

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH: LEIGHTON AND CLYTIE

TEXT OF TALK GIVEN AT LEIGHTON HOUSE IN OCTOBER 2012 BY DANIEL ROBBINS, SENIOR CURATOR, LEIGHTON HOUSE MUSEUM

On Wednesday 22nd January 1896, Frederic Leighton worked for the last time in his studio. The morning was spent making drawings from the model as he had done on countless previous occasions over the previous 30 years. The day before, he had been confined to bed with a serious cough, but that afternoon, his biographer Emily Barrington described how, against the wishes of his Doctors, he drove in an open carriage '...to Westminster, getting out and standing in the raw damp of a cold January afternoon to watch the pulling down of some old houses which had interested him.'

The following day he woke unwell and his condition continued to deteriorate. By Saturday his sisters were in attendance at his bedside. He died that afternoon; the news carried to the Royal Academy by his neighbour Marcus Stone and a committee was hurriedly convened to discuss funeral arrangements of the now deceased President.

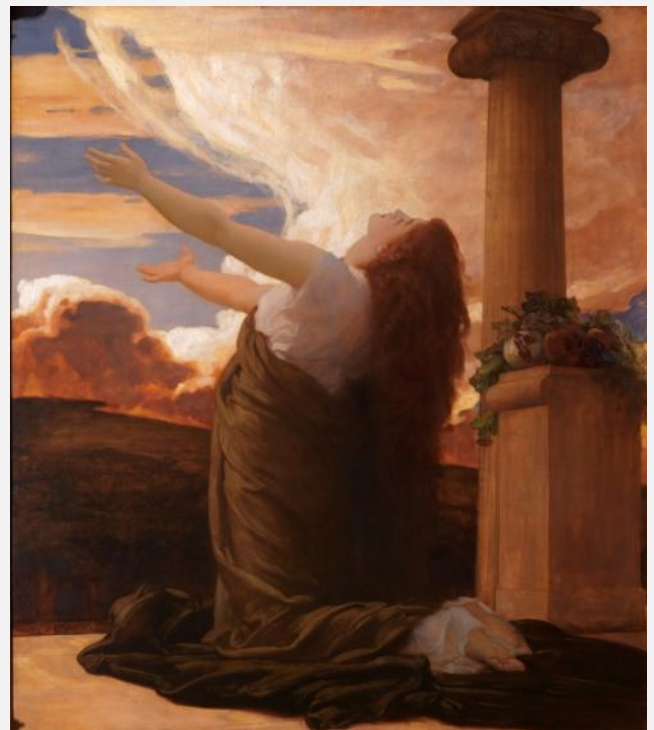
The following day, Leighton's coffin was moved from his bedroom across the landing and placed in the centre of the studio; the scene was widely described in the press:

...the coffin was almost hidden by beautiful flowers and wreaths which were arranged round the bier. The walls were hidden by Lord Leighton's own paintings. On the numerous tables were sculptures – also the work of the dead artist – and arranged in a semi-circle were some half-dozen paintings which were to have been in the present year's Academy exhibition.

Placed centrally amongst them, at the head of the coffin, was the unfinished *Clytie*, her arms outstretched '...bidding a passionate farewell to her god' as Leighton's biographer Mrs Barrington put it. From the start, the appropriateness of this work as a commemorative, memorialising image seemed apparent to all.

The story of Clytie is taken from Book 4 of the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* completed in the 8th century and describes the fate of the nymph Clytie, the lover of Apollo, god of light and the sun. When Apollo abandons her for another, she exacts revenge on his new lover (causing her to be buried alive) but is unable to win back his affections. Abandoned and distraught, she is described;

...day after day, –and through the lonely nights, all unprotected from the chilly breeze, her hair dishevelled, tangled, unadorned, she sat unmoved upon the bare hard ground. Nine days the Nymph was nourished by the dews, by her own tears' bitter brine; –all other nourishment was naught to her. –She never raised herself from the bare ground, though on the god her gaze was ever fixed; –she turned her features towards him as he moved: they say that afterwhile her limbs took root and fastened to the around. A pearly white overspread her countenance, that turned as pale and bloodless as the dead; but here and there a blushing tinge resolved in violet tint; and something like the blossom of that name a flower concealed her face. Although a root now holds her fast to earth, the Heliotrope turns ever to the Sun, as if to prove that all may change and love through all remain.



