows more intimate encounters are might be possible", says Elkins, "That's why some paintings are masterpieces. But we also like them safely locked away in museums".[10]

(SLIDE 7) However, Freedberg suggests that sometimes we are confronted with such a powerful fusion of an image and its prototype – and this is particularly the case with statues – that mental detachment becomes impossible and a living presence is sensed which, he says, "disturbs, attracts and threatens to shake the literal foundations of our reality".[11]

We live in an age where the creations of the media continually work to undermine our capacity for recognising the voice of what writer Ursula Leguin calls the 'real myths'. Soul-less, fabricated glamour vanishes as soon as it appears, but Leguin argues that no reason or cynicism can destroy the power of the timeless truths expressed through our mythologies. (SLIDE 8) "You look at the Blond Hero", she says, really look, and he turns into a gerbil…but you look at Apollo (SLIDE 9), and he looks back at you. When the true myth rises into consciousness, that is always its message. You must change your life".[12]

So we return to Rilke, and the question of *how* the true myth may work its magic, given the defences of the conscious mind. At the brink of taking a leap of faith into the unknown, it will retreat to image-theory, or transfer its attention to historical or cultural contexts, or the biography of the artist. We can always safely reassure ourselves that we are only looking at stone or paint and any intuition of living presence is safely relegated to the domain of superstition or groundless fantasy. But what if the instinctual response were to be trusted? Something interesting would happen, for we would find ourselves confronting an insoluble paradox. The statue is undoubtedly made of matter—and *yet* it also seems alive. This is an uncomfortable space to find oneself, but the reality of that paradox is clearly demonstrated by the apparent need to censor images of provocative subjects. After all, if they were merely inert material, why would they be considered subversive or corrupting? The ancient Greeks understood Eros to be a daimonic power which threatened to undermine civilised human behaviour if not safely contained and directed, but we have no vehicle or channel in our lives to work with this highly-charged, often overwhelming

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[10] Elkins,

[11] Freedberg, 60

[12] Ursula LeGuin, 'Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction' in *The Language of the Night, Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New York: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1979); at http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Poetry/rilke_archaic_apollo.html

emotional force – no collective rituals to tame and transform it. We are left confused, ashamed of the exposure of that raw place, therefore it is best suppressed or eliminated from our view. (SLIDE 10) Added to which, our Christian-Platonic legacy of the past two thousand years in the West has left us wary about the nature of sensuality and desire. In not allowing Eros to reveal his divinity through the arousal of our senses, we have separated soul from body, sacred love from profane passion, and ultimately divinity from matter. The virgin Mary inspires devotion, but not desire, whereas classical and Renaissance sculptors knew that the perfection of the physical body could inspire a passionate connection that was at once sensual and spiritual. It would seem that just as the God of Genesis formed man in His own image from the dust of the earth and breathed divine life into him, so artists knew the secret of exposing this divinity as if through a mirror-image, enabling humans to recognise in themselves a quality of immortal beauty in the midst of transient existence. (SLIDE 11) How easy would it be to breathe life into an ancient Greek goddess—or a Michelangelo? (SLIDE 12). Do we not sense that our desire to touch these bodies would in some miraculous way allow the marble flesh to soften? Furthermore, supposing we allowed our attention to focus, our desire to grow, our longing for contact to intensify? We would then be engaged with what C.G. Jung identified as the active imagination, the technique of concentrating on an image, either internal or external, so intensely that it begins to live, or become 'pregnant' with possibility. He says: (SLIDE 13)

> *Looking,* psychologically, brings about the activation of the object; it is as if something were emanating from one's spiritual eye that evokes or activates the object of one's vision. The English verb 'to look at' does not convey this meaning, but the German *betrachten*, which is an equivalent, means also to make pregnant…And if it is pregnant, then something is due to come out of it; it is alive, it produces, it multiplies. That is the case with any fantasy image; one concentrates upon it, and then finds that one has great difficulty in keeping the thing quiet, it gets restless, it shifts, something is added, or it multiplies itself: one fills it with living power and it becomes pregnant.[13]

(SLIDE 14) The idea that passionate engagement may awake a stony heart is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in W.B. Yeats' poem 'The Statues',[14] and it is at this point of a radical shift in perception that we enter the realm of *telestike*.

