
Antinous' Lips: A Note on the Slippery Matter of Realism in Portraiture

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—For John MacLaren

IT CAME as no surprise to learn that, when the colossal Mondragone Antinous bust from the Louvre was taken out of its crate after a long exhibition tour, the curators noticed that the face was smeared with lipstick (fig. 1).

A decade or so ago, a well-known New York museum had to spend a small fortune removing the bright-red kiss bestowed upon a Mondrian by a prominent lady during the opening of the building's expansion. Apparently, after a few glasses of champagne, the art-lover got over-enthusiastic about the excellence of classic abstract art. So her husband, a museum trustee, had to pay for all the work needed to remove the red crimson that had seeped into the painting's intricate cracks—and, one imagines, for his own embarrassment.

This form of love has a long history. Ovid tells us how Venus rewarded Pygmalion for a statue he had created of the goddess herself. Flattered by his exquisite craft, and moved by the obsession that the artist had developed for his artwork, Venus brought the sculpture to life. He called his bride Galatea. But the idea goes well beyond mythology. Think of Freud's keen interest in Wilhem Jensen's novel *Gradiva*, the story of a man's obsession with a bas-relief of a young woman he discovered while looking for antiquities in Rome. Arguably, the power that some images have to arouse such passions has its roots in primitive, fetishistic appetites. Consider the awe that Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* inspires in the masses of pilgrims that crowd around her at

the Louvre everyday. Or else, think of more private forms of worship, for instance, the cult that teenagers pay to those posters of rock stars they stick on their bedroom walls.

Aside from these passions there's a related but more subtle one, our persistent curiosity about what's real and not in a work of art, a question that becomes especially strong when we look at portraits. One wonders what is it—*who* is it—that we see in the image of a real individual? To what extent can we identify factual, physical information, say, the sitter's actual features, and tell them apart from those ideas imposed upon them by a particular technique or style? In other words, how can we sort out the degree of idealization and direct observation that coexist in a portrait?—an idea that E. H. Gombrich pondered so elegantly half a century ago.¹

Obviously, this is not merely an art-historical question. Consider what happens with those yellowing family photographs we keep in cardboard boxes under our beds—all those smiling strangers who will never make it into a frame simply because we don't know who they are. The same happens when we look at the pictures we took at our last party. They end up in the dump, if they don't match in some way what we think we look like or *wished* we looked like—whatever it is that we see in the mirror when we strike our flattering morning pose after we finish shaving or putting our makeup on. Speaking of makeup, back to that enormous Antinous head so lovingly touched by a woman's lips.

I vividly remember sitting in Richard Brilliant's class at Columbia University as a young graduate student fresh from Latin America, looking at one slide after another of Antinous' statues, struggling at the same time to take notes in the pitch-black classroom in order to get the collections and the dates right, an arduous task which I had to reconstruct later in the library, since all I could think about in class was who this gorgeous boy on the screen really was (fig. 2).

A few months ago and two decades later, I began to work on a play about Antinous, toying with that old question. I found myself searching my books and looking at his por-

traits very closely again, in order to choose the images I'd be projecting on the stage, studying the poses that the actor would strike at key moments, thinking about how I'd cut his hair, curl his locks, do his makeup but also, most importantly, how to create a character. For while much has been written about Emperor Hadrian, his patron and lover, we know just a handful of facts about the boy, half of them arguable; yet countless images of him have survived. We know that he was a Greek youth born in Bithynia, modern Turkey. That he was brought to Hadrian's court following a devastating earthquake when he was about twelve. That he entered the Palatine schools and at some point, became the Emperor's page, his "favorite," accompanying him on at least one of his tours through the Empire. We know that he drowned in the Nile in 130 AD when he was about nineteen for reasons that are still under speculation. (According to tradition, a seer had predicted that unless Hadrian sacrificed the thing he loved most he would soon die. Hadrian had been suffering from a mysterious illness that eventually killed him.)² No one knows whether Antinous' death was an accident, an enemy's opportunity for murder, or a voluntary ritual suicide to save his lover. The latter is the most likely answer—or perhaps the most romantic one. But there are other possible scenarios. Some of the emperor's political foes spread the rumor that the boy was sacrificed by Hadrian himself. But if, indeed, Antinous killed himself, one could consider a more personal motivation. He may have become prey to the fear of growing up, of becoming unfit to stay by Hadrian's side and thus being replaced by another, younger "favorite."³

Be that as it may, it is said that after Antinous' death, the devastated Hadrian "wept for days on end like a woman,"⁴ which is not hard to believe, since soon he had his lover deified; and the cult of the young Bithynian spread to all corners of the Empire. He had a city and an obelisk built near the place where the boy had drowned. He even tried to have a constellation named after him. (Apparently, by this point, the Senate

had had enough of the Antinous fad and politely declined.)