Alternative versions of the story suggest she is turned to a sunflower which of course is known for how it tracks the progression of the sun.

Leighton himself described how he had chosen to represent this scene shortly before his death:

I have shown the Goddess in adoration before the setting sun, whose last rays are permeating her whole being. With upraised arms she is entreating her beloved one not to forsake her. A flood of golden light saturates the scene, and to carry out my intention, I have changed the model's hair from black to auburn. To the right is a small altar, upon which is an offering of fruit, and upon the pillar beyond it I shall show the feet of a statue of Apollo.

It was not difficult to see how this image of the figure imploring the departing sun not to forsake her could so readily be taken to represent Leighton's own desperation at the prospect of his life ending – his 'raging against the dying of the light'. In the summer after his death, *Clytie* was selected as the single work chosen to represent a deceased Academician at the Royal Academy summer exhibition. Again, the *Art Journal* picked up on the appropriateness of the picture, finding something,

... saddening in its suggestion of yearning for life, its hint of craving that is in us all for light; it is pathetic to see this passionate appeal made by a man to whom had come his last moment of waning vitality.

The picture was subsequently acquired by the dealers, the Fine Art Society, who produced a commemorative booklet describing 'Lord Leighton's Last Picture' (and encouraging subscribers to buy mezzotint reproductions of the work). Indeed, when we were presented with the opportunity of acquiring *Clytie* in 2008, it was precisely its status as his 'last work' and how effectively it seemed to stand as a parting statement, a picture about his 'leave taking', that made us so determined to try and buy it.

But I wonder whether it is all quite as clear cut as it seems. Has not the coincidence of this picture with Leighton's death made it difficult to see it in any other terms? What if he had finished it? What if he'd lived to see it hung at the Academy in the company of his other works for that year...and it had subsequently merged into the larger cannon of his work? Would this change the way we view it? Leighton's death has given it one meaning, when it might, at the very least, have *started out* with another.

In this talk I want to look again at *Clytie*, trying to resist the label of the 'last work' and put it back into the context of the period leading up to its near completion and see if this suggests an alternative interpretation of what it might be 'about'.

Part of *Clytie*'s status derives from the assumption that in the last 14 months of his life, Leighton knew that his death was imminent and inevitable. His health had never been particularly robust and it is certainly true that from his first attack of angina in the autumn of 1894 (as he walked from a concert at St James's Hall to his club, the Athenaeum) his last year was dominated by the struggle to regain full health. But at the point of diagnosis there remained the possibility that he would make a full recovery. Even over the period that followed, between what were clearly agonising attacks, Leighton seems to have been able to function almost normally, giving rise to conflicting and uncertain reports about how ill he actually was. Some were clearly shocked by how ill he seemed; others surprised by how well. Did he know his time was limited? And if he did, would this artist whose work had been so characterised by an emotional reticence, by the apparent removal of himself from his own productions, react by painting a picture that seemed so transparently to be about his own impending mortality? Was this really his intention?

If Leighton felt his days were numbered, he seems to have been putting a brave face on it. Less than a week before his death, in what was very probably his final interview, he reported:

My complaint isn't a mortal one, I have no present anxiety concerning it; but it's very troublesome, as you may judge when I tell you that I had no less than twelve attacks yesterday, and they come without rhyme or reason. Merely washing my hands brought on an attack just now; and yet I can lift great weights, such as that frame, without any harm.

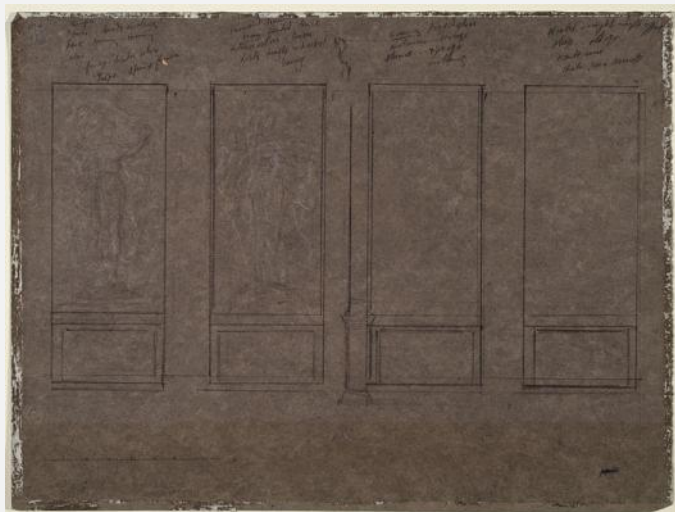
Further than this, he goes on to suggest that far from being compromised as an artist, his ailment, he says 'has not interfered with my capacity for work, for I have never had a better appetite for it, nor I believe, done better.' He then reports that having seen *Clytie*, the artist and Royal Academician, William Orchardson, commented that Leighton had, in fact, 'done nothing finer than the sky.'



