
Nothing's Lost Forever

EDMUND RICHARDSON

I saw something that only I could see, because of my astonishing ability to see such things: Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles, and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired. Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there's a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that's so.

—Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

ON MARCH 27, 1888, as the light was fading, several reporters knocked—softly and suspiciously—at the door of 166 Madison Avenue, New York. They were welcomed by one of the city's most distinguished lawyers, Luther Marsh, “looking almost precisely as all New York was used to seeing him at the bar—a short, well-built, kindly man, with a square, firm face, enclosed between white side whiskers.”¹ Marsh ushered them upstairs into his study, where for decades the city's elite had done business amongst the law-books. That night, the familiar room was unrecognizable. Dozens of strange new paintings were propped on the shelves, stood against the chairs and tables, and fixed to every spare inch of wall-space. The reporters gaped. Then Marsh began to tell them where the pictures had come from.

All of the works they saw, he said, were painted not by mortal hands, but by the spirits of the great artists of the past—who had turned blank canvases into finished masterpieces in an instant, here in New York, this very year, before his very eyes:

The history of two medallion groups was thus given by Mr. Marsh: "Apelles, the Court painter to Alexander of Macedon, said in a communication: 'I shall paint you medallions of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Pythagoras and Archimedes.' All five of them came out together. There they are. Then Polygnotus, a famous painter of the ancients, promised five others, and I had so much faith in that, that I had a double frame made. It is now, you see, filled, Polygnotus having given me Pelopidas, Epaminondas, Pericles, Homer and Cicero."²

And there were many, many more: portraits by Raphael and Rembrandt, subjects from Pythagoras and Archimedes to Queen Elizabeth I and St. Paul.³ Marsh was all eagerness, "and spent several hours in pointing out the beauties of his unique collection."⁴ One he was especially proud of: "a fine, large one, nearly as big as a window, which is a portrait of the man [Appius Claudius Caecus] who built the Appian Way out of Rome over two thousand years ago and who was . . . an ancestor of mine [Marsh's], as I am informed by the spirit."⁵ All the paintings had been brought into the world through the incredible powers of a certain Madame Diss Debar. "He [Marsh] buys mounted canvases and he holds them up above his head while Mme. Debar is present, and the painting[s] appear on them, all wet and sticky and smelling of paint." The reporters looked and wondered, and noted the badness of the brushwork. "The ordinary man with a knowledge of art," one murmured, "might wish that the spirits would paint in a less degree like the works that are sold on Vesey street, frame and all, for \$1.75."⁶

But there was more: some spirits, including Aristotle and Socrates, had even written messages to Marsh. To receive them, "he presses the edges of a pad that he has just bought and knows to be fresh, and the always-present Mme. Debar also presses it. Suddenly the sound of writing is heard followed by two or three soft, low raps. The pad is then opened and found to contain twenty or thirty or even sixty pages of writing from . . . some ancient Greek or Roman notable."⁷

Marsh had invited the newspaper-proprietors and editors of New York—larger-than-life figures, Joseph Pulitzer and

his rivals, men whom he knew well from his law practice—to his house that evening. He had promised to show them “the evidence of some miracle working”⁸—and absolute proof of life after death, in the shape of paintings and messages from spirit hands. Each had read the letter from his old friend, wondered, smiled, stayed away—and sent instead one of his most hard-bitten reporters to call on Marsh, with strict instructions to get to the bottom of what was going on. Marsh “was much surprised when, instead of proprietors, a company of reporters came,” but as he put it later, “there was no help for it then . . . so he told them all about it.”⁹ By this point in the evening, the reporters very much wanted to meet the mysterious Madame Diss Debar, the orchestrator of affairs, and told Marsh that “the newspapers could not assert the truth of these miracle workings unless reporters witnessed them. He seemed unprepared for this, but finally Mme. Diss Debar came in from up stairs.”¹⁰

