

John Ruskin: The Patron as Pygmalion*

Pygmalion, repelled by female vulgarity, fashions an ivory statue of a woman whose loveliness surpasses anything he has seen in life. The statue is so beautiful that Pygmalion, hardly believing it is not already alive, falls in love with it. The statue at first remains impervious to his attempts to animate it; however, Venus being more cooperative, the statue is made to come to life, conveniently falls in love with Pygmalion, and they live happily ever after.

--following Ovid

Since Ovid, the myth of Pygmalion has been furnishing poets, dramatists and painters with material for their art. Ovid builds upon the Cypriot worship of Aphrodite and creates, in The Metamorphoses, the first narrative of pygmalionism; he introduces the idea that Pygmalion is a sculptor who creates the statue himself, and that the statue is subsequently made by Venus to come to life. The genial eroticism of Ovid, however, vanishes in the Christian metamorphosis of the myth performed by Jean de Meun in The Romance of the Rose: Jean makes Pygmalion a foolish and deluded idolater who loses his wits and worships his own statue instead of God. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Pigmalion, Scene Lyrique (1776), by contrast, defines Pygmalion's torments as those of the creative artist.

As the myth of Pygmalion is used increasingly in the nineteenth century to signify the longing for an ideal world of the mind and heart, the Pre-Raphaelites display their own preoccupation with the theme. From 1865 to 1868, for instance, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones collaborated on a projected illustrated edition of Morris's The Earthly Paradise. Although the edition was eventually published without illustrations, Burne-Jones was left with a dozen pencil drawings which became the basis for two series of four oil paintings each, called Pygmalion and the Image after Morris's poem.

For both Morris and Burne-Jones, the myth of Pygmalion is an aesthetic myth expressing a commitment to the imaginative life and a rejection of the contemporary world which characterize late Pre-Raphaelitism. However, while the myth of Pygmalion is interpreted by some

*This article resulted from work done at an NEH Summer Seminar "Ruskin and His Times" directed by George L. Hersey at Yale University in 1978.