If we look at the period since that first attack, he had indeed been extremely productive. His submission to the 1895 Academy exhibition is recorded in this photograph here in the studio. As the critics noted, it was a larger submission than was typical and included the iconic *Flaming June*, *Twixt Hope and Fear*, *The Maiden with Golden Hair* and *Lachrymae*, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. During the summer he had completed a number of oil sketches in north Africa, many of which were exhibited that autumn at the Royal Society of British Artist. And in addition to *Clytie*, he had also completed in its entirety the large and complex *Perseus on Pegasus* now in Leicester Museum and Art Gallery as well as two other smaller works which were also destined for the Academy of 1896. This image gives a different sense of the vitality of the artist at this point in his life.



There are other indications that Leighton didn't see *Clytie* as his creative full stop. On that final Wednesday of work here in the studio, he was making drawings in relation to a commission he had accepted in August 1895 from Enriqueta Rylands, widow of the Manchester-based cotton manufacturer, John Rylands. This was for four panels depicting the seasons and had got as far as Leighton completing initial drawings which he showed to the client for her approval. There was therefore months of work ahead to complete this series and in accepting and starting on the commission, he clearly felt he was in a position to see it through. So there is no real indication that Leighton saw *Clytie* as the completion of his life's work, or that he was impeded in getting it as far as he had. But if it was not intended to be his 'end' what can we say about the origins of this work.



With Leighton, this can be a complicated question. We know enough about the way he worked to understand that the conception and gestation of pictures was a complex, drawn out process of looking back into ideas and sketches often made months or years before and generating out of them ideas for new compositions. While the idea for a picture might be spontaneous, appearing, as Leighton put it, complete in his 'mind's eye' and often annotated at the size of a postage stamp, there is no certainty at what point he would decide to develop that idea into a finished work. If we think of the artist's year being determined by the 12 months leading up to the handing-in days at the Royal Academy at the end of March/beginning of April each year, Leighton did not sit down at the start of that period and 'invent' the 3, 4 or 5 works he might conventionally send to the exhibition. Large, more complex paintings might be being made over a series of cycles; ideas that had been brewed over for many years, might be returned to and taken forward. A pose devised for one composition might evolve into the germ of an idea for another. In the particular case of *Clytie*, we know that its origins lie many years before 1896 and perhaps in an unlikely location. It therefore seems highly probable that the *idea* of the painting was 'in development' long before the onset of Leighton's condition. It was not, I think, a response to the idea he was dying, but part of a longer continuum of work both technically and thematically.

In September 1874, Leighton travelled to Donegal in the west of Ireland. A sketchbook, bought in Dublin en route, held at the Royal Academy, contains a series of pencil sketches made of the rugged coastline. Across a double page spread is the rapid representation of a skyscape, annotated by Leighton with descriptions of the colours of the sky and presumably made on the spot in order to capture the scene before him. This first drawing was then worked up into a sketch in oils. The sale of Leighton's collections after his death in 1896 included 'Study of Sky, Donegal'. Although untraced, the catalogue states that it was 'used as a study for *Clytie*'. The same Royal Academy sketchbook contains a second pencil skyscape, presumably again put down very rapidly on the spot and in this instance the corresponding oil sketch is in the Leighton House collections entitled *Mullenmore Island*.



The practice of recording landscapes in this way was a fundamental part of Leighton's travelling. Towards the end of his life he did exhibit some of these sketches, but for the most part they were painted for relaxation and his own interest. On his death, over 200 were in his possession. They were not necessarily painted with a specific use in mind or quoted from directly in a finished painting but they were - 'a reminiscence and suggestion' as Leighton put it, from which he might draw motifs, colours, effects of light or whatever it might be and incorporate them into the background of a composition. What is so unusual in this instance, uniquely in his work, in fact, is that this sketch, made in 1874 was not incidental to a work that appeared at a later date, but was the basis for a finished picture – a first version of *Clytie* one of five works that Leighton exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1892.



