Recomposing Werther

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ABSTRACT

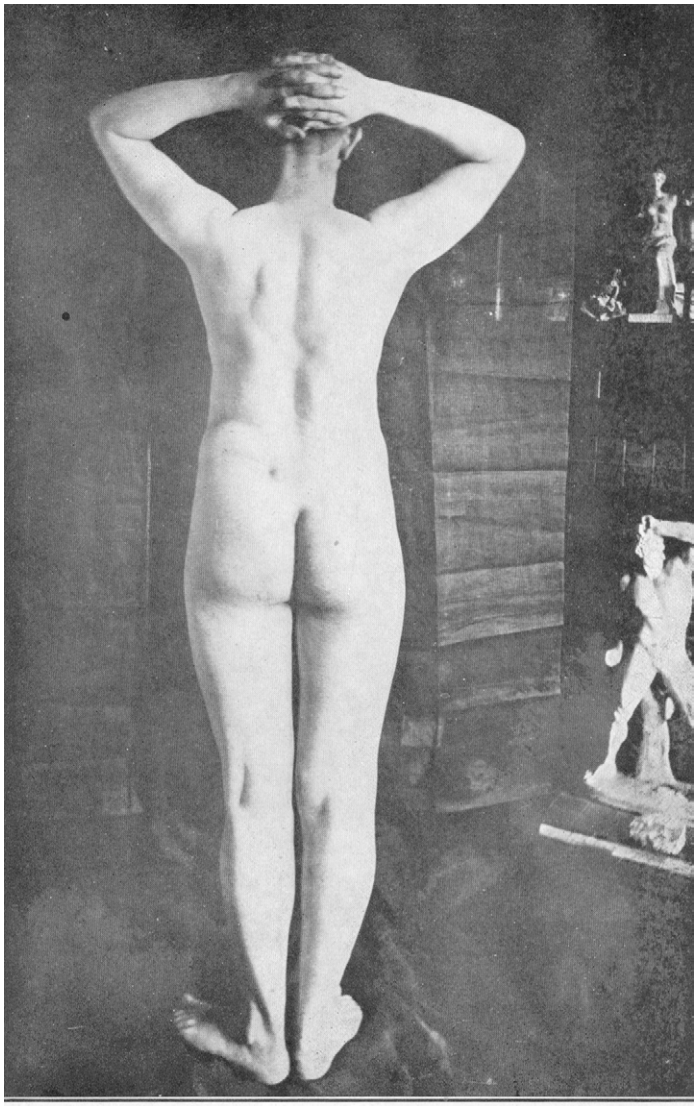
In this article, I use a new materialist methodology to analyse two full-length nude portraits in Ralph Werther's memoir, *The Female–Impersonators* (1922). I show how Werther either cooperates with the sexological diagnosis of his "pathological" condition of androgyny or, more provocatively, resists it to make a visual argument for the beauty of his variant body. My theoretical framework presents an alternative to social constructionist assumptions by asserting that agency, as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and others have suggested, is distributed across networks of human *and* nonhuman objects, exerting a mutually constitutive force to change and be changed by contiguous objects. Objects, from this viewpoint, have power beyond what humans assign them. In this light, I argue that Werther is made by the objects that his body engages within and beyond the photographical frame, but, more importantly, that he also exercises his agency on them, via a series of visual relays, in order to maximise their value for his own rhetorical purposes. I conclude that Werther, as an actant in a complex visual negotiation, ultimately persuades us that his body is not to be pitied, but rather is a form to be aspired to, both culturally and aesthetically.

Keywords: Androgyny, sexology, new materialism, visual agency, cultural network.

Perhaps because Ralph Werther's first memoir, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (1918), at times, defies belief — could he really have fellated over eight hundred young men by the time he was thirty? (Werther 2008:107) — Werther decided to support the second volume of his life story, *The Female–Impersonators* (1922), with photographs. As photographs were thought to provide a direct transcription of reality — to '"realize" something approaching an absolute knowledge of the visible world', as Dana Seitler (2004:76) has put it — pictures of Werther's body could enhance his verbal narrative with a kind of necessary visual affirmation. But an affirmation of what, exactly? Certainly not Werther's real identity. In the photographs, pains have been taken to disguise any idiosyncratic features that might make Werther's body recognisable to acquaintances. Similarly, in his written narrative, Werther presents primarily elusive details: just enough

to support the veracity of his story, but not enough to trace these details back to a person whose reputation — and whose family's reputation — could be compromised by socially shocking content. We know, for example, that Werther was born in Connecticut in 1874, that he was the fourth of eleven children, that he went to a four–year university in New York City, where he graduated *cum laude*, then attended graduate school. We know he was expelled from university for his "inversion", did military service, was court–marshalled, and did time in Sing Sing prison. We also know that he was a participant in the street life of lower Manhattan; that, as he actively engaged a double life, he went by several pseudonyms other than Ralph Werther — such as Jennie June, Earl Lind, and Pussie — to masquerade in alternative personas; and that he knew the pleasures and perils of New York's turn–of–the–century erotic underworld and chronicled them in a way unparalleled in his time. We know this only because he's told us so. Beyond this is speculation.[1] In short, although authoring what has been called 'one of the inaugural acts of queer social theory in the United States' (Herring 2008:xv), Ralph Werther's birth name, death date, and the official records of citizenship that compose the socially sanctioned axis of his life remain a mystery to this day.

And yet, in spite of Werther's commitment to a certain kind of privacy, he was also equally committed to describing the inner and outer life of an androgyne in scrupulous detail that dallies with, without fully committing to, explicit diagnostic conclusions. As the sexology of his day found Werther's androgyny to be both harmless and pathological, Werther's photographs, like his narrative, seem, at first blush, to support that professional stance. Thus in the *Medico–Legal Journal*, which first printed Werther's two memoirs in limited edition, editor Alfred W. Herzog (1975:vii) introduces Werther as 'belong[ing] to that despised class of sexual cripples', and Werther seems to readily agree. Indeed, on the first page of *The Female–Impersonators*, Werther (1975:1) describes himself as one of the 'innocent stepchildren of Nature', a victim of biology who should be pitied rather than shunned for a disability he is no more capable of curing than a one–legged man is his limp. In support of this claim to debility, we see portraits of Werther interleaved throughout the text, the most striking of which are two full–length nudes, one of the posterior, the other of the anterior view of his body. In the posterior photo, Werther's rounded buttocks and sloping hips, his narrow shoulders and rigid spine, neck, and legs combine as ostensibly self–evident signs of his physiological anomaly (figure 1). Without distinctly masculine physical markings, with, instead, a mildly "feminine" roundedness, Werther's body presents itself to his audience as an exotic specimen, a curious variation of the "third sex" the author so carefully delineates in his prose account.