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[13] C.G.Jung, *Interpretation of Visions*, privately mimeographed seminar notes of Mary Foote, 1941, Vol.6, Lect.1, May 4, 1932,3; quoted in Joan Chodorow (ed.), *Jung on Active Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1997), 7

[14] At http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/william_butler_yeats/poems/10415

In the ancient Hermetic texts we learn how one of mankind's greatest achievements was the creation of living statues: "statues ensouled and conscious", says Hermes Trismegistus, "filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means".[15] Through "holy and divine mysteries" the priests implanted the souls of *daimones* or living cosmic spirits into the ritual statues, using a mixture of plants, stones and spices whose "natural power of divinity" resonated sympathetically with the god. The spiritual presence was preserved in the statue by constant sacrifices, hymns and music which conformed to its nature, and it was heard to speak as an oracle to the celebrants. The neoplatonist Proclus, in the fifth century CE, tells us that "by means of vivifying signs and names they consecrate images and make them living and moving things";[16] rites not unlike those of concealing relics of statues of saints to infuse them with divine potency. Through these devotional acts the god became present in its own image, which then functioned not only literally as an object but symbolically as a *synthema*. It was the power of the symbol that "made the impossible happen"[17] – in bringing the stone to life – but only through the perception of the devotee, which had ceased to be limited to its outer appearance or form. When a state of contemplative awareness had been reached, marked by the ritual of consecration, matter was transfigured and was seen to wake. In Greek the word for this active form of contemplation is *theoria*, from which we derive the word 'theory', but it is no abstract conceptualisation. *Theoria* is productive and dynamic, resulting in efficacious action that opens a channel for the *anima mundi* - that all-pervading spiritual energy of the Platonic cosmos - to infuse the material world. To those outside the sacred space, no doubt stone remained stone – for the smile or voice of the god would be outside their range of perception.

(SLIDE 15) The writers of the Hermetic texts were speaking of rituals and traditions which emerged out of the mysterious depths of ancient Egypt, where one of the words for sculptor meant "he who keeps alive". Funeral effigies created in as perfect resemblance as possible to the dead person would be believed to attract his or her *ka* or life-force and provide it with another home or container. (SLIDE 16) In the case of the Pharoah, this procedure would ensure both his immortality and the continuity of his power in Egypt. (SLIDE 17) The *ka* was often given its own representation, such as this *ka* statue

[15] *Asclepius* 24 (trans. B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* [Cambridge University Press, 1989]), 81
[16] Proclus, *In Timaeum* 37 c-d, quoted in Freedberg, 88
[17] Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 213

of King Hor which would originally have been painted and decorated with gold leaf. Notice how the other worldly presence of the spirit is suggested by the luminosity of the eyes, which were intended to be as life-like as possible, to emphasise the penetration of divine vision into this world. We will return to eyes a little later, but I should emphasise here that for the Egyptians, as for Hindus today, the divine empowerment of matter was central to religious life and it was the function of the artist and priest, through skill and appropriate ritual, to endow the figures with the faculty of sense-perception.

In both cultures, such statues were, and are, not *art*, as we would call it, but serve the functional purpose of housing divine life. (SLIDE 18) Ceremonies such as the opening of the mouth and bringing food would ensure the presence of the *ka* and such statues were often placed deep within the tombs of their dead counterparts, unseen by human eyes. (SLIDE 19) In Hindu ritual images of deities are dressed, bathed, put to bed, given sight and breath in rites of consecration to effect their incarnation into this world. As Diana Eck observes, because the images of the deities are seen to *embody*, not merely represent, the divine presence, they "facilitate and enhance the close relationship of the worshipper and God and make possible the deepest outpourings of emotions in worship".[18]

We may perform a similar ritual when we surround ourselves with images of our dead, from monumental sculptures (SLIDE 20) to photographs on the mantelpiece; and we may perhaps ask ourselves whether the sense that the dead live on in some way is perpetuated not only by the attractive power of their likeness, acting as a 'bait' to draw their life force, but also by the quality of our attention and emotional response, as if our nostalgia and memory ignites the latent flame of vitality in their images.