By some margin, this was the closest Leighton came to the exhibition of a large-scale 'pure' landscape painting during his career. Indeed, critics couldn't help but describe it as such and were clearly somewhat non-plussed by its appearance at this relatively advanced stage, with no precedent in his career. Reaction was generally favourable, the Pall Mall Gazette describing it as 'important a work as any that he will send to this year's Academy.' But as the critic noted, to give it 'a certain amount of human interest', the figure of Clytie, with arms outstretched, is discreetly placed at the bottom right.



The collection of some 700 of Leighton's drawings held here at the museum contains this study which appears to be the only known drawing relating to this the first version of the picture. As you can see, these appear to be alternatives for the pose of *Clytie* with her hands clenched before deciding on the more obviously pleading or imploring gesture with the hands outstretched.

We can only speculate whether the pictorial possibilities of this skyscape prompted Leighton to seek a subject to which it could be harnessed, or whether an interest or an identification with the story of Clytie triggered the recollection of that sunset and how it might be used. But it was clearly in his mind for some time. The Tate has a drawing which shows an initial idea for the composition on a sheet of studies that included designs for *Idyll* and *Whispers* of 1880-1 and *Cymon and Iphigenia* of 1884.



But it was not just the emphasis on landscape that marks it out as 'different'. The finish of Leighton's paintings was conventionally worked up into an impregnable, smooth surface. Following his death, 'The Athenaeum' identified this as a defining rule of his career; what was described as 'artistic completeness, the finish that is due to study, patience and industry.' Yet with this work something of this polish breaks down, there is an unusual immediacy and vigour to the painting of the sky and the thick impasto of the sun. Perhaps Leighton felt this broader technique was somehow more acceptable or appropriate in the treatment of a landscape subject than in a conventional work, but it is significant that both this technical 'loosening up' and the prominent inclusion of light and the sun are in fact present in other paintings of the 1890s.



At the start of the decade he had exhibited *The Return of Persephone* at the Academy. Showing the emergence of Persephone from the underworld, to be greeted by her mother Demeter, the pose, with Persephone's head thrown back and arms outstretched is clearly a forerunner of *Clytie*. Both poses were modelled by Dorothy Dene, the actress and model who is prominent in almost all Leighton's significant later works. But while Persephone's gesture is about her seeking the arms of her mother it also corresponds to *Clytie* in its suggestion of a craving for sunlight.





In *Perseus and Andromeda* which formed part of the same Royal Academy submission, Perseus rides to rescue the bound Andromeda (again modelled by Dorothy Dene) emerging out of the sun, or at least emanating a sun-like radiance as he approaches on Pegasus.



In *And the sea gave up the dead which were in it* painted in the same year, there is again a dramatic skyscape as the figures emerge from the depths of the sea and rise upwards towards a patch of burning sunlight piercing the cloudy sky and painted with the same kind of impasto and energy.



Lachrymae of 1895, the patch of sun visible over the shoulder of the standing figure, has that same densely-applied burning gold carrying the real physical mark of Leighton's brush. It is obscured by the large trunk behind the figure and about to disappear, depriving the lachrymose figure of its consoling warmth.



Finally, and most obviously of all is *Flaming June* which can be read not just as a woman made drowsy by the heat of the sun that shimmers on the sea behind her but as a symbolic representation of the sun itself – it is in a true sense a sun-worshipper's picture.

So there is a common thread through these works that at least suggests an almost visceral relationship with the sun and sunlight. For a painter, and certainly for Leighton, the sun as the source of light was of enormous significance. His repeated travels to southern Europe and even further afield were, in part, motivated by a desire to escape the smog-bound gloominess of London and luxuriate in the effects of a brighter, warmer sun. The 1874 sketchbook drawing annotates the spot where the last of the sun is spilling over the line of the hills as simply a 'blur of dazzling gold'. Leighton later commented that 'Sunlight can never be accessory – its glory is paramount where it appears, everything except water is tributary to its song of splendour.'