In other words, although we know little about the young man, there are more images of him than of most Roman Emperors, so one can say that Antinous lives only in our visual imagination. Thus, “who was this boy?” and “what did he look like?” are almost the same question.

The subject demands that we zoom onto specific aspects of his image. Take two of the most haunting, best-crafted portraits of the youth, excellent illustrations of what have become, by default, Antinous' most distinctive features (figs. 3 and 4). As in most of the surviving works, he appears as a young man of about nineteen. We recognize the thick, impeccably messy curls; the round, full face; the rather large, but delicately shaped nose; the bristling eyebrows—an almost straight horizontal line across the forehead suggesting an impending frown or perhaps something of his impertinence; at other times, his intelligence and perhaps even a hint of melancholy. The orientation of the head has much to do with all this. In some cases, as in the Prado bust (fig. 4), the head tilts to one side very slightly, tenderly; in the Athens example (fig. 3), we even sense a tenuous smile. Here, Antinous turns rather abruptly and gives us a fetching but probing gaze that brings Bernini to mind.

As it is to be expected, these portraits are far from snapshots: they are the images of a young man who was very beautiful to begin with, but who was also dead. And thus, as with the best of Antinous' posthumous portraits, they are idealized. But they are not the result of the usual mental image we make of people who have become part of our memories, nor the obvious old-masters' photo-shopping of ugly monarchs for their official portraits. One gets the sense that idealization here works in very subtle ways. It's like a translucent veil that softens the boy's features without concealing them; if anything, intensifying the expressiveness and concreteness of what one can no longer see but can imagine—the superb stance, the distinct gaze, and both his vulnerability and intensity. (Granted, this may just be less

the art historian, more the playwright talking.) Looking at his lips, however, something else happens. Here we notice a marked sign of abstraction. We lose the slight asymmetry of the eyes, the delicate yet frank design of the nose. The lips' contours are evenly drawn with a clear, continuous, firm line, more assertive and conventional than the rest of the face, where the carving adapts to the specific qualities of the features, following closely the variations in the tension between skin and bone. But there's something else. In Antinous' lips we sense the shadow of an adopted model: Alexander's characteristic pout (fig. 5). Figure 6, from the Antike Sammlung in Berlin, is an extreme example of what one could call "The Alexandrine Antinous." In many others, where Antinous stands for a divine or allegorical figure, we see more of the posthumous portraits, for his features became a kind of visual *topos*, a shortcut to everything beautiful and eternal.

For all we know, there was never a true prototype for Alexander's portraits, that is, one taken from life. So his lips—just like his deep-set eyes, his tilted neck, wild hair, and so on—are an artistic invention, a trademark of sorts. How this came to be has always puzzled me. I can't picture the young warrior as a sad boy with sleepy eyes and soft, fleshy, parted lips screaming through the thick of battle, covered in sweat and dust, and sending thousands to slaughter thousands. Why would the mouth of the precocious conqueror reappear on the face of a boy who, for much of his short life, remained an adored captive in Hadrian's palace? The resemblance may well be a mere coincidence, but considering the Emperor's passion for all things Greek, one suspects that those plump lips did not belong to his paramour.

While most images of Antinous reflect Hadrian's taste for Greek art, they are not *classicizing*. Compare his face in the two busts we've just seen with that of Polykleitos' athlete (fig. 7). By classical standards, Antinous' locks are given too much attention, his neck is rather short, his nose too thick.

We are also missing the deep-set eyes that spark that sense of inwardness so characteristic of the classical prototypes. Also, next to the athlete, Antinous' pose looks lively (figs. 7 and 8): he almost seems to be about to take a step. Moreover, his body lacks the taut, nearly geometric structure of the classical example. Though obviously strong, Antinous' body is always softened by a layer of baby-fat. Rather than classicizing, then, Antinous' nudes would be more aptly called *Hadrianizing*.

Quite possibly, Hadrian had more control over his artists than any other ruler in the history of the Roman Empire. A poet, an architect, and a keen judge of the visual arts, he couldn't have been an easy patron to work with—or to sit for one. (Rumor has it that he had his chief architect, Apollodorus, killed when he failed to resolve some of the engineering challenges of the Pantheon—which, according to tradition, was designed by Hadrian himself—or as others believe, because the man bragged about having been the one to conceive the building himself).