Around the mid seventh century BCE the first Greek sculpture emerged under the influence of the Egyptian style, and with it a new desire to create the perfect human form with an idealised beauty that conveyed the serenity and perfection of the gods. (SLIDE 21) The early Archaic statues of *kouroi* or youths in the full bloom of beauty and strength reflected this particularly Greek aspiration for immortality. These naked figures were not hidden way in tombs but placed proudly in shrines, on monuments or in public places for all to admire. Life-size or more, the legs always in walking posture, their mouths slightly open as if breathing, they radiated *kallos* and *charis*, beauty and grace. The Greeks called them *agalmata*, "objects that through their high quality and craftsmanship inspire delight in

[18] Diana Eck, *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 46

the viewer".[19] But an *agalma* affects the viewer precisely because it "prompts" the divinity it imitates to respond through its *charis*, the mysterious charm bestowed by the genius of the artist. Thus the soul of the dead hero, or the god, was lured into its stone form with a magnetic attraction and could suggest through its gaze an alluring and enticing other world – a world which was no longer impossibly remote. Such an intimation was fully intended to arouse desire, the longing to return to a place where such beauty reigned. (SLIDE 22) The equivalent female figures of *korai* or young maidens, with their elaborate hairstyles and colourful garments radiated *cosmos* or the perfect orderly arrangement of ornament and dress; never naked, like their male counterparts, their eternal youth and demure self-containment were surely intended to suggest to the viewer that he or she too may transcend the earthly limitations of time and decay. Deborah Tarn Steiner has suggested that it is this other-worldly perfection of beauty to which we aspire in the cosmetic enhancement of our all-too-human bodies, and even that which inspires our romantic love; "a work of art", she says, "does not owe its appeal to its resemblance to a living beloved, but the beloved instigates passion precisely because he or she displays the properties that belong to finely crafted objects."[20]

(SLIDE 23) As the archaic style developed into the early classical, the monumental youths and maidens metamorphosed into supple, agile bodies of such vital presence that they were often bound or chained lest they should escape from their plinths. The mark of a great sculptor was precisely his ability to infuse his creation with life. Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century BCE, tells us that the mythological sculptor Daedalus "in the production of statues so excelled all other men that later generations preserved a story to the effect that the statues he created were exactly like living beings; for they say that they could see and walk, and preserved so completely the disposition of the entire body that the statue that was produced by art seemed to be a living being".[21]

The ideal of human beauty in the classical age took the form of the male athlete at the height of his powers, and indeed a new genre of statuary – hollow bronze portraits of champions – gained immense popularity. The aim of the sculptor was to 'freeze' the moment of victory for posterity, and Pindar remarks that such sculptors were continuing the work of the trainers in their quest to perfect the human body.[22] (SLIDE 24) The inscriptions on the statues' bases described the heroic status of the athlete, and often

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[19] Deborah Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 116
[20] Tarn Steiner, 195
[21] Diodorus Siculus, 4.76, 1-3, quoted in Freedberg, 36-7
[22] Pindar, quoted in Nigel Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics* 150 (see 'Epinikian Statues', 147-65)

implied an ambiguity between image and living subject . An anecdote related by Pausanias tells of the statue of a 5th century champion named Theagenes who made various enemies in his lifetime. When he died, one of them came to Olympia to whip his statue, but it fell off its plinth and killed the assailant. The statue was then prosecuted, charged with murder, and 'drowned' off the coast of Thasos. Thasos subsequently suffered crop failure, and the Delphic oracle blamed the abuse of the statue; so it was duly recovered by fishermen and re-dedicated, thereafter to be venerated respectfully. Pausanias concludes that it was not only a wonderful work of art, but *thaumaturgic* or wonder-working, giving health and good fortune to all who paid it homage, and indeed many copies of it were made for this purpose.[23]