So if this is where this first *Clytie* derives its power; a painter's very particular and profound relationship with light, there was no suggestion that it had any more personal 'autobiographical' message of leave-taking or loss. In 1892, Leighton wrote that 'I have myself a weakness for this picture, which I brewed for some 15 years.' Its origins therefore lie in a period when thoughts of mortality and loss were presumably far from his mind. Indeed, one interpretation of this first *Clytie* is that it is not about leaving-taking at all and that this is a dawn sky, the sun appearing over the landscape as a response to Clytie's gesture and bathing her once more in light and warmth. Rather than loss, it is about renewal; a reading that is completely at odds with how the second *Clytie* has been interpreted.

Nevertheless there was clearly something about this story that appealed to Frederic Leighton. The first *Clytie* did not sell at the Academy and he retained it until his death. In 1892, he acknowledged 'I have myself a weakness for this picture, which I brewed for some 15 years,' confirming that he had been considering it for a considerable time. What again is unusual is that having once explored this subject (however almost incidental it is to the picture) one might typically expect Leighton to leave it behind. Unlike so many of his contemporaries he almost never produced versions or alternatives of the same subject. But perhaps its continued presence in the studio let into the consideration of a second *Clytie* – effectively 'zooming in' on that figure to



make it the dominant subject of the painting itself. As I say, while the drawings show that taking elements from one composition and evolving them into a totally separate composition, I know of only two other instance of Leighton quoting from one picture in another and curiously they both relate to this same decade. The first is in the painting *Summer Slumber* of 1892 which features as a relief carving the pose that is then re-cast as *Flaming June* and the second are the two paintings we've already mentioned where the Perseus in the background of *Perseus and Andromeda* then is zoomed in on in a similar way and made the subject of a work itself for *Perseus on Pegasus*.

What we cannot be sure of precisely is the gap between the completion of the first *Clytie* and embarking on the second. It seems quite possible that the thought of doing it was in his mind as he was working on the first and there was a much greater continuity between the two pictures than might be imagined by the 4-year gap in the dates of their exhibition. How then did it the progress of this second *Clytie* sit against the backdrop of his last year?

In October 1894 Leighton returned to London from his customary trip to Italy, marking the start of an intensive period of work here in the studio and in the adjacent winter studio that would only cease with the submission of the works to the Academy the following spring.

A sign that his pictures for the Academy were completed was the annual visit by his closest Royal supporters. On 29th March 1895, *The Times* Court Circular reporting that The Prince and Princess of Wales accompanied by the Princesses Victoria and Maud visited the studios of Sir Frederic Leighton and Mr Val Prinsep.' But clearly his health was not improving. The Royal Academy Council minutes of 26th March open with a statement by Leighton in which he informs the Council members that, in order to recover his health and on the advice of his doctors, he is to go abroad for a period of weeks and that he will therefore not be present for the Academy Dinner to be held on May 4th.

His 'Music', was held here in his studio as usual at the beginning of April. These concerts had been an annual fixture since shortly after the completion of the house and this year it marked the unveiling of the newly completed Silk Room – the picture gallery extension that was the final addition to the house. His last official engagement was at Marlborough House on April 9th as a member of the Council of the Society of Arts. If he had made any start on the second *Clytie*, it was now left as Leighton set off for north Africa, which he had first visited in 1857 and travelling first to Morocco arriving in Tangiers. His departure was later recalled in the *St James' Budget* following his death:

...when last spring he sailed from the London Docks in search of the health which his intimates knew would never be restored to him, the spectacle of his handsome form alone on the huge vessel, with not even a servant to minister to his wants, was a sight to bring tears to the eyes of his comrades who went to bid him farewell.



Descriptions of Leighton the solitary, nomadic figure are repeated several times in this last year. But for a long time, solitary expeditions to remote locations had been an important part of Leighton's calendar; opportunities for him to step back from the duties and pressures that accelerated after his election as President of the Royal Academy in 1878. As he set off for north Africa he clearly preferred to be alone, seeing the avoidance of more or less any social interaction as an important part of his recovery. On April 25th he wrote to his sister Alexandra Orr from Tangiers that,

...though I am fairly comfortable here, I have whiffs of a certain "House Beautiful" in Kensington which are very tantalising. How am I? Well, I think I may claim a little improvement, of course I give myself every chance, and am superlatively, disgracefully lazy and put myself to no tests.