In Hadrian's portraits, idealization is even more carefully measured. Consider two of the most compelling examples, the busts in the British Museum and in the Louvre (figs. 9 and 10). In the British Museum's, we see him in his early-to-mid forties, probably soon after he took power; in the Louvre's, he is well into middle age, perhaps close to the end of his rule. In terms of style, these portraits are less rooted in the Greek tradition than in the Roman, which was by-and-large relentlessly realistic. And this does not just mean optically accurate, but psychologically sharp. There are important exceptions to this rule, of course. Augustus never seems to age throughout his long reign and Constantine remains as abstract as a postage stamp. But Caligula always looks like the cruel brat he was, Claudius like an old businessman, Nero like a fatuous fatso, and Caracalla like a thug.

Indeed, some of Hadrian's portraits are frank, no-nonsense, expressively potent and, one imagines, true to ap-

pearance. (Hadrian seems to have been quite a good-looker, and in such cases, naturalism may actually work in the sitter's favor.) One sees some of that in the Louvre portrait. The man's curls are carefully coiffed forward, but also (one suspects) to conceal a receding hairline. We see the long, sharp, handsomely shaped nose, the thin but firm lips softened by a well-trimmed moustache, a wrinkled brow and deep furrows between the eyebrows, the incipient sagging of the cheeks, announcing an impending old age, but also a short beard framing a commanding chin. And, as in many of his portraits, even in the mediocre ones, we meet that piercing stare: the deeply-drilled pupils and the tenuous carving of the irises suggesting light-colored eyes.

Though he was very much loved in the provinces, it must be remembered that Hadrian was never fully accepted by the Roman elites. He was born in Italica, a city near modern Seville, from a long line of prominent provincial Spanish Romans. (In her *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar imagines the Emperor as an outsider, a foreigner with a thick accent.) His association with the glories of old Greece, therefore, might well have stemmed from compensation: he grew a beard, often wore a *hymation* instead of a toga, and chose a young Greek as a lover, a foreigner, like himself. A brilliant captain in his youth, as an emperor Hadrian became an astute diplomat: he put an end to long, senseless wars and stopped Roman expansion. He failed formidably with the Hebrews, however, whose food taboos and monotheism he found baffling. He even had circumcision outlawed.⁵

Hadrian's portraits range from masterpieces created by sculptors of extraordinary skill to provincial versions, some of considerable quality, but so distant from the standard prototypes that they barely qualify as portraits. The same goes with those of his young lover. As an insider tells me, some respectable ancient-art dealers list any pretty boy with heavy curls as "an Antinous." (The boy sells well.) The most interesting among these works—often ravaged by time

and defacement, heavily restored in later centuries or propped on modern torsos—range from the hauntingly specific to the utterly bizarre. (Truly, I can't imagine why anyone would feel compelled to kiss that strange Mondragone Antinous.) This is often the case when he's cast as one of those stiff deities or mythological figures I mentioned before, where the beautiful adolescent is made to look like an Olympian alien. Others are glamorous summaries of his features, ancient versions of Andy Warhol's portraits—not a person but a logo. On the other hand, Roman Emperors didn't fare well as pop icons.

The image of Antinous is among the most arresting in Western antiquity, perhaps in visual history. Who else comes to mind? The incomparable Maria-Callas-like Nefertiti in Berlin, Bernini's teenage Saint Theresa in ecstasy in Rome, Marlon Brando in the publicity shot for *A Street Car Named Desire*. But none of them seems to match the enigmatic power of Antinous.

As I proposed before, we may find out something about Antinous by looking at his images, given that we know so little about him. What if one were to merge all the works based on him ever made, including the doubtful attributions and the mediocre ones, and excluding all his official images as mythological figures, but not those that appear in the popular works—the coins, balsam jugs, cameos, rings, amulets and all manner of trinkets, one would almost say, in all the key chains and refrigerator magnets of antiquity. The collection would include the non-posthumous sculptures which, as is to be expected, are far less idealized than the ones Hadrian commissioned before he turned the boy into a god, as well as those very tender, delicate works representing Antinous as a young boy (fig 11). Then we may find something real: a boy, perhaps shorter than the archetypical classical hero and most likely chubbier; an oval face, heavy brows, almond-shaped eyes, lips less fleshy than Alexander's and even slightly asymmetrical, and a distinctive frown. One might add what the stone can't reveal but

one can imagine: olive skin, light brown hair, dark-green eyes, maybe a dimple or a beauty mark. One thing is clear: he was no Osiris or Bacchus, and certainly not a Colossus, but perhaps simply a lovely, odd kid—a brat, a suicidal teenager, a prisoner of power—who worked his way deeply into a man’s heart and kept him, as Marguerite Yourcenar put it, “nailed to his beloved body, like a slave to a cross.”