Rear View of Author at Thirty-three
(Photo by Dr. R. W. Shufeldt)

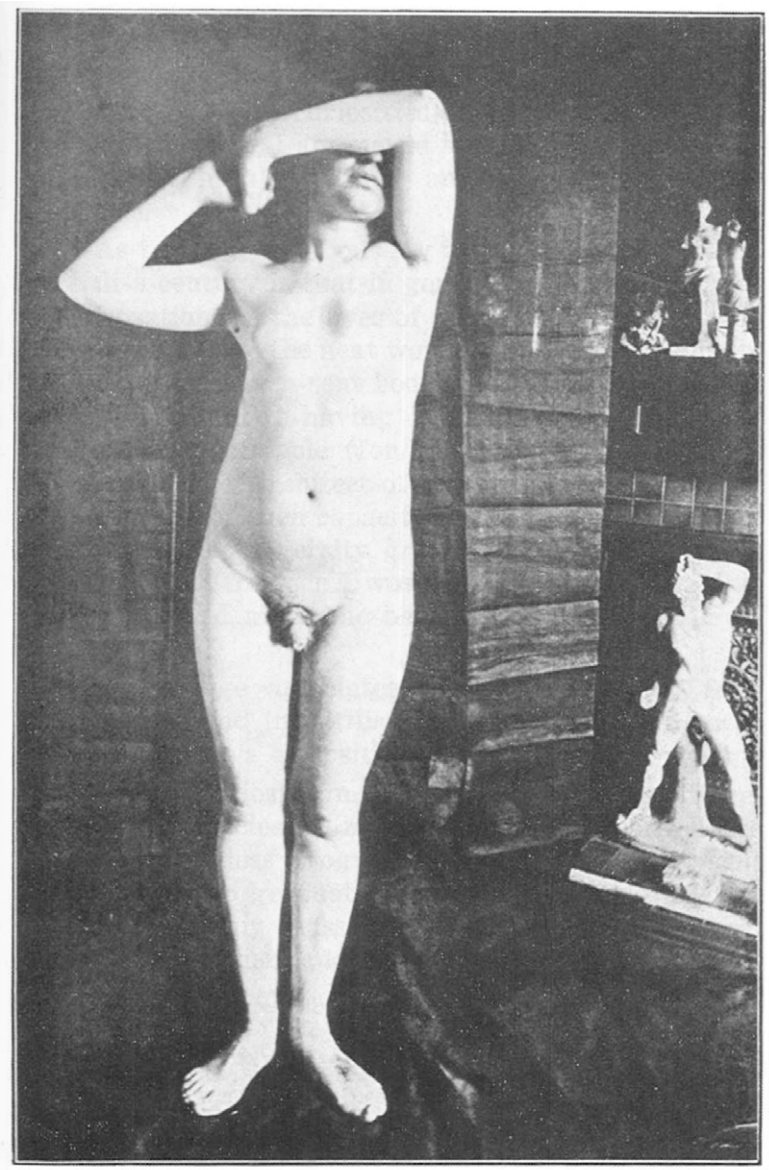
FIGURE **Nº 1**

RW Shufeldt, *Rear view of author at thirty-three*, 1922. Black–and–white photograph. 6 1/4 X 4 inches (Herzog 1975:88).

In contrast to the relatively easy cooperation between visual and verbal media, however, is the anterior view of Werther's form. Here, Werther faces the camera in full frontal nudity, his right leg slightly forward, intense lighting creating a dramatic chiaroscuro that emphasises the tendons on his feet, his navel, and sternum. His penis is depilated as an antique statue's and fully open to view (Figure 2). Werther's arms are raised, forearms

bent to cover his face in the remarkable interplay between anonymity and self–disclosure that his narrative insists on. Unlike the posterior view, this anterior portrait is notably vibrant with resistance to the categorical dismissal of Werther's body as 'cripple[d]'. Rather, the photograph's refusal to unproblematically depict Werther as one of Nature's 'stepchildren' serves as ready evidence for a growing body of present–day scholarship that has identified a counter–current in Werther's narrative defying pathological diagnoses. As Christopher Looby (2012:157) succinctly puts it, Werther integrated into his self–representations a refutation of the 'pathological' by reconstituting his subjectivity in distinctly 'aesthetic terms'. To date, however, Werther scholars have paid closest attention to Werther's aesthetic resistance in his *textual* self–renderings, largely glossing over the pictorial dimensions of his identitarian arguments. Thus Tracy Hargreaves (2005:30–31) has noted perceptively that Werther's verbal invocation of 'the (mythical) existence of the androgyne', which 'precedes its sexological/pathological incarnation', has the effect of 'repudiat[ing] the pathological representation' of Werther's body by challenging it through an imagined refiguration of his physique as 'classical statuary'. Anne Herrmann (2000:148) adds that Werther's 'securing … his ontological status as … Greek sculpture' makes his body 'proof of his particular variation on the forms of nature'. Werther's self–representation as a classical statue is clever, for it naturalises him even as classical statuary was thought to replicate the finest of natural forms while also bestowing high cultural capital on his body, just as the classical was associated, for centuries, with the sociocultural elite. Even still, verbal representations of Werther's uses of classicism will push these purposes and ambiguities only so far. His statuesque posing in photographs draws on nonverbal nuance that requires analysis on its own terms.

My essay's purpose is to explore these terms, and to do so contrastively, by considering the different work that Werther's posterior and anterior portraits perform. To gain a robust sense of these photos as objects at work, my analysis will unfold via a new materialist methodology, an approach that, as Laurie E. Gries (2015:73) notes, traces out visual 'rhetorical agency' by exploring 'how … matter participates in a dynamic dance' of networked interactions both within and beyond the photographic frame to illustrate how visual material 'generat[es the] mutual transformation' of both visual object and viewer. New materialism, in other words, will be used to describe how Werther's portraits *work on us,* with an agency that they possess and we do not, in order to draw us into their worlds, even as we reciprocate to modify them by our own acts of encountering them. Werther's posterior and anterior portraits work powerfully, however differently, in ways that are not wholly explicable by social constructionist theories that assign the locus of all action to viewers alone. Through a new materialist methodology, I seek, as Bruno Latour (2005:141–142) advises, to 'follow the link[s]' in visual networks that otherwise appear to be 'incommensurable' or invisible without close analysis in order to establish



Front View of Author at Thirty-three
(Photo by Dr. R. W. Shufeldt)

FIGURE **Nº 2**

RW Shufeldt, *Front view of author at thirty-three*, 1922. Black–and–white photograph. 6 1/4 X 4 inches (Herzog 1975:83).

pathways of agency conducting influence and power to every part of their circuit. I thus first identify the connective circuitry entailed in the building of Werther's apparent complicity, in his posterior portrait, with sexology's consignment of his androgynous masculinity to the gendered margins. More importantly, however, I show how Werther, as an agent within the photograph, and how the photograph, as agent working on us,

fight against sexology's condescension, and perhaps Werther's own self–loathing, to assert the emphatic beauty of his androgynous body in frontal view. Finally, I show how Werther's frontal pose threads him not just to classical antecedents that scholars have already well noted, but also to the late–Victorian cult of the adolescent boy that pervaded the visual field at the turn of the century and bestowed on Werther's unusual body an aesthetically radiant, if somewhat physically variant, glow.