To prosecute a statue implies no doubt about its autonomous power. The classical Greeks may not have yet developed theurgic methods of invocation, but perhaps that was because they had no need to—life was self-evident, the distinctions blurred between statue, hero and god. (SLIDE 25) Take also the image of the *eromenos*, the beloved youth whose role in the culture of Greek homoeroticism was to arouse the *eros* or the *erastai*, his older male admirer and educator. Could a boy of flesh and blood ever be a match for the sculptor's *agalma*, whose painted lips, bronzed skin and aloof untouchability were in service to an ideal of androgynous beauty beyond the dreams of the most ardent pursuer? The Greeks believed that erotic desire radiated from the beloved, kindling the *pothos* or longing of the stricken lover which was not to be appeased, but to be led on to ever greater intensity. In this sense, a statue fulfilled the same function, "just like a beautiful person" says Tarn Steiner, "a beautiful work of art doubly energised the space between it and the observer. Radiating grace, it attracted its victim's glance and held it imprisoned." [24] Unlike a reluctant youth, however, whose combination of reticence and modesty would eventually give way to the lover's entreaties, a statue denies the physical fulfilment of love forever.

(SLIDE 26) Praxiteles' stunned the classical world with his Aphrodite. For the first time, the female form was deliberately given a sexual allure; look at me, desire me, but you can't have me is her message. So what is the poor lover to do, ignited with desire? The famous anecdote of a man who stole into her shrine to make love to the marble goddess (leaving an indelible stain) graphically demonstrates the irresistibility of her material form – but where is the origin of her erotic power?[25] We may imagine Aphrodite laughing at the

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[23] Spivey, 164
[24] Tarn Steiner, 205-6
[25] Recounted in Lucian, *Amores* 13-17; Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 36,20-21

clumsy attempt of her devotee to consummate his passion with her image – for she knows that true union with her can only take place on another level, the place where her likeness beckons. A mortal may only unite with a goddess in the imaginal realm of myth, no matter how entrancing her earthly counterpart may be. But how we crave these images of seduction, that prompt perhaps some long-lost memory. (SLIDE 27) In the realism of photography and film the knife-edge of impossible desire becomes even more sharpened and refined, for the model or the film-star are living, breathing beings, and yet still beyond our reach. Plato would say of course that they must be, for the growth of the soul and its awakening to its own divinity depend on the pain and frustration of unfulfilled desire. Falling prey to the mighty daemon Eros means touching the quick of desire for possession, and not stopping until the limitations of mortal existence have been seen through as the greatest illusion of all. Can a statue be the starting point of such a spiritual journey?

Maybe not as many are seen today, alienated from their temples or shrines, deformed, pale, unseeing. But how different they would look with their original paint, even shocking, in their conflation of divine perfection and human warmth. And how different they would look if they could see us. In both Egyptian and Greek traditions, the most significant moment of the statue's creation, the moment of animation, was that of the painting in or inserting the eyes – and again it is Hinduism that preserves this in the ritual of *darsan.* "Not only must the gods keep their eyes open", writes Diana Eck, "but so must we, in order to make contact with them, to reap their blessings, and to know their secrets".[26] This was the moment of consecration, the 'making sacred', the point at which the god entered the image and it became operative in the world, able to meet the gaze of the onlookers. (SLIDE 28) In Egypt the eyes were often made of polished rock crystal which imitated the human eye with startling precision. (SLIDE 29) But these eyes do not seduce or invite the living, they penetrate into unseen realms. (SLIDE 30) The gaze of the Greek hero however deliberately entices the viewer in the conviction that eros was contagious through the eyes, and that love was born at the sight of beauty. If the statue can now see us, we are no longer in control, but rendered vulnerable, less certain of our superiority. A channel of communication has been opened which makes the question of representation or identity far more ambiguous. (SLIDE 31) Take the Apollo from the West Pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, captured in stone as he arrests the fight between Lapiths and Centaurs with his indomitable command, a monument to his civilising influence over