Nevertheless he goes on to say that he was enduring three attacks a day. Back in London, 'one of the most brilliant of social functions'; the Royal Academy dinner, took place on May 4th. The absence of the President was made a central part of the various toasts and speeches. Sir John Everett Millais, despite himself suffering from a cold, stepped into Leighton's shoes. Afterwards there was some comment that he used the word 'I' a little too often in his speeches and caused some amusement when he mistakenly invited the Archbishop of York to speak when he was supposed to be the Archbishop of Canterbury...amusing as this was, comments were made that this would not have happened with Leighton at the helm.

Leighton's submission to the 1895 Royal Academy was broadly well-received, although it is important to stress that throughout his career, his work had never been wholeheartedly endorsed by the critics. Nevertheless, *The Times* concluded that though his absence from the private view and dinner was 'a subject of universal regret' the work on display showed 'no weakness or wavering'.

In early May Leighton travelled to Algiers where he remained for a further fortnight. On the 21st of May, after a month in north Africa he set off from Algiers for France. His final bulletin to his sister referring to, in the main, a 'most enjoyable time', but it is clear that the condition was still troubling him. He seemed to take some comfort in now understanding that the severity of the attacks seemed to bear no relation to activity of climate and so he would be better able to resist any entreaty he repeat this kind of sabbatical. Crossing back to France, he travelled via Paris to Morlaix in Brittany, writing to his great friend G.F. Watts from there on June 2nd he gave a further indication of how he had passed the time in north Africa, completing:

A little quiet, unconventional, but most enjoyable sketching (landscape bits) from nature – it is the most irresponsible restful thing I can do and fills time delightfully – (I have made a few tidy little sketches I think)



Reports of his return to the continent and speculation about his health began to appear in the British press, in June. *The Times* stated that he had 'derived much benefit from his visit to Algeria', while the Western Mail offered a less promising prognosis suggesting he might never be able to recover sufficiently to return to England. This degree of public interest – other reports appeared in regional newspapers - demonstrates the fame and public profile that Leighton now enjoyed.

On 16th June he returned to London and two days later was back chairing the Council meeting at the Academy and picking up his round of duties and social. A few days later he insisted on receiving guests at the RA soiree 'although he suffered three attacks while dressing. He survived the subsequent three and a quarter hours without a recurrence, and afterwards told a friend, who had expressed amazement at his vitality: 'I think the attacks must be greatly a matter of nerves.' – the anticipation of the event rather than the event itself seems to have been the problem.

But the priority for these summer months, as it always was, was to progress the pictures for the following year, although this year, Leighton's working day was curtailed by a daily session with a Swedish masseuse whose attentions had been proscribed by Leighton's doctors. If the initial drawn studies for *Clytie* had not yet been made, it is during the course of these weeks that they would have been completed. Altogether, there are at least 12 drawings that relate to the second *Clytie*. These are all on the dark grey paper that Leighton adopted in about 1894 and show him working to refine and finalise the pose. In looking at these it seems extraordinary that the method he had adopted right at the start of his career seems to have been applied with the same systematic and rigorous effort through to this late stage.

For the next month he remained in London until the end of the season. We cannot be sure what state *Clytie* had now reached, but he had long experience of getting works ready and must have left confident that the work was sufficiently progressed to pick it up and complete it on his. Whereas the spring trip to Morocco and Algeria had been exceptional, it was typical for Leighton to travel from late August until early November. Again, accounts have given this trip the characteristics of a final valedictory tour, a last farewell to the people and places he loved best. But it was in fact the same kind of trip that he'd been making for many years, with no compromise being made for his delicate health. There are indications too that *Clytie* was now very much in his mind.

Leaving London around 16th August, he travelled to Worcester where he stayed for almost three weeks before crossing to Ireland, passing through Dublin, then travelling down to Cork and from there to Killarney and Galway before going on to County Donegal with the intention of spending a week in the area of Malinmore.

It seems to me no coincidence that he chose to return to the precise location which had provided him with the motif from which *Clytie* had evolved all that time before. Was he hoping to experience again a sunset of the kind he'd witnessed before? We know further landscape sketches were made on this trip but it seems more likely it was simply the association of this place with the work that was at the forefront of his mind that prompted his return – that and the fact that the chances of bumping into anyone were very remote. Writing to Mrs Barrington on 19th September he commented 'I am enjoying unsociable solitude keenly, like the bear I am; health so so.' In early October, the *Belfast News* provided an update on his movements reporting Leighton:

...has enjoyed a very beneficial holiday in what you call the Western Highlands of Ireland. He made the neighbourhood of Donegal his headquarters, and when he was not fishing, he passed the time in sketching some of the wild scenery on the Western coast. The weather having now broken up everywhere, Sir Frederick will soon be again seen in art circles in the metropolis, looking and feeling all the better for change of air and scene.