She made a spectacular entrance. “She is,” remarked one reporter, “an enormous woman”—“not stout, but absolutely fat,” thought another¹¹—and she “wore a melange of black and red decked with very old-fashioned diamond jewellery.” Pressed for a demonstration of her powers, “she said she never could do anything spiritualistic at night. She had to be in a receptive mood.” She did not, in fact, look pleased to see the reporters at all. “I can be a very charming woman or I can be a Lady Macbeth,”¹² she told them. The reporters went away unsatisfied—and not at all convinced, despite Marsh’s insistence that “the theory of fraud or collusion is out of the question.”¹³

The next morning’s newspapers were incredulous, breathless, satirical. “A new fashion in ghosts” was proclaimed from the front pages. By noon, the curious crowd around the door of 166 Madison Avenue had grown so large that the house “was as if in a state of siege.”¹⁴ Marsh was horrified; he had never intended “that anything should be published about what was seen at his residence.”¹⁵ Madame Diss Debar, outwardly unperturbed by the clamor, announced that, in order to establish “her absolute frankness, her upright motives and

the straightforward manner of her methods,” she would shortly demonstrate her power to New York: before the eyes of the world, “a block of Carrara altissima marble, so large that it will take eight men to move it with a derrick,” would be “carved instantly into a statue by Phidias.” “Lively work for Phidias,”¹⁶ remarked the newspapers—and their reporters began to look closely at the denizens of 166 Madison Avenue.

The story that unfolded was of a breathtaking confidence-trick. Ann O’Delia Diss Debar, “of many aliases, a number of husbands, and several prison terms”¹⁷ would be the talk of New York for weeks to come. Her ancient “spirits” had been let loose into a city which was transforming itself at a bewildering pace—old landscapes giving place to new, old faces giving place to new, almost overnight. Yet longing for the everlasting—and for the ancient world—could be glimpsed around every corner. On the edges of New York, monumental cemeteries were springing up, in a brilliant fusion of traditions and architectural styles: a miniature Parthenon topped by a giant cross stood in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx; next to it would be built the ham-pink neo-classical resting place of Herman Ossian Armour, hot dog magnate. In Manhattan, séances were all the rage: mediums plied their trade up and down the avenues, counting high society and distinguished intellectuals amongst their clients. Spiritualism, in the 1880s, claimed over a million adherents across the United States. “Let no one think that he has shaken off the past,” as Henry Osborn Taylor wrote. “We are in and of it, if we are also of ourselves. Our thoughts and the images in which we clothe them, what ancestry they trail out of a dim and ever lengthening distance, back through Rome to Greece.”¹⁸

The ancient past was a cultural touchstone, in this city—fought over by criminals and policemen, journalists and dupes, amidst the clamor and smoke. America’s Spiritualists, as Gutierrez remarks, wrapped past and present up together: they “inherited Platonic structures of thought and made them coalesce with their own world of steam engines and

telegraphs.”¹⁹ But Diss Debar went further. In 1888, she caused New York to wonder if it was possible to put an end to oblivion, once and for all. Such was her promise, to Marsh and to the world: that nothing was lost forever. Aristotle could still give counsel, Apelles still paint, one’s dead beloved could still speak words of enchantment. Every moment of the past—every figure from it—could be recovered and made present, here and now. History could become an open book.

It was a supreme act of bravado—especially as, in 1888, many opportunistic Spiritualists were wary. The newspapers were full of the latest séances gone wrong. Eva Fay was exposed as a fraud in Boston, Lizzie and May Bangs in Chicago, Mrs. Tobias T. Stryker, Mme. Stoddard Gray and Eliza A. Wells in New York.²⁰ The golden age of the ghosts was drawing to a close. James Sauter was attempting to turn a profit in the spirit-picture business at the same time as Diss Debar—but his New York client list was thin and his “daub of Cassandra”²¹ did not impress; believing that the spirit of Rubens “wrote his name “Reubens”²² (as in the sandwich) did not help his cause. Diss Debar, however, was a self-assured virtuoso, whom Houdini thought “one of the ten most prominent and dangerous female criminals of the world.”²³ She convinced Marsh that she had the power to make the dead speak, and by that act became a composer of history—weaving together fact and misdirection into a brand-new tradition.

