It is a commonplace to suggest that authors in the late Victorian era interpreted the period subsequently described as the “Italian Renaissance” in terms of its supposed impetus towards the discovery, disinterment and revivifying of persons and ideals long lost – both by the Victorians themselves, and by the authors and artists of the Renaissance who were felt to be engaged in re-awakening the spirit of the classical age. Indeed, as John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) himself would write, the Renaissance saw “the liberation of humanity from a dungeon, the double discovery of the outer and the inner world”. It was “the resurrection of the free spirit of humanity”.1 My emphasis in this essay is upon Symonds’ location of the place of intersection for this “double discovery” in the image of the recumbent male body, with its inner life and outer being at variance.

It is true to say that Symonds developed independent (or semi-independent) categories of experience in his poetry. That is, there are experiences to which observations of time and place are appropriate, and others for which these factors are obscured, in spite of the foregrounding of sensual data. Ed Cohen offers an explanation for this dichotomy – dichotomous because sensual perception presupposes both temporal sequence and spatial relation – by suggesting that a highly refined aesthetic temperament, such as Symonds’, derives pleasure not through contact, but through “mediated representation”.2 In other words, in the case of Symonds’ poetry, it is not the immediacy of experience that is sought, but rather the seclusion, or privacy of a recollection, or reconstruction, with pleasure as its focus. This strategy is particularly

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important in understanding the work of one of the era’s most outspoken homosexual poets.

As Richard Dellamora writes, Victorian homosexual poetry is a mixture of secrecy and excess – and I interpret this view here to refer especially to Symonds’ particularity in featuring his objects, while simultaneously disengaging them from an historical context.\(^3\) The actual state of being Symonds proposes is something I will return to shortly.

Plainly, Symonds had reasons to be circumspect. Even poems as abstractly moulded as “Hesperus and Hymenaeus” (written in 1862) would be used as evidence against his character during the investigation into his conduct shortly before he left Magdalen College, Oxford.\(^4\) But this early poem – and the use it was put to – notwithstanding, the direction Symonds’ poetry would take, was not, as Joseph Bristow argues, a homosexuality characterized by a struggle between men, but rather a struggle between men-as-they-may-be-said-to-embody-philosophy and women-as-they-may-be-said-to-represent-religion.\(^5\) In the context as Cohen describes it, all of Symonds’ poems which enact some sort of drama do so outside social restraints; they are all, in some sense, exceptional.\(^6\) But Symonds’ specific mode is one that Cohen does not discuss. It is, in fact, one in which the most explicit, the most revelatory, and the most dramatic poems have for their logic and for their place of being the landscape and progress of dreams.

Here some facts of Symonds’ biography deserve to be mentioned. As Phyllis Grosskurth writes:

> Dream-like states, not necessarily sexual, would at times become so overpowering that [Symonds] sank into a trance, a condition which half-frightened and half-fascinated him. These experiences were marked by a progressive obliteration of space, time [and] sensation .... Gradually he would return to awareness of the world around him, first by recovery of the power of touch, followed by the rapid influx of familiar sensations.\(^7\)

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