Whether his health was significantly recovered, we cannot know, but he didn't spend any time in London at all and seems to have set off almost immediately for Italy. Leighton travelled to Italy almost annually and had known the country intimately since living in Rome in the early 1850s. By 9th October he was in Venice, a city which was particularly close to his heart. Crossing the Piazza san Marco he bumped into the artist Henry Woods who invited him to lunch with fellow Edward Poynter. Leighton had known Poynter since those days in Rome forty years before, but his reaction to the invitation is telling:

He declined saying that he had too much to do, and asked me "to give his kind regards to Poynter and beg him not to call upon him". Poynter and myself agree that Leighton was in a most unsatisfactory state, travelling quite alone and consequently from his state of health, most miserable.



From Venice he travelled to Foggia then on to Naples and then to Rome which he reached by 22nd October. One of the chief attractions in Rome was his great friend the artist Giovanni Costa. Like Poynter, they had met first in Rome in the early 1850s. Part of Leighton's itinerary through Italy usually involved a period staying with Costa and his family and then travelling with him to view. But again, there is indication that *Clytie* was still on his mind. Costa's studio was in the Odaleschi Castle in Bracciano, near Rome and in the courtyard Leighton painted a still life which was to be used in the painting. Following Leighton's death, Costa described circumstances in which this was done:

It was a study of fruit, and he enjoyed working on it for several hours, though he was then ill; and I believe that the hours he passed in the courtyard of the Palazzo Odeschalchi painting these fruits, which he had arranged on a marble sarcophagus, afforded him, perhaps, the last artistic pleasure he ever enjoyed.



This study is now in the V&A and again it shows that these preparatory studies were not necessarily quoted directly in the finished work...

With Costa he travelled on to Siena and Florence and almost by way of repost wrote of Costa that 'I wish he were stronger in health as well as more prosperous'. Costa was the recipient of £3000 following Leighton's death.

Whether his doctors would have approved of an itinerary of this extent seems unlikely but writing to Mary Watts as he broke his return journey in Paris, he reported a relative improvement:

I have been wandering about Italy, moving rapidly from place to place & as my health between attacks is good, I have had much & keen enjoyment of what is beautiful & noble in Nature & art does not become blunter with years, but rather grows & gathers warmth & glow.

By the 5th November he was once more back in the Chair at the Royal Academy but the next day wrote to his neighbour Mrs Barrington that he was 'no better, rather worse'. He now had five straight months in which to complete his Academy submission and got down to work, punctuated by his usual round of social and other engagements. One of the last of these seems to have been on 6th December, when in the company of the Secretary of the Royal Academy, he made the journey to Windsor and an audience with Queen Victoria to discuss Academy affairs. Progress on the paintings appeared to be good, as Leighton himself reported to a caller: 'I was idle for 5 months in the summer, but since my return I have been working hard and have produced the pictures you see.'

This brings us back to this house and this room and to that final interview conducted just a few days before his death when the picture had been brought to the state in which we know it today. I have quoted the extract in which Leighton makes a claim for how well he is working and the praise the picture has received. There then followed an interesting exchange. The journalist is bold enough to suggest that Leighton should leave off the painting and not take it to his normal high level of finish.



Leighton replies:

I shall certainly try to finish it, and shall probably spoil it. I am not a great painter, but I am always striving to complete my work up to my first conception, and it is but seldom that I do not fail.' According to the same journalist, in his final days, the wish that he could have 3 more weeks to complete the pictures was 'frequently expressed' and the realisation that this would be impossible 'greatly distressed him.' In fact, he did bring the face and skin to a smooth waxy finish.



As we have seen, this looser treatment was not adopted just for this work - it was already there in other works of Leighton's later period. In fact, as this exchange demonstrates, far from *Clytie* being a further progression of this trend, Leighton's intention seems to have been to pull it back into line, to work towards his customary high level of finish. Similarly, the evidence of the drawings for *Clytie* confirms that far from abandoning himself in this last work, he had prepared and developed it in his usual painstaking, fastidious way. There are no shortcuts, no dispensing with an established method in favour of an emotional assault upon the canvas. Part of its apparent spontaneity clearly is that it was just unfinished. But I think both critics at the time – including Leighton's interviewer - and we ourselves want Leighton's mask to slip, we want to feel that he is 'letting himself go', revealing something of what he thinks and feels. Because *Clytie*, as his final work, allows us to believe that his customary control has been abandoned, we want to read so much more into it than we otherwise might.