New materialism and the agency of visual networks

Recent scholarly work has focused fresh attention on the agency that nonhuman things can possess and use to change and be changed by the things around them. And in this freshly regenerated ontological universe, humans are but other objects connected to a relay of such reactions. The scholarly movement that has produced variations of this view is often referred to, and will be referred to here, as the new materialism, where "materialist" invokes not the Marxist historical materialism, but, instead, a sense of the endowment of concrete things. "Things" or "objects", here, will encompass a very broad range of the material world, the broadest, to include the smallest to the greatest material entity. The words "thing" and "object" will also be used interchangeably, following Graham Harman (2012b:187) and with all due respect to Jane Bennett (2015:233–234), who prefers "thing" to "object" because the former is a better 'marker of individuation'. "Thing", however, will be preferred to "body", which Bennett (2015:233) sometimes equates with "thing" because "body" tends to favour the three–dimensional world, where our own bodies reside, as opposed to the two–dimensional world of bodily representations. "Things" and "objects" will therefore reference both three–dimensionality and two–dimensionality alike — not just restaurants, mountains, and dust motes, but also the photocopy of a restaurant, the lithographed mountain, and the contact print of a mote (if that were possible). Object–Oriented Ontologists, like Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Ian Bogost, take this kind of catalogue much further, to include a vast array of "immaterial" objects that have never manifested as concrete entities in the material world, such as, to draw from one of Bogost's (2012:12) many provocative lists, 'Harry Potter' and 'love affairs'.[2] For the purposes of this essay, however, which use new materialism to refocus on the human, I will stop my catalogue of things with the objects of the sensible world.

Essential to the version of new materialism I recreate here is the connectedness of things/objects to networks. In this important respect, I depart from Harman and other Object–Oriented Ontologists who argue, as Harman (2012a:[sp]) has, that '[t]here is no greater Imperialism than the philosophy of mutually determining things, stripped of all retreat from the system of the world'. New materialism, on the other hand, provides a means of

explaining the power of visual persuasion by theorising not just how things themselves can exert agential power but also how they mutually determine each other through linked associations that transmit and amplify their power to develop a persuasive visual magnetism. In this way, new materialism takes its cue from Bruno Latour (1999:122), who has famously asserted, '[T]here is no other way to define an actor but through its action, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed, or created by the character that is the focus of attention'. For Latour, a thing does not exist, it has no ontological status, in isolation — only 'through its action' on other linked things, which modify it and are changed by it reciprocally. Agency thus becomes an exponentially dynamic force when taken out of human hands and dispersed across a network of interconnected objects that act on each other in order to, in some fundamental way, alter every other thing in the system, even the scrutiniser of the system herself, who, in the act of scrutinising, is both bound to and changed by that system. Bennett (2010:31) calls this circulation of power across a circuit of actors a relay of 'distributive agency'. Among the many consequences of such a relay is, quite obviously, the decentring of the human, since human agency is but one exertion among many others. Decentring, however, does not need to equate with dehumanising. Instead, new materialism helps us to see the human anew — as much made by the things she moves through and interacts with as she is a constructor of the meaning of those things. New materialism can therefore be understood as deeply, though differently, invested in the human.

Thinking new materialism along these differently human lines, then, we could say that Werther, in the act of posing for his portraits, taps visual networks through a series of resemblances to other portraits and representations of bodies outside the picture frame. These resemblances can be organised around a single point of contact, like the position of feet, or something bigger, like overall posture. Each feature or collection of features pulls at out–of–the–frame networks organised around that visual pattern. Such acts of pulling draw the force of these networks to Werther's body, which becomes a point of intersection, linking visual systems and conducting their power forward to give Werther's figure magnetism — the 'it' that theatre scholar Joseph Roach (2004:555) defines as 'the easily perceived but hard–to–define quality possessed by abnormally interesting people'. We may not be aware of the visual networks that Werther invokes; we don't need to be. They confer the gift of their collective power anyway, and Werther's body registers that gift and pays it forward, in turn, to us.

Posterior view: the androgyne and the anthropological norm

Generically, Werther's two full–length nude portraits largely conform to the photographic conventions of late nineteenth– and early twentieth–century physical anthropology. Subjects studied through the mechanism of anthropological photography were typically shot from three positions: posterior, anterior, and lateral. Werther's portrait series includes the first two views. The background was frequently dark and dull so as not to distract from scrutiny of the nude body — a formula Werther's portraits improvise on with a few conventionally tasteful props (more on these later). In addition, as Amos Morris–Reich (2016:56,60) emphasises, bodies posed in anthropological photographs needed to be stripped of all '[c]ultural markers', including clothing, jewellery, and hair adornments, to make the physical features as 'measurable' as possible. Physical anthropologists were, after all, seeking to locate the bodies they photographed into discrete physiognomic and racial taxonomies, which were explicitly or implicitly normed to white, bourgeois conceptions of the body. As Harry Shapiro (cited by Carter 2007:7), the curator of physical anthropology for American Museum of Natural History, proclaimed in 1945, the white 'average' was, for early to mid–twentieth–century racial science, its own 'kind of perfection'. For many physical anthropologists, however, following the logic of social–Darwinist metrics, the white 'average' was itself hierarchised. As Roslyn Poignant (1992:55) summarises, at the top of the racial pyramid was the 'Germanic & Teutonic type'. Other racialised categories were subordinated to that pristine ethnological point in descending ranks of progressively darker people until the 'Australian Aborigines' at the base. Such was the great chain of 'social evolutionis[t]' being in the white supremacist imaginary at the turn of the twentieth century.

It's worth noting, as well, that "race", during this period, was more than a discrete marker of ethnological affiliation. Indeed, sexual practices and gendered identities were frequently thought to be visible *through* racial categorisations. Queerness was thus often racialised. As Siobhan B. Somerville (2000:17) has persuasively argued, variables of race and gender 'buttressed one another, often competing, often overlapping, in shaping emerging models of homosexuality' at the turn of the century. '[T]he structures and methodologies that drove dominant ideologies of race', Somerville (2000:17) explains, 'also fueled the pursuit of knowledge about the homosexual body'. A queer body, as or tangential to a racially marked body, was thought just as much a deviation from what nature intended. Physical anthropologists, therefore, cast both subordinated racial groups and pathologised sexualities as examples of nature gone awry. The homosexual body was construed to be 'organically abnormal' just as the 'savage' body was 'less than the normal average' (Ellis & Symonds 1897:23; Ellis 1890:64). Disease and minoritisation, the perverse and

the primitive, thus became inextricably entangled — a matter Werther's posterior portrait seems to illustrate with textbook precision.