NOTES

1. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton 1956).

2. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book 69.

3. The concept we now call homosexuality did not really apply in Mediterranean Antiquity, especially not in Greece and thus not in Hadrian’s Hellenizing Rome. The word did not even exist. A promising boy was expected to be taken under the wings of an older, prominent man, who would prepare him for a mercantile career or public life. (It should be remembered that the sexual privileges, while acceptable as part of this unwritten social contract, were not necessarily practiced.) In any case, especially in the highest classes, once the boy was no longer the older man’s *protégé*, he went on to live an adult life and to have a family of his own—perhaps eventually, taking a young male companion himself. While homosexuality in these terms was tacitly accepted, some things were frowned upon: a long-standing relationship, or worse, one where the dominant sexual partner was lower in class or age. And worst of all, falling in love.

4. The Emperor had for a while been showing signs of the mysterious illness that eventually killed him. Some say his ailment was the result of the curse of one of his enemies, once a close friend, whom Hadrian had executed and who, before dying said, “You will suffer the most horrible pain conceivable till the very day you die” [Cassius Dio, note 2] And Hadrian indeed did suffer excruciating pain and depression till his last day, yet somehow managed to rule for eight years after Antinous’ death. He even launched one last tour of the Empire. But his pain, physical and emotional, eventually became unendurable. He delegated most of the government powers and spent most of the time away from Rome in his Villa in Tivoli. After a several unsuccessful attempts at suicide, he died on 10 July 138, age 62.

Recent examinations of the portraits of Hadrian, especially the splendid bust in the British Museum, show a subtle malformation in his earlobe which is, controversially, associated with a sign of an inherited cardio-vascular condition that might have caused his death (N. L. Petrakis, “Diagonal Earlobe Creases, Type A Behavior and the Death of Emperor Hadrian,” *Western Journal of Medicine* 132 [Jan 1980], 87–91).

Many argue that this diagnosis is very questionable. Cassius Dio tells us of the Emperor’s constant episodes of nosebleeds and abdominal pain. Given

these long-term symptoms, it is very unlikely that the reason for his death had been cardio-vascular, but rather a slowly developing form of renal and liver failure.

5. It should be remembered, however, that circumcision was often practiced on adult men upon conversion to Judaism or Christianity. In the latter case, the practice ended with Paul of Tarsus, who allowed men to become Christians (or, shall we say, Neo-Hebrews) without having to fulfill such surgical requirements, a decision that in all likelihood contributed to the expansion of Christianity. It also bears remembering that the circumcision of adult males posed a serious health hazard, and that Hadrian's law extended to the many slaves who were castrated to become eunuchs in respectable Roman homes.