For example, in his study of the sculptor Alfred Gilbert published in 2006, Jason Edwards finds evidence in the breaking down of the paint surface and the 'frankness' with which Leighton, a male artist, expresses his adoration of Apollo, a male god, as being a last-gasp indication of his sexual orientation – something which has been the subject of much speculation.

By contrast, Elisa Lawton Smith in her book *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body* sees *Clytie* as 'a woman who is confined, who is 'held fast' and unable to participate fully in the actions of the world'. Smith, in relation to De Morgan's own *Clytie* draws parallels with the position of women in contemporary Victorian society, whose room for manoeuvre is limited and, to a large degree, dictated by men. In Leighton's *Clytie*, with the nymph rooted to the ground in endless adoration of her male lover, she sees confirmation of this male appropriation of the *Clytie* story.

I am very aware of the pitfalls of reading significance where there perhaps isn't any, but would like to finish by proposing a reading that relates to some of Elisa Smith's, but gives them a more specific and personal focus.

At the start of this talk, I partially quoted Mrs Barrington's description of the scene in this room with Leighton's coffin placed at its centre. The full quote is curiously ambiguous. Describing the arrangement of the pictures she says:

'In the centre, above the head, the sun-loving "Clytie" stretched out her arms, bidding a passionate farewell to her god.'

So, who exactly is saying good-bye to whom? Who is the 'god' in this sentence? Is it Apollo or might it also be Leighton? And who is bidding a passionate farewell, *Clytie*, or is Mrs Barrington subtly making reference to the model who *posed* for *Clytie* and almost all the last works we have been looking at – Dorothy Dene. Mrs Barrington had – if she is to be believed – introduced Dorothy Dene to Leighton and knew both of them extremely well. Next week's talk is about Dene and I am only going to sketch in a little bit of her background, but by this point in his life, Leighton and she had known each other for 17 years and their lives were very enmeshed. The place in which he had found her as Ada Alice Pullan, young, poor, a 'mother' to a large group of siblings had been very substantially changed. She had become an actress, a society figure or 'celebrity' might be a better word, and was now installed in a flat nearby with two of her sisters. Whatever the exact nature of their relationship may be, we cannot ignore the place that she held in his life. Is



Leighton representing himself as Apollo? As we have seen, the pictures of the 1890's show an obsession with the sun. Apollo was not only the god of light, but also the god of music and poetry – the things that Leighton had immersed himself in and to which he'd devoted his life and held most dear.

But if Leighton is identifying himself with 'Apollo', it is because he can see how closely the hopelessness of the position into which he has cast Dorothy Dene echoes that of *Clytie*. If anything this picture is about failure, about the remorse of getting it wrong. Towards the end of his life, Leighton sadly confided to Mary Watts, wife of G.F. Watts that his interest in Dorothy Dene had 'been turned to her disadvantage.' *Clytie* is perhaps about Leighton's sense of despair, desperation even, that the intervention that he made into the life of Dorothy Dene has been to place her in a position where as his model and muse – to pick up Smith's argument - she is trapped, isolated, in a social dead-end; associated with him to her own detriment and yet at the same time dependent on him. While her life is 'transformed' and her beauty recognised and represented in many of Leighton's pictures, she must remain rooted, unable to move beyond the social strictures of the time. In *Clytie*/Dorothy's outstretched, imploring gesture, Leighton recognises that both for himself as an artist and for this woman, the full promise of all that Apollo represents, will remain forever out of reach, inaccessible and beyond their grasp. So, far from celebrating male dominance or superiority, the picture is about male culpability.

If we turn again to the works of the 1890s we've already looked at for which Dene also modelled, might they not all be preoccupied in their various ways with this same central subject.

Seen in this context, *Clytie* can be seen as just the latest instalment of a strand within Leighton's late work which is to do with the exploration of his conflicting feelings for Dorothy Dene. In this sense *Clytie* is perhaps more about the messy failings of life, than it is about the anticipation of death.