

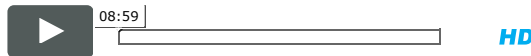
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A Wandering Will: Mary Reid Kelley Discusses Swinburne's "Pasiphae" by James Cahill (/contributor/james-cahill)

May 25th, 2015



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O crowned head of my child Pasiphae,
What god is this that drives thee without sail
Before the wild winds of a wandering will ...?

— Algernon Charles Swinburne, Pasiphae

IN THE 1860s, the Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne penned a fragment of verse that was as obscure as it was ornate, and never to be published in his lifetime. Styled as a passage from a lost Greek play, Pasiphae takes the form of a dialogue between Daedalus — the mythic artistic genius — and Pasiphae, queen to King Minos in Crete. With increasing fervor, they revel in Daedalus' contrivance of a wooden cow — a "cunning carven beast" — within which Pasiphae will secrete herself and satiate her lust for a beautiful white bull. Even now the work retains the power to unnerve, grappling with forbidden sexual longing and the feats of perverse ingenuity it can inspire. Whimsical as the poem is in style and tenor — a screed of expostulation and florid innuendo — its evocation of Pasiphae's erotic ecstasy retains a disquieting sensuality. Daedalus foresees the "Sweet stings & pleasurable warm violences" that the queen will enjoy, the "shoots of fluid flame through the aching blood." Far from turning us away, the poem's aberrant subject draws us stealthily into sympathy with the tormented queen.

American artist and filmmaker Mary Reid Kelley has magnified this quality of fascinating aberration in Swinburne's Pasiphae (2014). Her nine-minute melodrama, for which Swinburne's text serves as the screenplay, is the second in a trilogy of films based loosely on the story of the Minotaur (the monstrous fruit of Pasiphae's lust), made in collaboration with artist Patrick Kelley. Shot in stark, metallic monochrome, it draws us into a comic-book realm decked out in clunky black-and-white paintwork. Figures totter and gesticulate like marionettes, endowed with Ping-Pong balls for eyes and bearing doodled black lines across their bodies. Reid Kelley plays all the parts — a handyman Daedalus, a swimsuit-clad Pasiphae with braided hair, a cat-suited Minotaur — while intoning Swinburne's verses through a mask or painted teeth. "I see myself as working within an essentially grotesque

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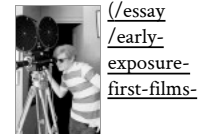
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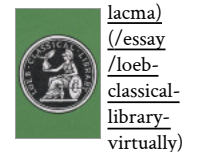
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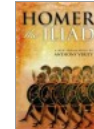
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tradition," she explained to me in an email correspondence last year adding that "the grotesque had an enormously important role in the classical world — the satyrs, priapic gods, Dionysian drunkenness — although due to some very careful rebranding in the Enlightenment and Victorian eras, that's not what classical means to most people."

Like Swinburne's poem, Reid Kelley's art is undergirded by a "wandering will" or aberrant impulse (invoking the literal meaning of the Latin *aberrare*, to wander or stray) — grappling with the self as a fluid, unstable, and potentially deviant entity. Through the myth of the Minotaur's conception, she veers away from the classical world's connotations of order and rationality. *Swinburne's Pasiphae* is overtly, luridly stagey — achieving a suitable sense of what Swinburne's biographer Cecil Lang called "Algernonic exaggeration." The counterfeit cow is akin to a pantomime contraption; Daedalus's workshop is evoked by a backdrop, filled with clumsy graphics of tools. Beneath the film's ludic veneer, however, there is an atmosphere of reality gone dangerously awry, as if distorted by delusion and neurosis. Reid Kelley's sense of a darker side of the classical — one of sexual profligacy, intoxication, or ecstatic frenzy — looks back to the dichotomy Nietzsche expounded in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) between the "Apollonian" face of ancient Greece (what Walter Pater had termed the "sharp, bright edge of high Hellenic culture"), and the darker "Dionysian" subcurrent of irrationality and chaotic subjectivity.^[1] In Kelly's view, "Apollonian interpretations of the classical world are ubiquitous" — too ubiquitous: we have tended to brush Dionysus under a carpet of sweetness and light.