In the posterior portrait (Figure 1), Werther seems to present his body as paradigmatically pathological, ripe for scientific edification. The pose quite purposely replicates one published eight years earlier by Werther's photographer, R. W. Shufeldt, entitled *German Jew* (Figure 3). A centrepiece in Shufeldt's *Studies of the Human Form* (1908), the *German Jew* carefully conforms to the conventions of anthropological photographic methodology. Presented in both posterior and lateral views, the subject is cast as a racialised and so sexualised degradation of the Northern European, heterosexual man. Not surprisingly, the *German Jew* appears in Shufeldt's chapter on 'the criminal class' as photographic evidence of intrinsic physiological inferiority — in this case, strangely, due to a 'bigness of torso' — a bodily deformity self–'molded' by a lower 'mentality' and therefore conducing, within Shufeldt's white supremacist imaginary, to criminal behaviour (Shufeldt 1908:163,161). In Shufeldt's *Studies*, the *German Jew* appears as part of an extended reply to the French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon, who emphasised scrutiny of a suspect's face and head to detect innate criminality (Finn 2009:23). Shufeldt (1908:161) rebuts Bertillon by insisting that the latter's study 'was not carried as far as it might be' by neglecting 'photographs of the entire figure nude'. Such a suggestion quite overtly nudges the criminological portrait into anthropological territory, as physiology is made as crucial as head study to the detective's biometric diagnosis.

Werther's resemblance to the German Jew is uncannily exact, suggesting that Shufeldt has given careful posing instructions that his subjects diligently followed. The only significant differences between these two figures are that Werther's hands are higher on his head, reducing the flexion of his biceps and so softening his arms to feminise them, and that his heels are closer together rather than positioned in a distinctly statuesque forward step. Still, the stiffness of both bodies readily differentiates Werther and the German Jew from a visual antecedent, a standard academy figure seen here in a sketch made by turn–of–the–century American artist Bryson Burroughs (figure 4). In this drawing, the model's hips and shoulders are at angles to bring his body to a sensuous s–curve. His hands clasp at the nape of his neck so that his elbows point up instead of out. The curve of the academy figure's body consequently follows this upward sweep to extend past the limits of his form. The overt eroticism created by moving the figure off the centre line is tamped down in Shufeldt's portraits, which seem aimed, in contrast, to be figures of detached objectivity, like butterflies pinned behind glass.

But if we shift Werther's relationship to the *German Jew* and the academy figure so that

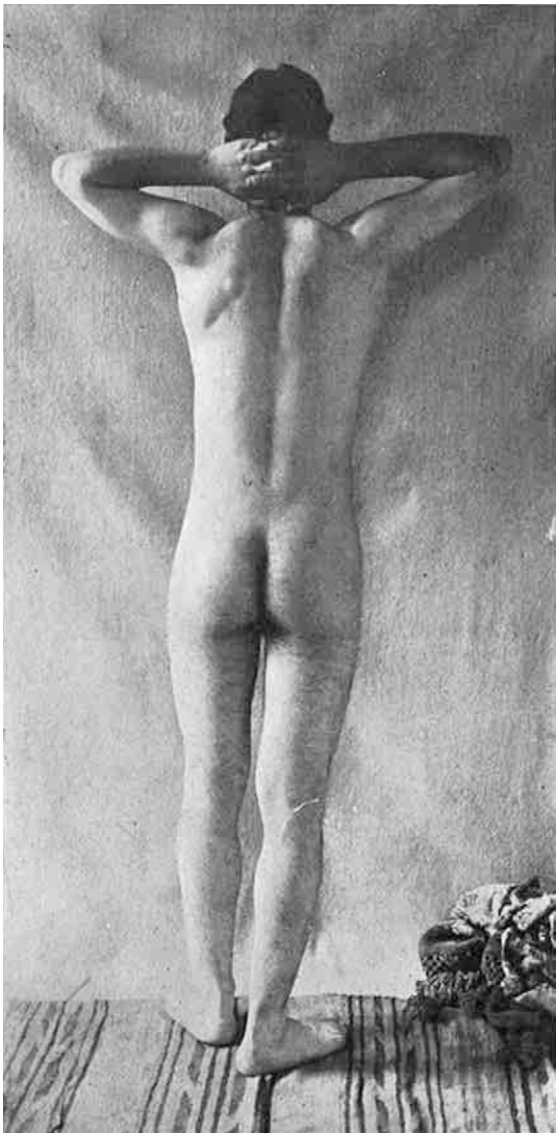


FIGURE **Nº 3**

RW Shufeldt, *German Jew*. Posterior view, 1908 (Shufeldt 1908:163).

he isn't precisely aligned with either but rather serves as a point of aesthetic intersection, the resulting triangulation constructed by this network helps us see just how problematic the eroticism in Werther's posterior portrait could be. On one hand, the *German Jew* exerts the agency of a palimpsest, racialising Werther as non–normative, making him doubly deviant and intensifying the aura of criminality that marks the diseased portions of the turn–of–the–century anthropological taxonomy. On the other hand, however, the academy figure enters through Werther to rejuvenate him with a classical and entirely socially sanctioned form of androgyny that surrounds him with the penumbra of youth