[26] Eck,

humanity. (SLIDE 32) What happens to our relationship with this statue when his eyes are restored and he sees? (SLIDE 33) And what happens when his familiar worn and damaged greyness is bathed in vibrant colours? (SLIDE 34) There is a recognition. In bringing their statues to life in this way, the Greeks created the perfect conditions for the working of *telestike* or statue magic, where the form of the deity resonated so harmoniously with its divine essence that they became fused. Proclus recognised that in theurgic ritual a superbly crafted statue became a receptacle for a mysterious transcendent presence, which he called "divine illumination".[27]

This brings us to neoplatonic philosophy and the function of images in the soul's journey from the world of multiplicity back to its source in the One, the fount of all being. We have already suggested that images could be regarded as baits or lures to catch the spiritual power of the *anima mundi* that pervades the cosmos, and Plotinus explains how this can happen: (SLIDE 35)

"I think that the wise men of old, who made temples and statues in the wish that the gods should be present to them, looking to the nature of the All, had in mind that the nature of soul is everywhere easy to attract, but that if someone were to construct something sympathetic to it and able to receive a part of it, it would of all things receive soul most easily. That which is sympathetic to it is what imitates it in some way, like a mirror able to catch the reflection of a form".[28]

Images then may ultimately be receptacles for the Divine Ideas themselves, as in Plotinian metaphysics, the properties of the Ideas are sown in the world soul as it mediates between heaven and earth. If the gods or daemons who inhabit the immortal realm are given form, they may then act as messengers, contacted in the ritual action of the theurgists who know how to conform their own souls to the divine. In the famous magical text, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Tat the initiate says (SLIDE 36) "there are reflections of the incorporeals in corporeals, and of corporeals in incorporeals – from the sensible to the intelligible cosmos, and from the intelligible to the sensible. Therefore my King, adore the statues, because they, too, possess Ideas from the intelligible cosmos".[29]

The rituals of statue-animation would have formed an integral part of the theurgic rituals practised by Iamblichus and Proclus. This 'divine work' had as its ultimate goal nothing less than the divinisation of the human soul, as the theurgist used ritual objects as

[27] Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum Commentaria* 18.27-19.18; quoted in Struck, 236
[28] Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.3.11
[29] *Corpus Hermeticum* 17 (trans. Copenhaver, 62)

symbols, to move to ever deeper levels of perception not through discursive understanding but through awakening a sense of primordial participation with the gods, a sense which is *prior* to any rational judgement or analysis. As Gregory Shaw explains, "the rituals of theurgy allow us to move from the periphery of embodied awareness to its divine centre. Ultimately, [theurgy] allows the gods to appear in embodied life, to reveal themselves in human form through our mortal existence".[30] He adds that the gods do this not through our "knowing, calculating or predicting", but "by the quality and intensity of our longing". [31]Or in the words of Proclus, symbolic properties of images "move everything towards the desire of the good and this wanting produced in things is unquenchable".[32]

Platonically speaking then, symbolic images engage us not just intellectually but also emotionally, and crucially, it is the kindling of the desire and longing that allow us to perceive them as symbols at all. In other words, symbolic perception is a mobile process which progresses according to the intention and attention of the observer. Let us take this a bit further now, and consider what the theurgists meant by moving from a condition of separated knowing to a "unitary connection with the gods".[33] (SLIDE 37) Proclus speaks of four different levels in which sense objects participate in divine life, and through which we may respond to them. Firstly, they are quite simply sense-objects, seen literally as just matter. It's only stone or wood, we might say of a statue, expertly carved maybe, but the bottom line is its materiality. Secondly, a statue may be seen as an image or *representation* of something, such as a god – but as I suggested at the beginning, this move does not yet bring the form into single focus as it were with its prototype. It is akin to allegory – it remains a conceptual exercise. The key move is the next one, where the object is seen as a *reflection* or imitation of something beyond it – it resembles and thus reveals a presence which can only be grasped through an intuitive shift on the part of the viewer. This is the moment of the shiver down the spine, the catching of the eye, the message to change your life. Finally, the image is no longer seen as separate in any way from its immaterial essence; the alchemical transmutation has occurred, the miracle is seen, the god and his form are identical and the viewer participates in this identity. Not many of us could claim to know what this means from experience, but Proclus would say that as a symbolic image partakes of all these dimensions simultaneously, how far an individual proceeds purely