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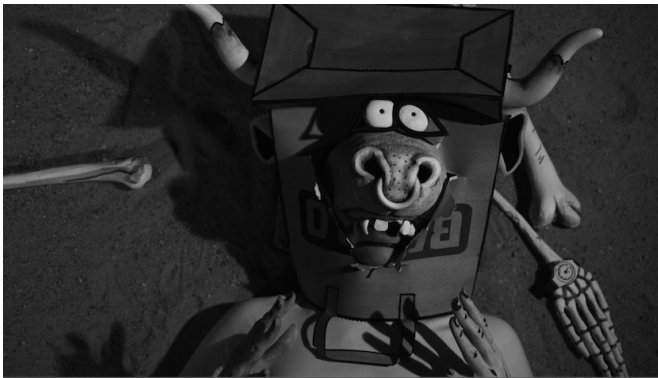
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The extremes of sexual deviancy remain a largely taboo area for contemporary art — often shied away from entirely, or sublimated through bombastic caricature, as in the sculptures of Paul McCarthy or the Chapman Brothers. The question of what qualifies as deviancy is, up to a point, a historically specific one: as Reid Kelley proposes, "many subjects that Swinburne's audience would have seen as very risqué (such as lesbians, or spanking — favorite Swinburnian topics) are nearly ubiquitous in contemporary art," and she draws a distinction between "extinct taboos (gay sex) and live ones (bestiality)." Jocose as her film appears, Reid Kelley uses the smokescreen of a mythical story and fanciful stagecraft to broach the inexpressible "live taboos" of modern society — just as Swinburne and his peers did. She impels us to see sexual transgression not as an eccentricity of myth but as a fact of everyday life, as real now as it was in prehistoric Crete. In her exhibition last autumn at London's Pilar Corrias gallery, *Swinburne's Pasiphae* appeared alongside a collection of dioramas of props from the film. One of these, *Pasiphae's liquor cabinet* (2014), evoked the queen's guilt-ridden lust in the form of a shelf cluttered with potions and panaceas — her torment reimagined comically as a modern, pill-popping dilemma. A sequence of cartoons meanwhile channeled the ancient zoophilic narrative into the guise of "Lonely Hearts" adverts in lifestyle magazines, with some appalling classicizing puns thrown in for good measure ("QUEEN SEEKS BOVINE FRIEND," "I AMPHORA NEW ROMANCE").

The point of *Pasiphae's liquor cabinet* seemed to be that, however preternatural and arcane the story, its core themes — of forbidden desire, the craving for satisfaction, and the basic fact of sexual peculiarity — are all too real, discernible everywhere amid the trivia and neuroses of modern life.

Reid Kelley concludes that “the love element of the story that still seems archaic is the bestial coupling,” although she regards this residual element of incongruity as revealing much about modern attitudes in itself. Indeed, the strangeness of Pasiphae’s coupling with the bull has perhaps been given an added twist by science, liable to seem even more grotesque in the eyes of a contemporary audience versed in the rationale of evolutionary theory. “It’s not just taste that’s intervened,” she explains, “but science, Darwin, genetics. The acquisition of this knowledge hasn’t made us better at tolerating difference, which is what the Minotaur ultimately represents.”

Given that sexual aberration — whatever its form — is a fact of life as much as a figment of myth, it is hard not to think of Pasiphae’s aberrant fictional passion in relation to Swinburne’s own life and his notorious peccadillos. Reid Kelley points out that “the exact dimensions of Swinburne’s sexuality are impossible to know, thanks mostly to Victorian sensibilities — including his own: he was equally a libertine and a gentleman.” Swinburne’s milieu (which included Charles Baudelaire, Walter Pater, Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites) might well be summed up in similar terms — imaginatively licentious yet bound by the politesse of the day. It is clear, however, that “Swinburne was certainly a sexual outcast,” Reid Kelley says, “which makes me sad because I think he would have been much happier partnered. I wish he could have lived in our pro-kink era of Craigslist and OK Cupid.” She speculates that “the dramatic appeal of the cursed, willful Pasiphae must have been obvious to him — he never missed a chance to enshrine sexual taboo in verse.”