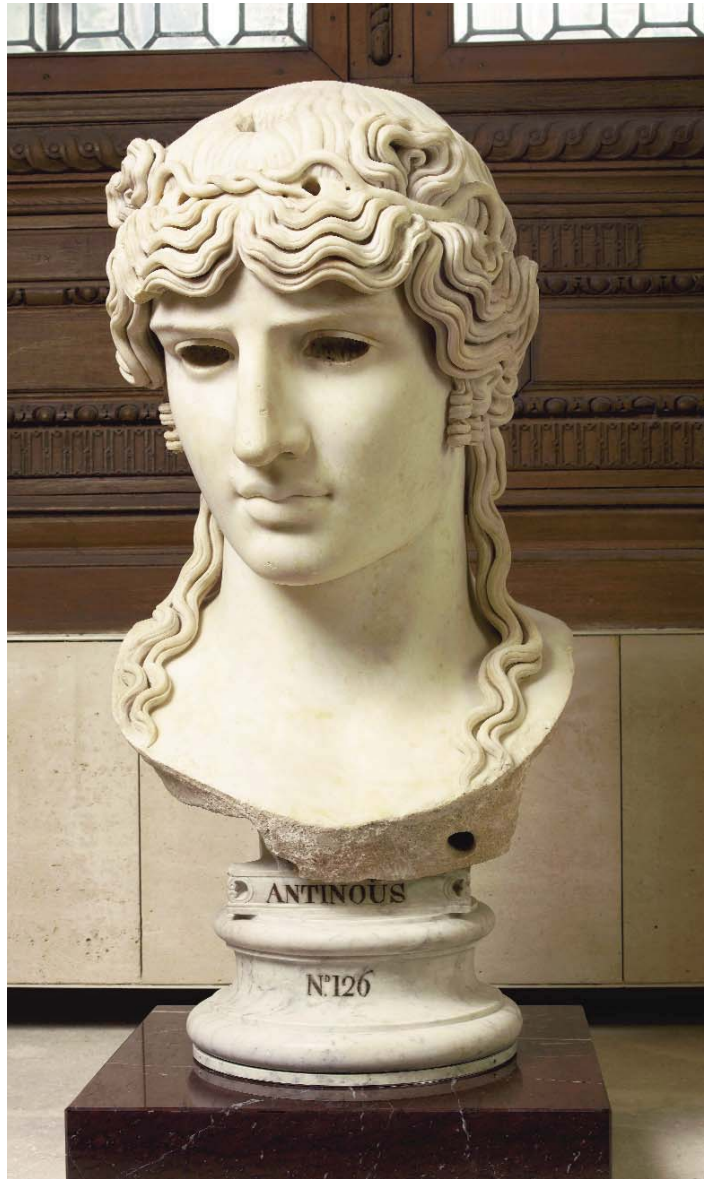


Fig. 1. Mondragone Antinous, Louvre. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

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Fig. 2. Delphi, Museum, Inv. N° 1718, exhibited in Hall 13. Found in 1894 in Delphi. Photo Credit: Vanni / Art Resource, NY.

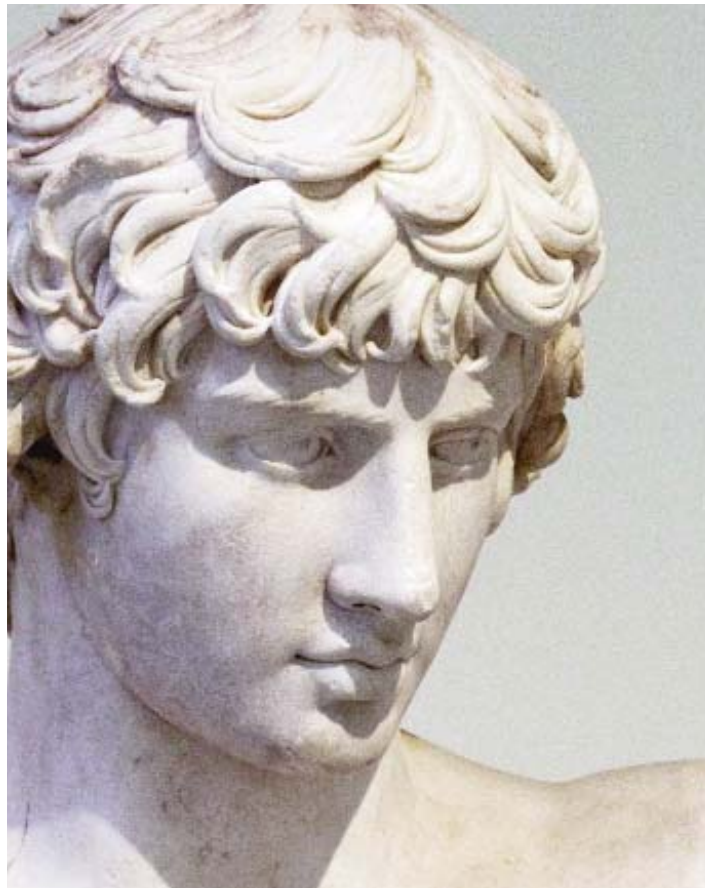


Fig. 3. Athens National Archaeological Museum, Inv. No 417.
Photo Credit: Vanni / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 4. Antinous. Portrait Bust, 2ND CE. Madrid, Museo del Prado
Inv. No 60-E. Photo Credit: Vanni / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 5. Alexander Helios, Museum Capitolini, Rome. Photo Credit: Vanni / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 6. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.



Fig 7. Polykleitos Athlete Statue, Didomenos, Metropolitan Museum, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.