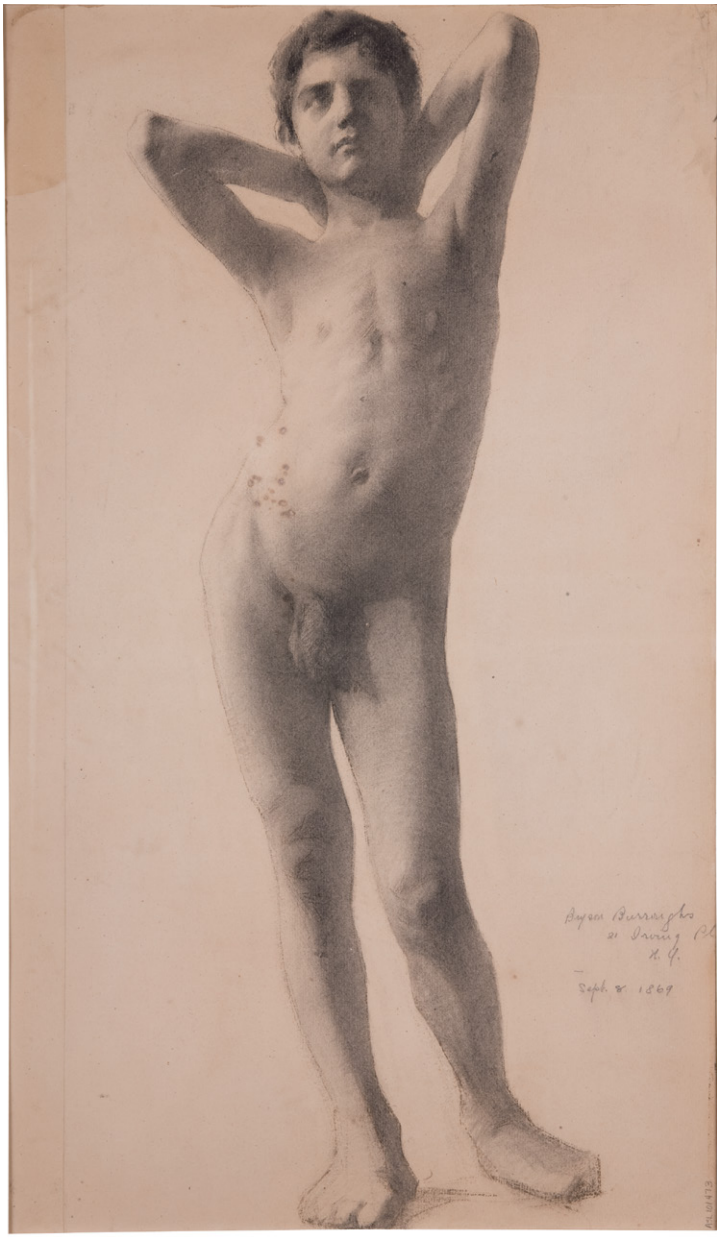


FIGURE **Nº 4**

Bryson Burroughs, *Academic Drawing*, 1869. Charcoal on paper. Permanent collection, Art Students League of New York. Image courtesy of the Art Students League of New York.

required of antique statuary. Staging a more modest, awake, and certainly more pubescent version of the Barberini Faun (Figure 5), the academy figure also spills these qualities into Werther, who himself becomes a variation on the faun, the object of his lusty passion just out of view.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Bibi Saint-Pol, *Sleeping satyr, or the Barberini faun*, 2007. Digital photograph. Wikimedia Commons.

This shift from suppressed, pathological sexuality to conventional, socially sanctioned eroticism only quickens as we move from a scrutiny of networks external to the photographic frame to networks within. Here, two classical statues, both nudes, become crucial nodes: one a replica of the *Venus de Milo* on the mantle behind Werther, the other a plaster cast of Antonio Canova's mythic boxer *Creugas* at his feet. As an androgyne, Werther is neither the hypermasculine *Creugas* nor the hyperfeminine *Venus*, which is perhaps the ostensible point Shufeldt hopes to make with these objects. Instead, these figures, as actors in this visual network, complicate Shufeldt's argument as their very shapes are altered through the relay of agency that their contiguity sets up. Thus, even as Werther receives these figures and synthesises them aesthetically, he also exerts his androgynous influence on them, consequently softening the rigid, muscled boxer and adding an austere linearity to Venus's famous curves. As the bodies converse, their mutual correspondence takes the simple fact of Werther's nudity and charges it erotically, endowing it with the power to arouse us while also, paradoxically, shutting us out. The ménage of this interior triangle is a closed system. Werther's back is to us, casting us as voyeurs of an exchange we can only witness as we look past him. It is not until Werther turns to face us, in his anterior portrait, that we are able fully to partake in the agential transaction.

Anterior view: the androgyne and the cult of the Boy

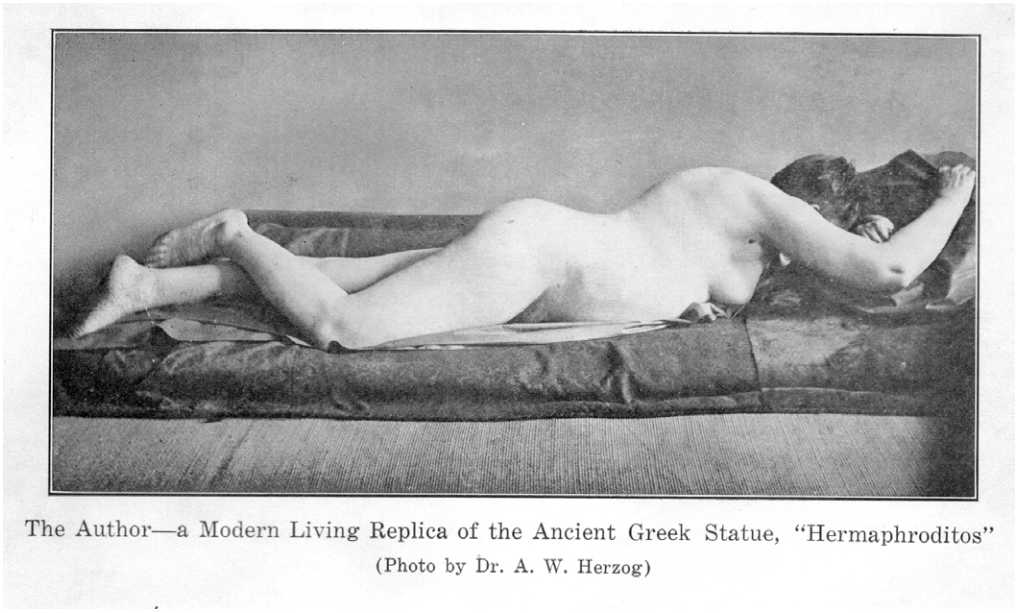
Only a cursory glance at Werther's frontal portrait is sufficient to note that his body is hairless; his genitals, and all body hair, have been carefully shaved. Werther (2008:105–106) explains in his *Autobiography* that he 'removed all the growth of hair on my body and limbs by means of a safety razor so that they were as glabrous as statuary. I considered that I thus beautified my body'. Here, then, is a verbal supplement to Werther's photographic self–presentation as both media cooperate, in this case, to resist sexology's pathologising deprecation with a counterclaim of beauty via the classical mode. Casting his gender and sexuality variance in classical terms to authorise his queer presence is not, of course, a strategy that Werther pioneered. As recent scholars have duly noted, Victorian–era classicists such as John Addington Symonds mounted tenacious arguments to legitimise homosexual practice under the rubric of "Greek love". David Greven (2012:189), among others, convincingly argues that the classical aesthetic was turn–of–the–century queer subculture's means of 'subverting' heteronormative conventions of the period through Hellenistic visual images and texts that 'allow[ed] for the expression of homoerotic appreciation while still [remaining] within acceptable social parameters' of bourgeois, heteronormative 'taste and decorum'.[4] Queer desire could thus be hidden in plain sight if it were inflected through classical objects of sufficient cultural capital, like statues of the

Apollo, a figure Werther (1975:25) in particular adored, calling him 'the pre–eminent androgyne god'. As a connoisseur of art and a keen observer of culture, Werther was certainly well aware of the queer implications of the Hellenistic code and drew on the code repeatedly to his advantage, in, for example, his *Hermaphroditos* (figure 6), where Werther quite precisely mimics the ancient Roman prototype (figure 7). In his *Autobiography*, Werther (2008:27) writes: 'My home is an art gallery, with more art objects per cubic foot than I have heard to exist anywhere else outside an art gallery or shop. Few are better endowed than myself in respect to the capacity for deriving pleasure from beauty in art and nature'. As his photos reveal, Werther clearly derives intense pleasure not just from looking at exquisite art, but from becoming it.