(<http://larb.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/swinburneStill20.jpg>)

Certainly, Swinburne is now remembered as much for his alcoholic excesses and erotic aberrations (he peddled a rumor that he had engaged in pederasty with a monkey and then eaten it) as for his verse and criticism. His alleged homosexuality may have been more affected than practiced, but he was clearly a masochist — as vulnerable as Pasiphae to “the sharp goad of an amorous will [...] biting her flesh with teeth / Immedicable.”^[2] “He visited a brothel in St John’s Wood for regular spankings,” Reid Kelley recounts, “and the one romantic liaison he had (it was with an actress — [Dante] Rossetti set it up so Swinburne could lose his virginity) did not last long.” Indeed, the actress friend supposedly reported back to Rossetti: “I can’t make him understand that biting’s no good.”

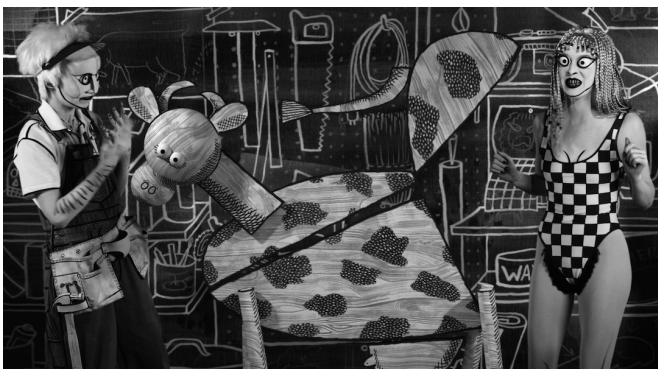
That culturally contingent question of what is “good” or “no good” — either in art or sexual etiquette — is posed by the myth of Pasiphae. In both Swinburne and Reid Kelley’s treatments of the story, the theme of sexual transgression is intimately bound up with that of artistic licence, with Pasiphae and Daedalus straying — in nature and artifice respectively — beyond what is conventionally appropriate. What are the proper limits for art? Daedalus’s “marvellous handicraft” is, in one sense, as aberrant as the unnatural lust it seeks to abet, but it also commands admiration precisely because of its dubious purpose. It offends against — and trumps — nature through a diabolical sleight of hand.^[3] As Daedalus himself comments in Swinburne’s poem, it is “no small subtlety [...] To have wrought in wood such likeness of a life.” His art sets itself apart from ethical qualms (compare Oscar Wilde’s *fin de siècle* dictum: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”)^[4] Daedalus was traditionally a figure who went beyond limits — an artist of overweening and unchecked imaginative power. Pasiphae’s remark that the

and “Will: a man of gifts” when they bestowed his talents finds corroboration in ancient presentations of Daedalus as a demiurge. Plato tells us in *Meno* that when his figures “are not fastened, they play truant and run away; but if fastened, they stay where they are.”^[5]

Renouncing the emotional reserve and technical refinement of much contemporary video art, Reid Kelley’s film shares something with Daedalus’ — and Swinburne’s — daring lack of inhibition. We sense the artist’s imagination wandering (erring) unfettered by regard for decorum. The prolific allusions embedded in *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* are evidence of an errant, fitful impulse — down to the strange potpourri of historical riffs compressed within Pasiphae’s garb. Reid Kelley has explained how “the shape of her eyes comes from Minoan frescoes. The hairdressing supply store that I purchased her wig from described it as ‘perfect for Bo Derek or Cleopatra’ — just right for a century-spanning femme fatale.”^[6] Meanwhile, the queen’s checkered swimwear simultaneously aligns her with the tragicomic figure of the harlequin — Picasso’s morose clowns or the cavorting players of the *commedia dell’arte* as imagined by the younger Tiepolo.

In its eclecticism, *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* plays out the idea that art — like Daedalus’s tethered statues — is ever striving to break away from itself, to outstrip its own histories and traditions, while remaining incapable of breaking the bonds that tie it to the past. Literary and artistic retranslations pile up in lurid array — heaped up on a pyre — with no single voice amid the throng “winning out.” Reid Kelley speaks of the influence of “the first few decades of film, when it was very entwined with current stage and theatrical practices (Weimar probably being the best example)” — again alluding, via the dramaturgy of Brecht or Artaud, to the improvisatory style of the *commedia dell’arte*. One genre refers, in this way, backwards and outwards to multiple others. And by dint of this polyglot referentiality, the film is once again faithful to the fizzing erudition of Swinburne’s verse — to those intertextual caprices and nuances that, as Reid Kelley relates, made his writing such an anathema to Modernist critics: “too diffuse, too non-specific, too avid and frequent in its literary allusions, too close to parody.” In a characteristically backhanded compliment, T.S. Eliot surmised: “Only a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne.”^[7]