For weeks, in this city where the past was so deeply valued, the most talked-about history was a lie. Diss Debar’s fraudulent “ancients” commanded the front pages, and dominated the conversations. Educated, sophisticated and wealthy New Yorkers—many of the city’s elite—believed in her. Indeed, it seemed as if all New York wanted to catch a glimpse of Diss Debar: the crowds which gathered when her powers came to be tested—and her claims on the past found wanting—were “absolutely without parallel for numbers and quality.”²⁴ Though her life-story was exposed as a lie, her Socratic wisdom as opportunism, her narratives of the past as bogus, and her portrait by Apelles as “the daubiest of

daubs,”²⁵ so artful was her classical con that ultimately, only New York’s magicians had the power to untangle it.



RAP, RAP, RAP, \$100,000²⁶

LUTHER MARSH, the “famous”²⁷ lawyer, had spent half a century at the top of his profession—trusted by tycoons and politicians alike, with “one of the most extensive and paying practices in the United States. As attorney for many corporations and for rich men, he transacted business amounting to millions. His reputation for legal acumen was great.”²⁸ Marsh played a leading role in the life of New York—“he wrote editorials for the *New York Times*,” was chosen “to deliver the oration at the opening of the World’s Fair,”²⁹ and served as President of the New Parks Commission; it has been argued that he was “the man who was most interested in the purchase of and the laying out of Central Park in New York City.”³⁰ Letters from John Brown—Marsh had argued passionately for the abolition of slavery—Benjamin Disraeli, and Phineas T. Barnum were stacked up in his study. No one could understand how he had been taken in by Diss Debar and her “Socratic” scribbles.

In 1888, Marsh was still coming to terms with the death of two women he had loved. The first was Adelaide Neilson, a hauntingly beautiful English actress, whose Shakespearean performances entranced America in the 1870s. “At the height of his fame as a great lawyer, Mr. Marsh fell under the fascinations of this extraordinary actress.” Neilson had died suddenly in Paris, a few years earlier, and her death “sent a sigh around the world.”³¹ In August 1887, Marsh’s wife of over forty years died—and he was left devastated. His private papers, which remain unpublished, are full not of dry notes and legal references—but love poetry and deeply-held memories. A miniature Valentine’s day couplet to his wife—

“each day’s a Valentine”—is tucked inside a pile of newspapers. A poem to Neilson, written after her death, spills down page after page:

Now glimpse we clear the radiant shape
Of the dear Adelaide we missed.
So near she comes, in joy and peace,
Our brow is by her fingers kiss’d. . . .
For soon, the river transit made,
We’ll meet her in the summer land.³²

Loss sharpened Marsh’s faith in Spiritualism into urgent conviction. Thus did Diss Debar bait her trap: “She met Luther R. Marsh, and secured his attention by going into trances and bringing him alleged messages from the late Mrs. Marsh, from Adelaide Neilson, the dead actress, and others.”³³ “Neilson sent messages thrilling him with joy”³⁴—and while he had admired her from afar in life, in death she called herself his “spiritualistic wife.”³⁵ As he later wrote, “the ties that have been snapped are reunited”³⁶—and more.

MY FRIEND APELLES

THE “RIVER TRANSIT” in Marsh’s poem refers, of course, to the journey across the Styx which all souls made in classical mythology. Like many in nineteenth-century America, he saw the ancient world as his intellectual home: his letters brimmed with Phaeton and Apollo,³⁷ his speeches with Romulus and Remus.³⁸ And when he wrote of loss, he reached for the classical above all.³⁹ But for Marsh, antiquity was never a passive frame of reference, nor a source of consolation alone; it was a living force, charged with intense excitement. He believed that it was America’s destiny to emulate the greatness of Greece and Rome. He dreamed “of a free people . . . successful rivals in all the departments of life with the kingdoms of the ancient world.”⁴⁰ “Were the curtain which hides the doings of the next century now uprolled be-

fore the eyes of the boldest Seer, he would stand in such amaze, that he could find no language.”⁴¹ At such a moment of possibility for America, who more fitting than Plato to counsel the nation? For Marsh, the ancient world symbolized not an inaccessible past, but a shining future.