However, to assert the status of his body as beautiful, Werther needed more than just a classical code he could imitate bodily. He also, quite crucially, needed a contemporary network of beautiful bodies he could join. During the turn of the century, his most logical choice was to become a boy. Among period photographers of the nude, after all, the adolescent boy was seen as the best of a series of difficult choices. In his influential article, 'On Photographing the Nude' (1894), printed on both sides of the Atlantic and cited by Shufeldt in his *Studies*, British photographer Gleeson White (1894:215) complains,

> When you touch upon female nudes it is impossible to lay down any rules; the subject teems with difficulty and absolute danger. Indeed, rather than assist in opening it up, one would be inclined to say that, except as studies for technically artistic purposes, the nude female is not a possible subject for self–respecting photographers to–day.

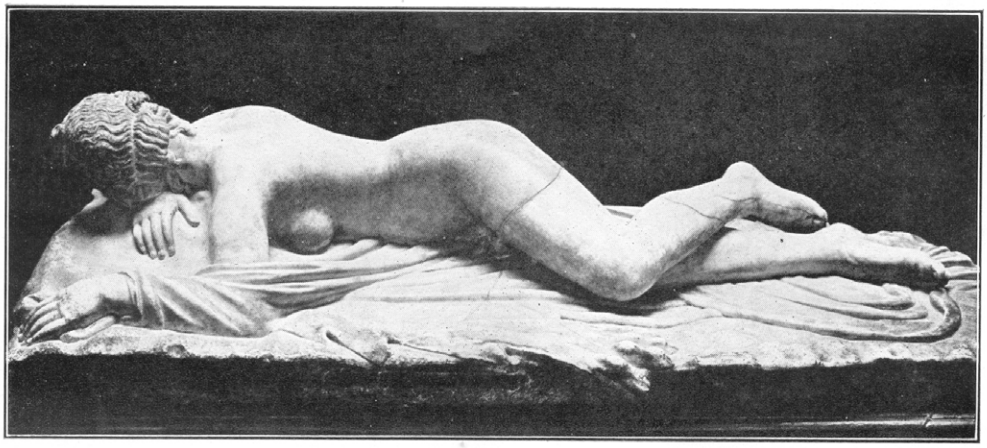
Because of its ostensible transcription of reality, photography was an especially dangerous medium for the rendering of naked bodies, which could not be disguised, as paintings could, with impasto, idealised chiaroscuro, or some other plastic technique. Photographed naked bodies were often simply too real to carry the moral message they were required to carry in order to be elevating rather than degrading to the bourgeois eye and soul. Victorian angels of the house thus had to keep their clothes on. In contrast to the virtual impossibility of the adult female nude — any figure who could be construed as a mirror of bourgeois womanhood — White (1894:215) claims that boys, especially 'good studies of boy juvenile bathers', shot in the open air and from the proper angle, present the least morally objectionable option to the widest range of mainstream sensibilities. Images of naked youths, to Victorian sensibilities, incorporated the putative purity of childhood with the public exhibitionism permitted primarily to men; their cusp state made them uniquely qualified for bodily display. Thus some of the most famous photographed nudes of the period, shot by such eminent photographers as Wilhelm von Gloeden and Guglielmo Plüschow on the Continent, Frank Sutcliffe and Henry Scott Tuke in England, and F. Holland Day in the US, were of adolescent boys. Discretely posed, they could be published in



The Author—a Modern Living Replica of the Ancient Greek Statue, "Hermaphroditos"
(Photo by Dr. A. W. Herzog)

FIGURE Nº 6

AW Herzog, *The author–A modern living replica of the Ancient Greek statue Hermaphroditos,* 1922. Black–and–white photograph. 6 1/4 X 2 1/2 inches (Herzog 1975:frontispiece).



Ancient Greek Statue of an Androgyne, Called "Her maphroditos," Now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

FIGURE Nº 7

Photographer unknown, *Ancient Greek statues of an androgyne, called Hermaphroditos,* now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy, sa. Black–and–white photograph. 6 1/4 X 2 3/4 inches (Herzog 1975:24).

mainstream journals like the *Photogram* and the *Photographic Times* without public outcry. To be sure, more sexually explicit photographs of adolescent boys, taken by von Gloeden and Pluschow, among others, were circulated across Europe and the US via private channels for explicitly erotic pleasure, but the presence of this branch of the turn–of–the–century photographic industry failed to generate sufficient moral opprobrium to censure the entire genre of the photographed nude youth.[5] For late nineteenth– and early twentieth–century tastemakers, beauty, then, was often found in a virtual cult of the adolescent boy.

Among the famous photos of this genre, full frontal nudity was, not surprisingly, excluded — an aesthetic choice necessary for the figure's beauty to remain unalloyed in the conservative Victorian imaginary. Werther's frontal portrait, published at first exclusively for private viewing, quite obviously abandons this convention, a permissible choice given the intended professional audience. Werther makes full use of this expanded range in acceptable bodily presentation not just to show his classicised genitalia, but to align them, in their hairlessness, to a boy's. His visual strategy of legitimation, then, was entwined with a physiological regression designed to heighten his physical androgyny. Indeed, Werther's visual strategy of regression cooperates well with his verbal self–representation. Over the course of his memoirs, he frequently, mysteriously, refers to himself as a 'baby', as when he says in his *Autobiography*,

> [A]ll my life down to my early thirties, my decidedly virile associates in school and business have babied me. Indeed in some respects I have never ceased to be a baby mentally …. Up to my early thirties, I yearned to be called 'Baby' by decidedly virile males, and to have them treat me as a baby and a weakling (Werther 2008:26).