To watch *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* is therefore to be jolted again and again between filmic styles and historical moments. At various points, animated paintbrushes and rulers gambol across a black field — spelling out punning and anagrammatic title cards (“HER DESIRE” slipping back and forth into “HERD SIRE”) in accompaniment to Swinburne’s verses. Like the cow itself — a hollow wooden core finished in hide — the film thus consists of layers of artifice that abrade one another even as they hold together (Swinburne’s elevated language sounding all the stranger in Reid Kelley’s limpid American vowels). *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* has about it a sense of sprawling chaotic timelessness. As we flicker between the voices and epochs of Swinburne, Reid Kelley, and the vague “mythic” time of their characters (located three generations, at least, before the Trojan War), it becomes difficult to determine who the real subject of *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* is — Swinburne or Pasiphae or Reid Kelley herself. Perhaps it is all three. If Swinburne’s poem stands as a “lens” through which Reid Kelley re-examines the story, then by the same token her film presents a lens through which we view his verse (and through which that verse is inevitably distorted) — or more accurately, a shifting carousel of different lenses, each offering a new distortion.



While erring against (even gently lampooning) Swinburne's poem, Reid Kelley inevitably reaffirms it. *Swinburne's Pasiphae* reminds us of the double-edged nature of artistic influence — a force to be resisted as much absorbed. In Reid Kelley's art, we find a playing out of Pater's proto-Modernist belief that "the composition of all ages is part of each one of us."^[8] The Minoan cycle myths have continually been recast and adapted in art and text; and of course, the very idea of aberration spawning aberration in an unstoppable chain is a narrative theme within ancient mythology.^[9] There is no original version of the Minoan cycle of myths, and it has been claimed that the story of the Minotaur has its basis in some conceivable reality — the "Bull of Minos" was just a bull, or a man so ferocious as to seem like a bull — but myth has naturally deviated from reality, often through the erroneous accounts of onlookers.^[10]

Reid Kelley has noted of Swinburne's poem that "mythological characters like the Minotaur, Daedalus, and Pasiphae are authorless free agents of ideas, cyclically pressed into service by centuries of artists and writers" — although she also stresses that "there are distinctions to be made in the long blur of historical time into mythological time." She points out, for example, that "monsters like the Minotaur or the Sphinx seem to be in a more purely mythological category than figures like Daedalus or King Minos or Theseus, who might be amalgamations of real people. Then there are people like Homer or Jesus, who probably existed — it's interesting how writing, or records of their thought, is a crucial distinguisher here."

In tandem with the trilogy of films inspired by the Minoan myths, she is producing a sequence of black-and-white photographic portraits of her key influences from the 19th century — Baudelaire, Poe, Swinburne — recast as puppets. It is as if the luminaries of the *fin de siècle* have become characters in a Plasticine animation. "The motivation in making the portraits was the chance to spend more time with people I think of as my artistic or intellectual heroes," Reid Kelley explains. "Identifying someone as a hero does seem to move them into a mythologically tinged category, particularly with thinkers like Swinburne and Baudelaire whose biographies abound with very colorful anecdotes."

Indeed, almost all acts of memory or interpretation entail a degree of estrangement from reality, or what we might call mythologization. The unreality of myth is itself nicely reflected in the faux-naïve stagecraft of *Swinburne's Pasiphae*, elaborate in its very woodenness and suggestive of a childish simulacrum of the world. Daedalus's workbench (preserved as a sculptural assemblage in the Pilar Corrias exhibition) bears an array of tools — paintbrushes, a hammer, a tape measure — that have been papered and painted to become counterfeit versions of themselves. Reid Kelly insists almost *ad absurdum* in this way on the manufactured surfaces of things; and her "dressed-up" world is moreover mirrored in the transvestitism of her performances. As Daedalus, with close-cropped blond hair and a workaday apron, she becomes a kind of DIY-store tomboy. The Minotaur is a spandex-clad female with an upturned shopping bag for a head.