[30] Gregory Shaw, 'Astrology as Divination: Iamblichean Theory and its Contemporary Practice' (unpublished paper, 2005), 5
[31] Shaw, 2005, 6
[32] Proclus, *In Cratylem* 30.19-32.3, quoted in Struck, 237
[33] Proclus, *In Parmenidem* 847 (trans. G.Morrow and J. Dillon, Princeton University Press, 1987)

depends on how far he or she can extend his or her normal limits of vision. In this context, there is no sense at all in asking black and white questions, expecting yes or no answers, or holding conclusive definitions about truth or falsehood, reality or illusion. In fact what we call 'normal' perception is thrown upside down, for to perceive the outer appearance as most real is, from this perspective, the most preliminary and deceptive stage of looking, a mere preparation for the more substantial revelation granted to the imagination. As Henry Corbin has pointed out, this kind of vision is what turns an idol into an icon.

So to return to our Platonic lover, it becomes clearer why the statue or the beautiful youth must not respond to his (or her) desire—in the impossible frenzy of unrequited passion, the extreme tension produced forces the soul away from its imprisonment by the literal world and impels it towards a condition of liberation, where if finds an affinity and identity with the immortals. The lover comes to realise that in the contemplation of a beauty that cannot be possessed, he is being asked to change, to awake to a new and deeper perception of the world and union with it, for by the laws of cosmic attraction, soul will always seek to unite with itself.

No one has considered the role of the imagination in this process more thoroughly than Corbin in his studies of Islamic mysticism, with its Platonic and Hermetic undercurrents. The *mundus imaginalis* as defined by Corbin is the very ground in which the literal becomes transformed into the spiritual, the place of theophany and revelation, the place where the human imagination may make contact with a creative source and allow it to flow into the world. This is the active imaginative power that Jung was to explore in the context of analytic psychology, and is very different from the fantastical meanderings of human invention. (SLIDE 38) The visionary mysticism of Avicenna, for example, emphasises the function of the imagination as a place of prophetic inspiration; the images that are formed in it do not derive from external perception, but arise in the depths of the soul through the agency of Angelic hierarchies and are then given material presence through the object of vision. In this way such objects are reflected back to the soul which transmutes them into symbols. For sages such as Ibn'Arabi, the power of the imagination at the intersection between physical and spiritual realities becomes primary with an autonomy and ontology of its own, and its own organ of cognition, the *himma* or creative power of the heart. Corbin defines *himma* as "the act of meditating, conceiving, imagining,

projecting, ardently desiring".[34] It is a passionate force which can create changes in the 'outside' world, and when practised by initiated mystics, even 'manifest' a being external to itself. Corbin says, "thanks to the active imagination, the gnostic's heart projects what is reflected in it (that which it mirrors); and the object on which he thus concentrates his creative power, his imaginative meditation, becomes an *apparition* of an outward, extra-psychic reality."[35] In ths way a theophany can occur, but only perceivable by others of like consciousness. (SLIDE 38) On one occasion for example, the Angel Gabriel took the form of a beautiful Arab youth, but only Ibn Arabi saw the Angel – his companions saw only the youth. It is though the image – whether youth or statue – could provide the starting point for the *himma* to create its own, internal image which then fuses with and transfigures the external one in a dual movement of internalisation and projection. This double-seeing, a seeing *through*, is instantaneous, as anyone who has fallen in love at first sight will testify. It is an initiation, an awakening, and as Rilke discovered, can be life-changing.