Werther's infantilism has been a perplexing feature of his self–description to scholars seeking to discern the terms on which he built his unusual identity. Joanne Meyerowitz (2011:103), for example, has argued that Werther's regression 'partly reflects [Werther's] version of womanhood, in which the height of femininity is the "helpless cry–baby species of woman"'.[6] Aiming to build on Meyerowitz's insight, Aaron Shaheen (2013:925) describes Werther's infantilism as reflective of his notion of 'adult woman's disinclination toward sex', a symptom of 'arrested maturation' that was 'at the core of Victorian constructions of womanhood'. However, shifting analysis from verbal to visual material contributes a challenging alternative to this debate, for Werther's frontal nude portrait cannot be confused with that of a woman or of an intersex individual. In plain sight is his sex–defining penis, no vagina and nothing that looks like women's breasts. What has been made ambiguous by the act of depilation is Werther's state of bodily development. Before us is not a denuded Victorian woman or a baby but a hairless, somewhat otiose body that most closely resembles that of a pubescent boy — a boy who would be beautiful on his own terms.

Quite plausibly, then, Werther made full use of the visual network organised around the cult of the beautiful adolescent boy to strengthen the aesthetic value he sought to project, so to speak, frontally. Robert H. Hobart Cust's *Sun–Bath* (1897?) (Figure 8) provides an especially salient example from this network. Modelled on the ancient bronze *Adorante* (figure 9), at that time much ogled where it stood exhibited in Berlin, the adolescent figure in the *Sun–Bath* has been posed laterally to give us the enclosing curves of his arms while avoiding a frontal view to maintain Victorian decorum. Posing before Shufeldt's camera, Werther stands in visual relay with both the ancient bronze statue and the Victorian replica, both exerting their influence, like the *German Jew* and academy figure described above, outside the portrait frame. Through a network established, again, through a play between visual resemblance and difference, Werther pushes against the *Adorante* and *Sun–Bath* by alternately modifying and mimicking their poses. As a consequence, he resists the sunbather's modesty by turning to face the viewer — he can do so as an art object — even as he elevates his arms to the full height of the Adorante, though altering their position just enough to hide his face, finding an assurance of privacy in his anonymity, which he has otherwise lost in his frontal display. Werther's negotiations with these visual antecedents act on them, subtly modifying them formally, as they, in turn, act on him, transmitting more youthful beauty than a middle–aged androgyne is supposed to possess. And Werther glows with it — or glows with 'it', as Joseph Roach would say. Had Werther uncritically imitated the celebratory poses of these youths, his visual argument would have been severely reduced to a banal exhibitionism that, in the early twentieth century, would have produced a simply vulgar body. Had he, in contrast, followed the cues of the anthropological conventions that pathologise bodies such as his, Werther would have been one more example of a sexual cripple, an iteration of the 'female type' represented in Eugene Talbot's (1898:273) compendious *Degeneracy* (figure 10).

To reinforce Werther's brash claims to beauty drawn from networks external to the portrait frame, the interior network that Werther establishes with classical bodies inside the frame gains new resonance, widening and deepening the implications suggested by the posterior portrait discussed above. In Werther's posterior portrait, the *Venus de Milo* and *Creugas* mingled "feminine" and "masculine" bodily dimensions to fashion the androgyne as a synthesis. As well, their triangulation with Werther charged him with an erotic current that was also suppressed as Werther turns his back to us, thus reinforcing our sense of his degeneration. In contrast, with Werther turning to face the camera to flaunt his masculine variance, the eroticism of the *Venus* and the *Creugas*, both hyper versions of their respective sexes, markedly amplifies. Werther, after all, in some degree resembles both of them, or, to put it in Bruno Latour's (2005:108) (emphasis omitted) terms, he 'translat[es]' them into his form, thus 'generat[ing] traceable associations' with their bodies. The full visibility of the interior bodily network of classical or classically fashioned

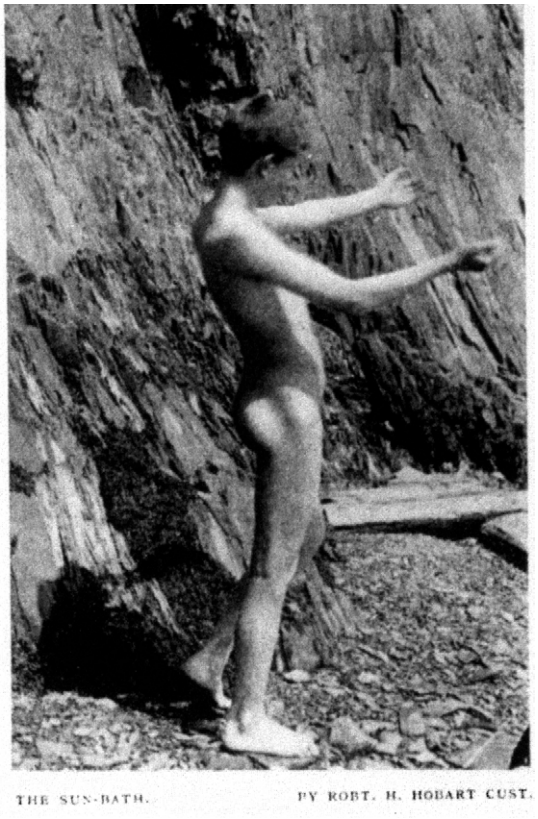


FIGURE **Nº 8**

Robert H. Hobart Cust, *The Sun-Bath*, 1897?. Black–and–white photograph. 4 X 2 3/4 inches (Ward & Ward 1898:185).

bodies markedly heightens its erotic value. The character of the interior network alone does not, however, wholly explain the photograph's discernable erotic effusion. For that, some sense of the external visual networking, invisible to the eye but visible to the mind's eye, is also necessary. Without a sense of the photographed bodies that surround Werther's anterior portrait, exerting their respective agencies to augment Werther's magnetic power, we might be moved by his erotic charge and the strange, resistant beauty it creates, but we couldn't fully say why.

