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"Victorian Stoicism and Pompeii: On Edward Poynter's *Faithful unto Death*"

In 1865, the Victorian artist Edward Poynter presented what would become one of his most popular works, a large historical painting detailing the destruction of Pompeii. My paper addresses this popular work, *Faithful unto Death*, as an emblematic example of the Victorian fascination with Roman Stoicism and what can be termed Stoic masculinity. Through discussing the painting and its reception, I will place it in the context of the wider mid-Victorian interest in the qualities of virile, undaunted manhood, exemplified, it was thought, by the Roman military spirit, Roman Stoic philosophy, and in particular the work and life of the second-century emperor Marcus Aurelius.

The painting itself features an unnamed Roman soldier standing, spear at the ready, as the lava of Vesuvius falls on the other citizens of Pompeii during the 79 CE eruption. Even as balls of flaming magma besiege the citizens hunched over in the background, the soldier stands stolidly in the foreground. Although he must know that he'll be the next to fall, although he is about to be defeated by an insurmountable enemy, he does not leave his post, and so performs the ideal sort of Stoic passing *in extremis*. The argument of his stance announces a moral victory that will take place through denying the defeat.

The appearance of the surrounding calamity in the painting alludes to a broad moral critique of Rome that contrasts with the celebration of the soldier's Stoic virtues. For Poynter, as for many other Victorian commentators on Pompeii, the destruction of the city was an appropriate end to an episode of Roman decadence – complete with sexual and material profligacy and the casting away of the resources of the body and the state – that adumbrated the empire's eventual decline.

The Roman Stoic posture exemplified in Poynter's soldier at Pompeii was a seductive and popular image in mid-Victorian high and middle-class culture because it presented an idealized masculine heroism that could face loss unchanged. And the stiff-necked Roman attitude acted as a rebuke to the sentimental excess, the overflow of grief, or in this case, fears, which can expose the male body as a site of effeminate disorder or weakness. Through his "masculine" control over his state of mind, which is manifested in his rigid posture, the soldier promises to eliminate the creeping modern effeminacy that Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes, and other self-consciously "masculine" Victorian writers meant to suppress.

But I want also to argue that for Poynter the soldier does not really resist his fear with complete success. The soldier's eyes draw our attention, dewy with apprehension about his inevitable destruction, and so they fail to exhibit the control manifested elsewhere in his body. The modern male viewer is engaged in a sympathetic relation with the painting, then, as he recognizes the soldier's emotional and bodily control even as he senses the possibility that he could surrender to a fearful wince or perhaps a painful comic pratfall at the last moment. Poynter's *Faithful unto Death* typifies how Victorian writers such as Matthew Arnold and J. S. Mill constructed "hard" Roman Stoic control over the emotions through a direct appeal to the reader's emotions. In order to be transmitted successfully to a broad audience, the Roman Stoic "tradition" as a whole was

transmitted sympathetically, often through readings of the life and work of Marcus Aurelius or, as in this case, a moral parable about Pompeii.