Diss Debar played to his ambitions. Messages from his dead wife gradually gave place to those portraits painted by Apelles, letters from Plato and Socrates—and the promise that Marsh himself had a claim on ancient greatness, as the descendant of Appius Claudius Caecus. “Nearly as big as a window,” the “spirit” portrait of Appius Claudius had pride of place in his home, and visitors were encouraged to remark on “its resemblance to me.”⁴² Marsh had been given the starring role in a new classical tradition, built out of deceptions.

Even Harry Houdini—who despised Diss Debar⁴³—admired her use of the ancient world to establish a hold over Marsh. She had “the advantage of being scholastic, and well versed in historic lore and the classics.” This, he reflected, was instrumental in “opening the doors to the social life of the “upper-ten” . . . people of wealth as well as scholars and scientists, all of whom were apparently perfectly willing to be deceived.”⁴⁴ “She must have inherited a liberal share of shrewdness, together with a fancy for reading ancient history.”⁴⁵

She could not, however, have managed such a grand entrapment alone. Joseph Diss Debar—calling himself “General” Diss Debar, though he was nothing of the kind—had moved in to 166 Madison Avenue with Ann. In a room unvisited by Marsh, he kept stacks of canvases, and heaps of paint-brushes. (He and Ann told the world that they were husband and wife, but as a matter of fact the “General” already “had a wife and family in Philadelphia.”)⁴⁶ He was born in Alsace in 1820, and had drifted around America for many years. He was an amateur artist of more determination than talent, “long known as phenomenally rapid with crayon and brush”⁴⁷—and had attached himself to Ann several years previously. There was also “‘Dr.’ B. M. Lawrence, the Trenton tapeworm specialist,”⁴⁸ a sparse, fussy, elderly

man, and his son Frank. All had been enjoying Marsh's hospitality when the first articles appeared.

The affair might have ended as a curiosity rather than a scandal, though, were it not for the discovery that Ann was not only in residence at 166 Madison Avenue, she was also its new owner. Marsh had transferred the deed to her, on the understanding that the house would become a "Temple of Truth":⁴⁹ "The said house, thus equipped, shall, after my departure from this life, be kept by the said Editha L. [an alias of Ann] and her descendants as long as possibly may be, as I have dedicated, and keep it now, as and for A Temple To The Lord."⁵⁰ The gift had, unsurprisingly, been suggested by the spirit world. Marsh's friends were horrified. The reporters were galvanized. It was fraud on a scale which few could dream of: the spirits paid so well that some thought the field would soon be overcrowded; surely "Grand Central Pete, Kid Miller, and the rest of that fraternity will now inevitably abandon the ordinary bunco business [rigged gambling] and make dead set with spirit pictures."⁵¹

When New Yorkers' curiosity showed no sign of abating, it was announced that Marsh would take to the stage on April 1, to deliver a lecture in Chickering Hall—and exhibit some of the spirit-pictures to the public. The hall was packed, and Marsh "received on the whole a patient and attentive hearing"—though one man "laughed as much as if he had taken gas and was going to have a tooth pulled," while a policeman slouched in the gallery picking his teeth, and a line of reporters sat "with meekness and mirth" in the front row. "If I am not a shadow addressing shadows merely," Marsh told the crowd, "if anything is anything and anybody anybody, then are these phenomena actually real." The evening looked set to be a success, until "the lights were turned down and the stereopticon reproductions of the spirit pictures were cast slowly, one after the other, on the screen." Then, "his hearers, with a keen sense of the ridiculous, began to be overcome by the humor of the occasion. Here was a grave, elderly gentleman playfully alluding to "my friend

Apelles” as the author of a series of dirty-brown caricatures of ancient philosophers, and mentioning . . . Lola Montez and Phidias with equal familiarity.” The laughter grew louder. The doubters began to chant: “Let’s see Madame!”