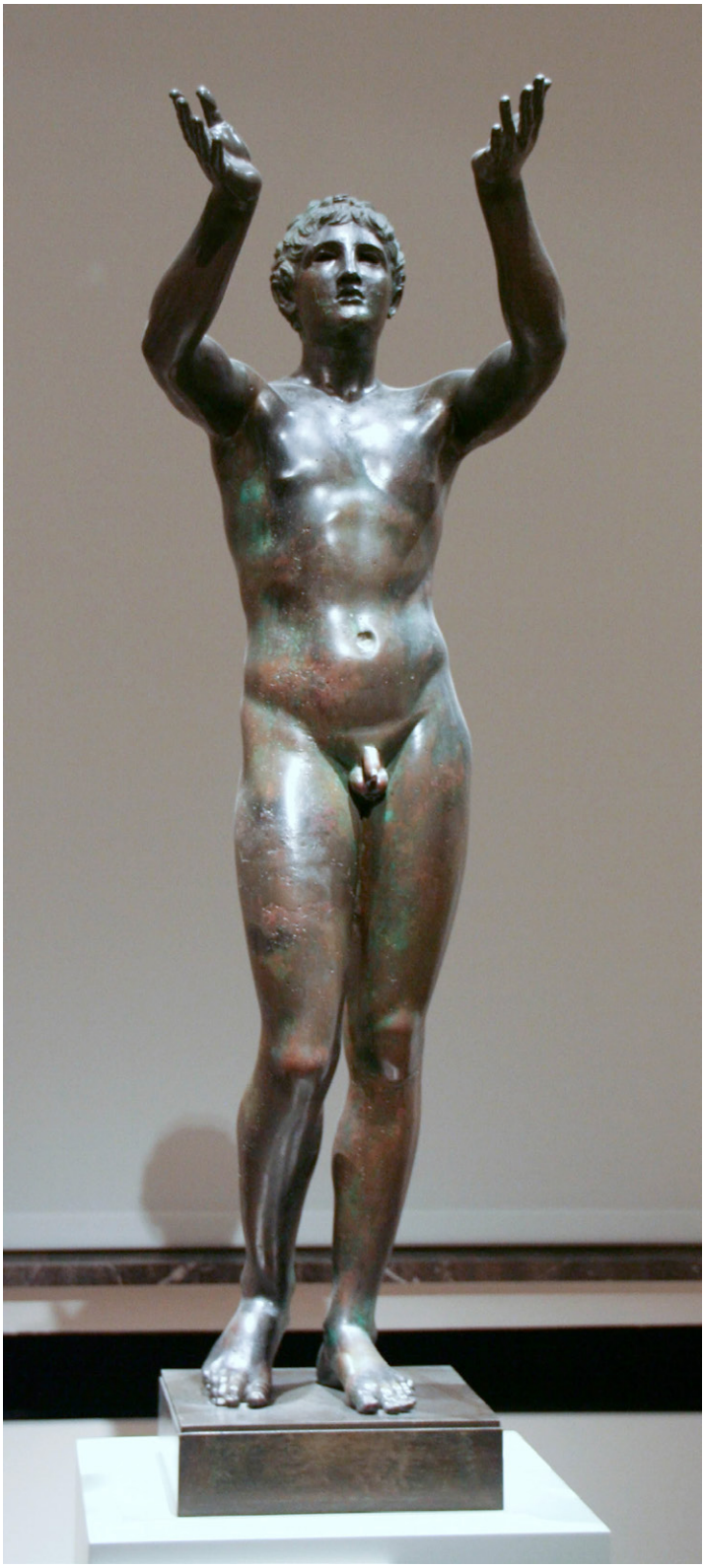


FIGURE **Nº 9**

Ismoon, *Bronze statue of a young man: So-called praying boy*, 2016. Digital photograph. Wikimedia Commons. [O].

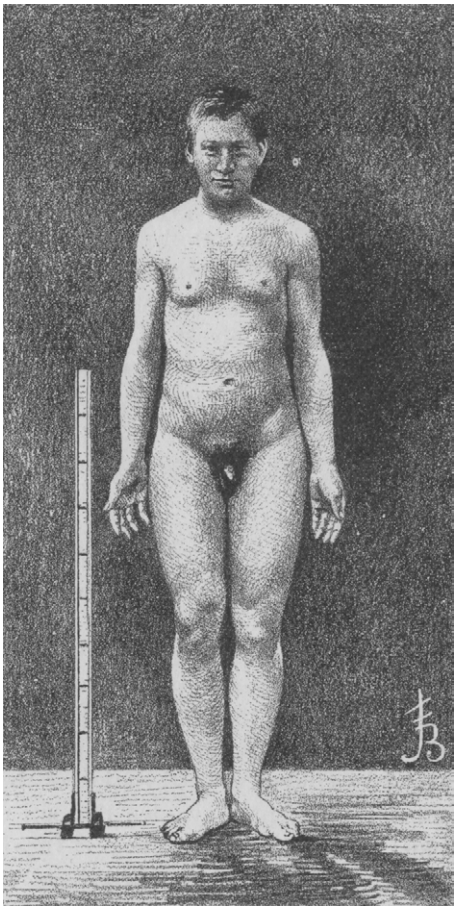


FIGURE **Nº 10**

Charles Féré, *Feminism*, sa. Black–and–white photograph. 5 1/8 X 2 3/4 inches (Talbot 1898:273).

Agency and the human/nonhuman object

Another way of stating my claim could be formulated as a response to W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) well–known question: 'What do pictures want?'. Werther's anterior portrait, I argue, *wants* to tell us that this androgynous male body is beautiful — that it is, to intensify the claim, radiant with a compellingly erotic, if variant, charge. For Mitchell (2005:11) (emphasis in original), however, the question is purely heuristic. In accounting for his title, he stages a mock dialogue to explain: 'Do you really *believe* that images want things?', he imagines someone asking him. '[N]o,' he answers, 'I don't believe it. But we cannot ignore that human beings (including myself) insist on talking and behaving as if they *did* believe it'. My argument, through the employment of a new materialist methodology, takes the 'as if' out of Mitchell's formulation. It posits, instead, that agency generated

within and around pictures themselves exists — and is not, or is not merely, a product of human projection. Yet while the analytical tactics of new materialism are explicitly designed to exceed the human so as to counter the assumptions of human exceptionalism that undergird much study in the social sciences and humanities, I hope to show in this portrait study how such tactics can also be deployed to understand the human, after the "nonhuman turn", anew.[7] I hope to show, in other words, how a focus on the aesthetics of the human body, in variant or normative form, need not be precluded by a fresh focus outside the human — that, indeed, the field of aesthetics is a productive meeting point between human and nonhuman inquiry. If aesthetics is that 'strange region out in front' of the thing itself, as Morton (2013:18) argues, then Werther's portraits, as human/nonhuman objects, have drawn us into that region, exerting all the power of their visual persuasion to have us experience Werther's body and, as we become new links in the network exterior to the photograph's frame, be changed by that body. This study thus aims to advance Gries's (2015:xix–xx) compelling challenge to scholars of visuality seeking to explain 'how images circulate within a distributed network of collective activities', and hopes to do so by bridging the print culture that gave birth to Werther's stunning portraits with the 'digital economy' that gave me first access to them.

Notes

1. These details, found in both the *Autobiography of an Androgyne* and *The Female Impersonators*, have been culled from Jonathan Ned Katz's excellent web page dedicated to solving the mystery of Werther's identity. For some provocative speculations, see Katz (2017).

2. For this reason, Graham Harman (2016) has named his field–defining primer to Object–Oriented Ontology *Immaterialism*.

3. Indeed, Shufeldt was pursuing a course already well established by Cesare Lombroso and criminal anthropologists. See Finn (2009:13).

4. See also Halperin (1990:4) and Bristow (1998).

5. For commentary on von Gloeden and Plüschow's photographs, pornographic and artistic, see Cooper (1995:156–158).

6. For 'helpless cry–baby species of woman', see Werther (2008:22).

7. For a brief history of the "nonhuman turn", see Grusin (2015).

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