Through a conflation of eruditely couched eroticism, archaic mythology and surrealist masquerade, Reid Kelley has produced a work of art as hybrid and incongruous as the creature of the Minotaur. It is easy to see the piece as an allegorical mythological recycling, a postmodern exercise in playful artifice; indeed, whereas Daedalus's cow was intended to deceive, Reid Kelley's piece revels in its own air of confection. And yet to regard her micro-drama as no more than a "magic lantern" of genres and styles is to overlook the emotional puissance of its accrued layers. To return to the question of Daedalus's artistry and its notional amorality, it is significant that while his creation transcends the bounds of what is conventionally "good," it also generates empathy between Daedalus and Pasiphae. The creation of the cow is an act of compassionate understanding. As the literary critic Catherine Maxwell writes of Daedalus (and Swinburne through him), "he has imaginatively entered [Pasiphae's] psyche and experienced her physical cravings"; he "performs an unexpectedly graphic version of erotic sympathy that looks like a parody of the conventional Victorian sympathetic ideal."^[11] Transgressive

This quality of imaginative sympathy emerges most clearly in the final phase of *Swinburne's Pasiphae*, as Pasiphae and Daedalus's playful conversation gives way to the ruminations of a third unseen character — the oracular Nurse who foretells the sad consequences of Pasiphae's passion. We witness the Minotaur pacing the labyrinth, its bare-bricked walls evoking the deadening uniformity of a prison or similar institution. The very scenography seems to grow more desultory, the pictographic world of black-and-white dissolving into a murkier liminal gloom. The film suddenly errs against its own mood of frivolous referentiality. We are confronted by a spectacle of frenzied loneliness — the Minotaur frenetically running back and forth through corridors, driven to distraction by its own whirring thoughts. Nurses in Greek tragedy are often blundering (if well meaning) fools, but this one speaks with sober objectivity when she avers that Pasiphae's "wandering will" is set to find no rest: "Nor now is night well over here." Aberration will only perpetuate further aberration, of greater or lesser varieties — for one, the annual sacrifice of young Athenians (50 youths and 50 maidens) to the beast. A modernist note of plangent foresight intrudes here; the Nurse's prophecy shares the grim portentousness of Yeats's "A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower" — verses that look ahead to the destruction of Troy in the moment of Helen's conception, as the swan rapes Leda.

In its final self-subverting lurch from masquerade into profundity, *Swinburne's Pasiphae* pulls off a classic camp twist. Two of the "Camp Rules" enumerated by Richard Core in his 1985 tome, *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth*, aptly describe the effect of Reid Kelley's work: "CAMP is a biography written by the subject as if it were about another person."

"CAMP is a disguise that fails."

The overtones of camp playacting and grotesquery in *Swinburne's Pasiphae* may seem *démodé*, but they are precisely what allow it to evoke something of the nature of experience — in particular the experience of difference and aloneness. Reid Kelley sees this quality of inexpressible aloneness as summed up in the figure of the Minotaur: "The Minotaur is the ultimate unwanted being." As the ultimate inescapable interior, moreover, the labyrinth is a mirror of the self — a place of endless deviations, of illusion and disillusionment suspended in perpetual oscillation.

But whose interior is evoked in the Nurse's speech? Swinburne's poem and, latterly, Reid Kelley's film perhaps speak, through their artful disguises, of the outsiderdom of being an artist. Pondering whether Swinburne himself is the true, agonized subject of the poem, Reid Kelley comments: "I think it's an open question which character in the fragment he identifies with more: the powerful but out-of-control genius (Daedalus) or the sexually tormented, doomed queen on the edge of destruction." Core's dictum about a biography "written by the subject as if it were about another person" implies the self-estrangement — the erring of the self from the self — entailed by much art. In the end, the nagging sense of one's difference or deviancy (erring from the proper path) is a criterion of both camp and art: "Throughout history," Core writes, "there has always been a significant minority whose unacceptable characteristics — talent, physical unconventionality, sexual anomaly — render them vulnerable to the world's brutal laughter. Hiding their mortification behind behaviour which is often as deviant as that which is concealed is the mainspring of camp."^[12]

Core might easily have been writing about Swinburne and his self-conscious otherness. "I think Swinburne identified with Pasiphae intensely," Reid Kelley says. "He dwells on her insomnia in particular with such vehement, personal empathy." It is important, of course, that we avoid constructing an elaborate psychobiography of Swinburne — Reid Kelley pointedly remarks that "there are people about whom we know a great deal, but critical chunks are missing — Austen and Byron, for example, both of whom had letters and writings burned in order to preserve a reputation." Yet it is no accident that Swinburne's poem was left unpublished: it was utterly unpublishable, and can only have been written for essentially private purposes — as an interior monologue or "dialogue of the mind with itself."^[13] Its final evocation of