Madame Diss Debar, when she appeared from the wings, “glanced around with an eye of withering scorn. But nobody withered. They even laughed. It struck them as funny that a medium should weigh so much.” The laughter “increased the rage of Madame, who ramped and raged like a tragedy queen.” The unbelievers had a “high old time.”⁵²

The grotesque portraits by “Apelles” brought home to many of the audience not the living presence of the ancient world in nineteenth-century New York, but its distance—the absurdity of claiming that a long-dead Greek could still hold a paintbrush, or that one of the most celebrated artists of antiquity would produce such “caricatures.” Marsh’s mind seemed to be “filled with shadows of almost forgotten ages, in the form of representations in oil upon canvas of men and women who lived so long ago that their names are the only ties between them and the present.”⁵³ Much was truly lost forever—a fact only made sharper by Diss Debar’s masquerade.

Some days later, at the door of 166 Madison Avenue, visitors were still being turned away—but Detectives Mangin and Heidelberg could not be denied. When they knocked, on April 11, 1888, “a servant took them for reporters and refused to allow them to enter the house. But they were not to be bluffed and quietly but forcibly opened the door . . . ‘General’ Diss Debar was in, and came downstairs to see what the intrusion meant. He was promptly put under arrest . . . The detectives did not have long to wait for the portly swindler to appear. Detective Mangin confronted her with a warrant. She swore vengeance upon everybody,”⁵⁴ and was taken into custody. The Lawrences—found and detained at their home on 22nd Street—soon joined the gloomy couple at Police Headquarters. “The charge is a conspiracy to despoil Mr. Marsh of his property.”⁵⁵

Waiting for them at Police Headquarters was Inspector Thomas Byrnes, chief of the New York Detective Bureau.

Byrnes was “a genuinely tough cop,” whose “achievements include the establishment of the Rogues’ Gallery.” He was also a master of graft. “He did not bother to investigate robberies if the victims failed to offer a substantial reward. Although he had never earned a salary greater than \$5,000 a year, he somehow had amassed \$350,000 in real estate and a fortune, held in his wife’s name, of \$292,000.”⁵⁶ He almost certainly extracted more money under dubious pretences than Diss Debar ever did. Byrnes greeted his new guests with a wolfish smile, and exhibited them to the reporters. “‘General’ Diss Debar sat dejectedly in a chair close by the black cap that was over McGloin’s face when he was hanged, and he looked with admiration upon his versatile spouse. She turned upon the reporter and wrung her hands as if she was tearing all the reporters in the world to pieces.”⁵⁷ They were then locked up for the night. Byrnes worked the crowd happily. “I can’t get the old woman into any cell up there,” he told the reporters. “She’s too fat, and if she did manage to squeeze in she wouldn’t have room to turn around.”⁵⁸ “Madame Diss Debar,” as one newspaper put it, “can now produce spirit pictures of a jail interior—from the life.”⁵⁹



SOCRATES IN CELL 21

DISS DEBAR had reason to be optimistic about her chances of walking free. Other mediums had managed such situations with aplomb—indeed, when the infamous Fox sisters appeared before the New York State Supreme Court, the judge “not only accepted the veracity of the [spirit] phenomena, but he then discovered his own mediumistic powers.”⁶⁰ Diss Debar herself had seen the inside of a courtroom several times before—though under different aliases—and had extracted herself from even less promising situations. “Her campaigns have extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific,

and from the lakes to the Gulf. . . . She skipped out of Kansas City leaving debts and a reputation as a beer guzzler.” In Philadelphia, “after a general rumpus, a hair-pulling match, and the deuce to pay generally,”⁶¹ she abruptly left town. “She was feigning death in Dayton with the candles around her, and the priest administering extreme unction. . . . In order to satisfy himself, he talked about placing a red-hot iron to her face. Immediately on hearing this, Anna, who up to that time pretended to be in a trance, jumped up and knocked down two of the priests, overturned two or three of the Sisters of Charity and escaped to the street. That was the last of her there.”⁶² Though many of her schemes unravelled, she generally emerged unscathed.