Fig 8. Antinous Farnese, three-quarters rear view. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Inv. No 6030. Photo Credit: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

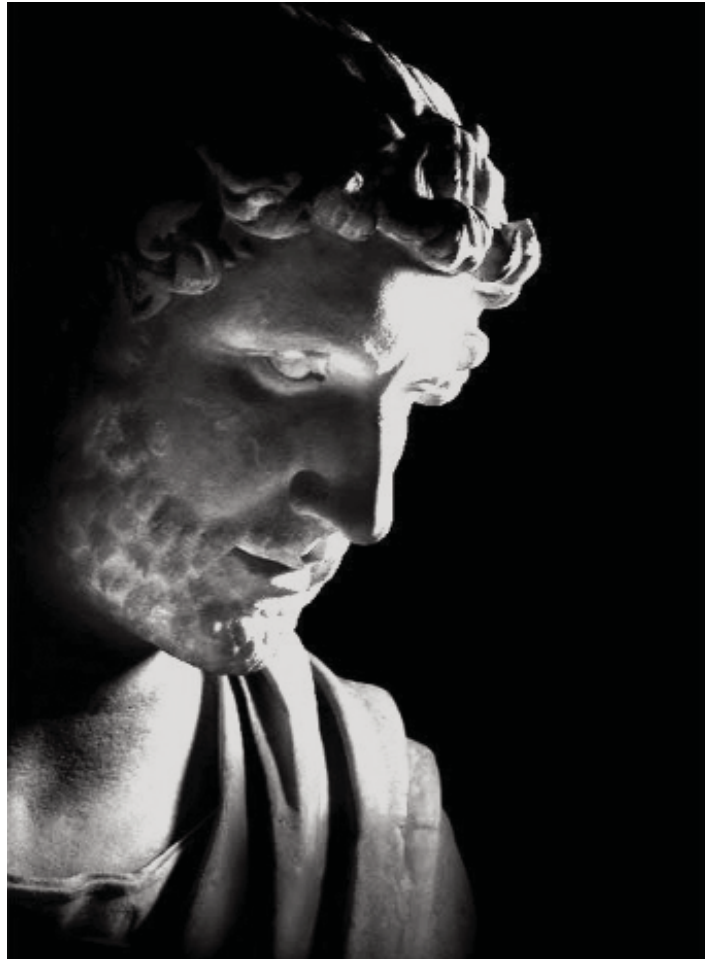


Fig. 9. Hadrian in his fifties. Cover of the British Museum catalogue for the Hadrian show © Trustees of the British Museum. Courtesy of the British Museum.



Fig. 10. Emperor Hadrian, in his sixties. Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

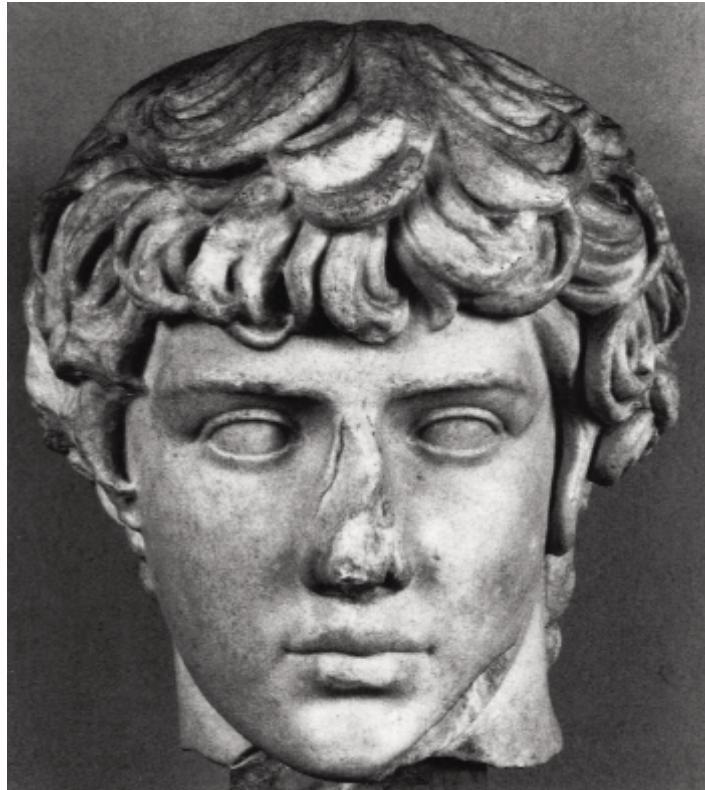


Fig. 11. Antinous as a young boy, Musee d'Olympie, Montauban Col., Munich.



Fig 12. Actor James McGinn as Antinous in Arenas' play.
Photogravure by the author and Mayra Leon.