And to turn back to the metaphor of Pasiphae's cow, it is telling that it dazzles and, to some extent, deceives without allowing us to forget the human subject at its core. "In what way," Pasiphae asks, "having put this strange shape on, / I may fare heifer-wise beneath a bull, / Being clothed with cow & quite dis-womanized?" The Minotaur story's themes of unholy desire and diabolical invention lend themselves to precisely the kind of camp re-enactments produced by Swinburne and Reid Kelley. Poem and film alike are whimsical pretences that employ the strange and aberrant tale of Pasiphae as the vessel for something more real. As we witness the wandering monster at the close of Reid Kelley's film, the inability of the wandering self to escape *from itself* emerges as her (and Swinburne's) underlying concern. Concealment, whether a lurid mask or a louche metaphor, paradoxically entails an emotional revelation, and each artist's elaborate artistry thereby amounts to a disguise that necessarily fails. Art needs to err — against taste, against conventional morality, and ultimately against its own elaborate devices and affectations — in order to grasp the most fugitive aspects of human thought and experience.

Hammer Projects: Mary Reid Kelley opens at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, on May 23.

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[1] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1877 (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 171.

[2] Wilde called Swinburne "a braggart in matters of vice, who had done everything he could to convince his fellow citizens of his homosexuality and bestiality without being in the slightest degree a homosexual or a bestializer."

[3] Michel Foucault seminally theorized the idea that art operates as licentiously as sexuality; see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Trans. R Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978). Jill Bennett offers an apt compression of Foucault's argument: "ars, unlike *scientia*, promotes open-ended enquiry; it can embrace the unknown, the abject, the aberrant, the pornographic, not as pathology but as experience." Bennett, "The aesthetics of sense-memory: theorising trauma through the visual art," in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (Eds.). *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity, And Recognition* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009).

[4] Oscar Wilde, preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock & Co, 1891).

[5] Plato, *Meno*, 97 d.

[6] Skye Sherwin, "The Myth of Mary Reid Kelley." *W Magazine* online, 15 September 2014.

[7] See T.S. Eliot, 'Swinburne as Poet' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 1920 (London: Methuen, 1964) p. 150. A similar critique was voiced by A.E. Housman: "In truth there was only one theme which Swinburne thoroughly loved and understood; and that was literature. Here was the true centre of his interests, and the source of his genuine and spontaneous emotions. But literature, unfortunately, is neither a fruitful nor even an appropriate subject for poetry [...] Swinburne did worse than take books for his subject: he dragged this subject into the midst of all other subjects, and covered earth and sky and man with the dust of the library." Housman, "Swinburne," 1910, in Christopher Ricks (Ed.), *A. E. Housman: Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1988), p. 280.

[8] Walter Pater, "Poems by William Morris." *The Westminster Review* 34, October 1868, p. 307.

[9] Pasiphae's unnatural lust was inflicted on her by Poseidon, angry with Minos for having withheld the white bull (erring against due observance) as a sacrifice to him; in the future, Pasiphae's daughter Phaedra — the subject of another verse drama by Swinburne — will be infected by Aphrodite with illicit longing for her stepson Hippolytus.

[10] Pausanias explains the Minotaur's hybridity through a "doctrine of things present," hypothesizing that the Minotaur was a mere freak of nature such as existed in his own day — a man with bovine features (1.24.1). Other commentators have proposed that the Minotaur arose in the popular imagination through a verbal slippage.

[11] Maxwell, in her book cited above.

[12] Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth* (London: Plexus Publishing Limited, 1984), p. 9.

[13] "Pasiphae" was written in the same decade in which we find the first occurrence in English (imported from Germany) of the word "homosexual," hitherto a nameless and unnameable phenomenon.

[14] Compare how Swinburne's language — prefiguring Modernist ideals of impersonality — uses other voices, those of Pasiphae and Daedalus, to abstract its own, in a way that can never be wholly successful. Compare T.S. Eliot's faltering suggestion of poetry constituting an "escape from personality" — before apparently conceding the very impossibility of such an escape, as something that can be desired but not attained — in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1921): "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, *only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.*" [Italics mine].

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James Cahill is an author and critic based in Cambridge and London.

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