As she awaited her day in court, though, Diss Debar had two reasons to worry: Mr. Howe and Mr. Hummel. The sharp-suited wolves of old New York, William F. Howe and Abraham Hummel were to present the case for the prosecution. From their office at 89 Centre Street—across from the Tombs prison—they made the city their own. The pair “were very nearly a law unto themselves, and were so much a part of the New York scene, both high and low, in the latter half of the nineteenth century that they can hardly be discussed without the use of superlatives.”⁶³ “Mr. Howe,” as Howe noted, “has tried more capital cases than any six lawyers in America combined.”⁶⁴ One day Hummel, almost casually, had most of the prisoners held on Blackwell’s Island released on a technicality—simultaneously. Howe was a showman, Hummel a strategist; Howe was enormous, Hummel not five feet tall; Howe was hairy, Hummel was bald; Hummel extorted capitalists with tales from chorus girls, Howe dropped to his knees and delivered a two-hour plea to a jury; Hummel probed, Howe boomed and wept. Their office was topped by a giant advertisement for their services. “Their cable address was LENIENT. . . . They owned reporters at most of the daily papers and kept a regular stable of professional witnesses.”⁶⁵ They were almost unstoppable. Luther Marsh’s friends and colleagues—the elite of the American legal profession, sharp, fastidious lawyers for millionaires

and corporations—had looked long and hard at Ann O’Delia Diss Debar, and decided that they wanted no part of her in court. Instead, after Marsh’s lecture, believing that a “criminal prosecution of the whole gang would be the most effectual mode of disclosing the nature of the operations by which the venerable and wealthy lawyer was being despoiled,”⁶⁶ they sent a deputation far downtown, into the narrow, filthy streets around the Tombs, right to the other end of the legal profession, to the office of New York’s most unscrupulous legal brawlers, “and asked the firm [of Howe and Hummel] to bring a private prosecution against the spiritualist.”⁶⁷

Privately funded prosecutions were widespread in nineteenth-century America, as Ireland has noted.⁶⁸ The case was brought in to the Police Court, which sat without a jury, and had the power to pass summary judgment only on minor offenses. More serious cases such as Diss Debar’s would be sent to the Grand Jury for an indictment, if the presiding justice believed that there was a case to answer; following the Grand Jury indictment, a full jury trial would take place. Howe and Hummel were there to ensure that Diss Debar was indicted for fraud and grand larceny by the Grand Jury—then they intended to step aside, and let the prosecution be taken over by the New York District Attorney. Better connected, more theatrical and more ruthless than Diss Debar—and owed favors by half of New York—the two could play her, and beat her, at her own game.

In prison, Diss Debar fumed. She “still insists that Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Claudius and Apollo Belvedere . . . are on her side . . . but if I were arraigned in the Tombs Police Court before Justice Kilbreth upon the charge of being a deadbeat and a fraud, I think, on the whole, that I’d rather trust my interests to Howe & Hummel.”⁶⁹ The newspapers were gleeful. “Ann O’Delia, poor, dear Ann,” wrote the *Evening World*, “Get from prison if you can. / Why not induce a ghost or two / To unlock the doors for you?”⁷⁰ The atmosphere of the Tombs was not, indeed, agreeing with “the 200-pound ex-chantress”⁷¹—and within a few days, it was announced by her lawyer that she had decided to return the Temple on

Madison Avenue to Marsh. “Diss Debar disgorges”⁷² ran the headlines. Later, in court, she explained that she had done it at the behest of the “ancients”:

Q. Did you act of your own volition in writing the letter offering to return the property?

A. No. I acted solely under the direction of the Council of Ten. I would not dare to disobey them.

Q. Who are this Council of Ten?

A. It is composed of ten ancients.

Q. Name them, please.

A. Pelopidas, Epaminondas, Cicero, Homer, Pythagoras, Sophocles—no, Socrates instead of Sophocles—Archimedes, Pericles, Plato and Aristotle—all gentlemen of eminence. (Laughter.) . . .

Q. How did they communicate with you?

A. Clairaudently. . . .

Q. Whereabouts was it?

A. In Cell 21 of the Tombs.

Q. Then you mean to say that all those eminent ancients, headed by Socrates, came there to the Tombs and consulted with you about this property and advised you to write this letter?