We have come a long way from the experience of most of us when visiting an art gallery, but I hope I have at least suggested that there may be more to visionary experiences with statues than we commonly assume. I want to end with some examples of myths and narratives that hold open the possibility that with a little divine help, humans may indeed wake up the slumbering soul of the world through infusing it with passion. (SLIDE 40) We all know the story of Pygmalion and Galatea from Ovid – the artist who created a statue of the most beautiful woman, fell in love with her, and not daring to ask for the statue itself to come to life, appealed to Venus to send him a wife just like her.[36] But the goddess did more than that, and when Pygmalion returned home from her shrine Galatea's marble flesh began to pulsate under his hands and her warm lips returned his kisses; "then indeed, the astonished hero poured out lavish thanks to Venus; pressing with his raptured lips his statue's lips. Now real, now true to life – the maiden felt the kisses given her and blushing, lifted up her timid eyes, so that she saw the light and sky above, as well as her rapt lover…"

In Ovid's story, the combination of Pygmalion's longing, his invocation to Venus and her response allow a miracle to happen – she 'consecrates' his act of creation by the firing of Eros' arrow, and as the goddess of Love, becomes present in Galatea's image. The artist's intense longing for Galatea was not enough to bring her to life, but through his

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[34] Henry Corbin *Alone with the Alone: creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn'Arabi* (Princeton University Press, 1969, repr Mythos 1997), 222
[35] Corbin, 1969/1977, 219
[36] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book 10

ritual action the goddess gave a sign that she would intervene on his behalf. Perhaps the message of this tale lies in the surrendering of human will to divine will, suggesting that when human desire has the backing of the gods it may achieve its end, even in the face of the impossible.

(SLIDE 41) The story of Eros and Psyche[37] further demonstrates this theme. Although Eros is in love with Psyche, she cannot see him, and in that sense she is like an unawakened statue. When Eros visits her at night their union is not yet fully conscious, for she does not know who he is. It is only when she drops burning oil on his shoulder and he wakes that she recognises him as a god, and falls in love – but he flees, leaving her longing for his return throughout the tasks set for her by his vengeful mother Aphrodite. When finally Psyche appears to have failed and lost her life, Eros returns with his mother's blessing and revives her to marry him on Olympus. Here Psyche's initial awakening leads to separation from her lover – it was safe for her to be in the dark, not seeing her lover for the mighty *daimon* he was. But the recognition of his true nature broke through, heralding the need for profound inner transformation. For Psyche has to become divine—that is, achieve an inner marriage in herself—before Eros can return to meet her. It is only her yearning for her lover that keeps her focussed on her tasks, and which eventually softens the heart of Zeus who orders Aphrodite to return her son to his beloved. Psyche is then made immortal, and the child of their union is Pleasure. This myth conveys the message that if Eros is glimpsed before the soul is ready he will flee, but the memory of the intoxicating encounter is enough to fuel the longing of the soul through trials of strength to an eventual everlasting union. The 18th century sculptor Canova has here depicted the moment when Eros arouses Psyche from death with a kiss, and in many stories the kiss becomes the ritual act of awakening or animating the slumbering soul. (SLIDE 42) After the kiss, captured for eternity by Rodin, there is no going back to a literal perception of the world, for it has become pregnant with possibility. This is very obvious in the fairy tale The Sleeping Beauty, where the princess is sleeping like a statue, waiting to be revived by the erotic desire of the Prince. (SLIDE 43)

(SLIDE 44) It is also expressed through Christian mythology, where we find the active, male impulse moving, transforming and awakening the receptive female soul. In one version of his genealogy, Eros is the child of Mercury – the messenger of the gods –

[37] In Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*. See translation and Commenary by Erich Neumann, *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine, a Commentary on a Tale by Apuleius* (Princeton University Press, 1971)

and Venus. In the Annunciation, Gabriel takes on the role and announces the birth of the divine child to Mary. Here, as in Apuleius' story of Eros and Psyche, the awakening of the soul leads to its pregnancy, and we return to the Jungian theme of pregnancy as a metaphor for the new life that is born through the passionate engagement of the soul with the images that arise from deep within the unconscious.