A. I have so stated.⁷³

The absurdity was irresistible: Diss Debar had promised New York a past stripped of uncertainty—but she could not even keep her own “Council” straight, confusing Socrates with Sophocles. The more her “ancients” were examined, the more precarious they became. Justice Kilbreth was unimpressed, and continued to deny Diss Debar bail. New Yorkers, intensely curious, called on her in prison and found her in a towering bad temper. Howe and Hummel, in the meantime, were hard at work—and by the time the case began in earnest, they had “raked up enough evidence to be used against her to furnish material for six three volume novels.”⁷⁴



APOLLO VS. MR. HOWE

ON THE AFTERNOON of April 18, the Special Sessions courtroom of the Tombs was full to capacity. Famous faces—including Anthony Comstock, nastiest of the moral reformers—were dotted throughout the crowd. “A fair proportion of those in the crowd were Spiritualists, who looked expectant, as though the possibility of “manifestations” did not seem remote to them.”⁷⁵ Marsh, sitting in the shadows, looked “the ghost of his old self.” By contrast, “William F. Howe and Abraham Hummel were both early in court, the former wearing a big jewelled horse-shoe scarf-pin for good luck, and both evidently expecting nothing else.”⁷⁶ When Diss Debar glided in, topped with an olive-green ostrich-feather bonnet, all eyes turned towards her.

Eyes widened when her lawyer, John Townsend, outlined his case. “Diss Debar . . . in the broad light of the Nineteenth Century sets up as a defence against the charges of fraud, conspiracy and grand larceny that her pictures really and truly were painted by the spirits.”⁷⁷ There would be no claims of misunderstanding, in other words—no rueful confession, or admission of sleight-of-hand. She would proceed with brazen directness, and see if New York could be made to believe that those pictures truly were painted by Apelles, those letters really were written by Plato.

Outrageous appropriations of the classics—one *Iliad* made Helen a Trojan, and Paris a Greek⁷⁸—were as common as curses within nineteenth-century popular discourse. And apart from works which overtly claimed scholarly authority, acceptable boundaries were rarely laid down, for such fact-stretching revisions. A book would either sell, or not; a play would either attract an audience, or not. Rarely would the question of a particular narrative’s legitimacy find its way to the centre of a city’s conversation. Diss Debar’s

case was a striking exception. Few claims on the classics—inside or outside the academy—have ever been tested so publicly, or before such fascinated crowds, as hers. New Yorkers gathered to watch her “ancients” put on trial—not by scholars, but by lawyers and magicians. Could antiquity be abused without consequences or limits? Could any lie become a history? If Diss Debar walked free, and the crowds cheered, then New York’s answer was surely: yes.

First to testify for the prosecution was George Salomon, her brother. Enlisted to puncture Diss Debar’s aliases, he was happy to state that “he knew Ann O’Delia Salomon, otherwise known as Diss Debar, Montez, Messant, &c. &c; that she was his own sister.” “She was born in Kentucky.”⁷⁹ (Diss Debar claimed that she was the daughter of King Ludwig of Bavaria and Lola Montez.) “She has cultivated nothing but bad principles and seems to thrive on them. . . . There is so much to be told about her that it passes human belief.”⁸⁰ He had brought a bundle of letters from her—mostly appeals for money—each full of false promises. “I swear by the memory of our dear father,” she had written, “never again to appear under the name [Montez]. My hand, dear brother, on this sacred promise.”⁸¹ Howe read them out—and as he read, Diss Debar slowly squirmed. “A tall, spare man with grizzled goatee and hair,” Salomon glared across at his sister all the while, and declared that she had “destroyed the peace of mind of almost everybody who has ever said ‘good morning’ to her.”

(Despite his severe appearance, Salomon himself had a colorful history. When asked on cross-examination when he had last been arrested, he looked confused, then declared: “My last arrest was—well, I haven’t drunk any rum for three years.”⁸² He had been arrested in every city he had drunk rum in—and some forty-eight times in all.)