(SLIDE 45) Botticelli's famous painting *Primavera* depicts yet again the firing of the arrow of love, in the context of the neo-platonic spiritual agenda we touched on earlier. Here we find the soul, personified as the Grace Chastity, inspired with love for Mercury and fixing him with her gaze – but in true Platonic style, he is not interested in her, for he looks towards the heavens, piercing the clouds with his caduceus, directing the force of her love onwards and upwards. Instigating the whole procedure is Venus herself, presiding over the operation of her blindfolded son whose action sets in motion the regeneration and salvation of the soul. The mythological imagery here was undoubtedly inspired by the new Renaissance Christian-Platonic vision of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, for whom the union of the divine feminine with the Mercurial *logos* signified the sacralisation of nature; as indeed the woodland grove is deliberately intended to convey with its columns of trees, central alcove and fusion of pagan and Christian symbolism.

(SLIDE 46) And finally, there can be no more dramatic example in art of the identity of spiritual and sexual eros than Bernini's *The Ecstacy of St Teresa*, setting in stone the saint's mystical experience of an angelic visitation of the most intense physicality:

"I saw in the angel's hand a long spear of gold" writes Teresa, "and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God."[38]

In all these narratives, it is the erotic encounter that transforms the soul through impregnation, through the action of the divine masculine in the form of Eros, the Prince, or the Angel. In all cases there is recognition,a seeing. Rilke sees Apollo, Psyche sees Eros, Beauty sees the Prince, Galatea sees Pygmalion, Mary sees the Angel, Chastity sees Mercury and Teresa sees God. Such seeing of Eros by the soul has ancient mythological origins: (SLIDE 46) In the *Corpus Hermeticum,* the divine Hermes describes the incarnation of humans on the earth as the result of a mutual contemplation between Nature and Man, which results in their union:

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[38] St Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St Teresa of Avila* trans. David Lewis (London: Burs and Oates, 1962) ch.29, para 17

> When nature had seen the beauty which never satiates of him who had in himself all the energy of the powers and the form of God, she smiled with love, because she had seen the image of the most beautiful form of Man in the water and his shadow upon the earth. He, seeing a similar form to his own in the water, fell in love with her and wished to dwell there. No sooner wished than done, and he inhabited a form without speech. Nature, having taken her beloved, enfolded him completely, and they united, for they loved each other.[39]

(SLIDE 47) Our imagination is still gripped by the fascination of living statues. There are many circus and entertainment companies who provide 'living statues' for celebratory events, a mode of entertainment that has its roots in the European theatre tradition of mime and tableaux, but which has now become part of corporate culture and even street life. The advertising language used by these organisations plays on a secret desire that perhaps statues should be able to spring to life: "Ancient white stone figures actually begin to move" says one, "You draw near, suddenly YOU are the subject of interest", and "with elegance and grace, they come alive"[40] (SLIDE 48). The paradox is reversed; these statues really are alive, and yet convince the viewer that they are not. These party acts, in literally bringing statues to life, breaking the taboo as it were, provide a kind of 'quick fix' in that the imagination no longer has to do the work. The transformation from literal to symbolic vision is never made, the divine is reduced to the human, nobody has to confront any life-changing emotions. (SLIDE 49) And yet, what do the living statues themselves experience, standing motionless for hours under peoples' intense scrutiny? Do they find themselves undergoing a kind of initiation into the world of the inanimate statue waiting to be brought to life by human attention? Do they find out what it feels like to be made of marble, knowing that at any moment someone may glimpse a flicker of life and see them for who they truly are?

(SLIDE 51) Nor is the world of advertising immune to the power of *telestike* as a bait for custom. In 1990 the Italian company Fendi brought out an advertisement for their perfume called *La Passione di Roma*, in which a beautiful young woman is seen kissing an ancient statue with an expression of intense longing. (SLIDE 52) Two years later, the same young woman is seen in another advertisement, this time for a perfume called *La Passione Viva* (living passion). But now the statue has metamorphosed into a handsome young man, at whom she gazes rapturously – although in true Platonic spirit, his eyes do not meet hers,

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[39] *Corpus Hermeticum* I.

[40] World Gate Entertainment, *The Living Statues* at http://www/worldgateentertainment.com/The%20Living%20Statues.htm

but contemplate, like Botticelli's Mercury, higher realms. The message is loud and clear – if you use the right ritual substance and kiss passionately enough, you will indeed animate your statue who will lead you to another world.