With Diss Debar’s origins disposed of, Howe and Hummel shifted to the origins of the “spirit” pictures. Their key witness, here, was Joseph Randolph—a theatrical agent who had hoped to put Diss Debar on stage, and had been taken into her confidence. Randolph told his story in the slang of

the Bowery—and his testimony captures Diss Debar at the height of her powers over Marsh, showing off the inner workings of the con:

She said, “Now you are my manager and confidential man. How do you like the looks of my house?” I replied, “It is a fine establishment. You are a fly mug to work a man as smart as Marsh for such a big prize.” She answered, “I can give you fellows with sawdust on your feet pointers on working soft snaps. Before the end of April I will have \$150,000 more . . . ”

She then took me to the hall, and in the back of said hall opened another door and said, “Look in.” General Diss Debar was engaged in painting pictures. He began scolding her, and I withdrew, and was almost immediately joined by Madame Diss Debar. She said, “He don’t trust anybody. There will be a grand split-up here before long . . . ”

I asked, “Ain’t you afraid he [Marsh] will tumble to himself and have you pulled?” “I don’t fear God or the devil. I have had hard knocks enough, and the balance of my life will be one of luxury.”⁸³

Randolph went on and on, for much of the afternoon—describing how the “General” put the finishing touches to Apelles’ latest masterpiece. It was lurid, sensational stuff—and the crowd drank in every word.

Next, Howe and Hummel had to explain the miraculous way in which the “spirit” pictures and the “letters” from Plato and Aristotle appeared—how a blank canvas could be transformed into a finished oil-painting, a blank notebook be filled with writing, in the blink of an eye. The following day, on April 20, Diss Debar “swept to her seat like the queen of a ball-room,”⁸⁴ dressed in black silk. The crowd was even thicker. First to be disposed of were the “letters” from the spirit-world.

Carl Hertz, who announced himself as an illusionist, magician and juggler . . . said the trick was done by sleight of hand.

“Can you perform that trick now?” asked Mr. Hummel.

“Yes.”⁸⁵

Howe and Hummel had decided to fight “trickery con-

cealed with trickery confessed,” and bring some of New York’s most celebrated magicians into court, to show just how the ancient “spirits” were summoned. The tricks upon which Diss Debar had built her bridges to antiquity would be demolished, one after the other. Turning to Marsh, “Mr. Howe made a profound salaam and said to the aged lawyer: ‘May we trouble you to take the stand?’”⁸⁶ He wanted to fool Marsh in open court as deftly as Diss Debar had done behind closed doors. Hertz, writing to Houdini years later, recalled how it had been accomplished.

The trick, if you remember, was to show a pad of about a hundred sheets of paper unwritten upon, and to wrap the pad up in a newspaper, and to allow Marsh to hold one end while she held the other. Then the sound of writing was heard as if some one was writing on the paper, and when the newspaper was opened every sheet in the pad was written upon.

I had two pads alike, one I had concealed under my waistcoat, and the other I gave to Marsh to examine; as I proceeded to wrap the pad up, under cover of the newspaper, I changed them, quickly drawing the pad from my waistcoat and leaving the other one in its place. I then proceeded to wrap the pad up when Diss Debar shouted from her seat in the Court Room “Don’t let him fool you, mark it!” but as it was already changed, it did not matter so I let them tear a corner off.

I then let him hold one end, while I held the other, and amidst a great silence the sound of writing was heard, as if a pen was rapidly going over the paper, and I then told him to open the newspaper and look at the pad, when he found every sheet written upon. I then showed the Court how I produced the sound of writing, by having the nail of my forefinger split, and simply scratching the newspaper underneath while I held it.⁸⁷

When Hertz revealed the pad full of writing, “Mr. Marsh and Mr. Hertz were fairly mobbed. People swarmed over tables and chairs, elbowed their way to the front, and clustered around the Justice’s bench. There was such a din that scarcely a word spoken by the lawyers, witnesses or judge could be heard.”⁸⁸ Diss Debar’s “ancients” were losing the

battle for public opinion and column inches which was, in this discourse, the same as the battle for legitimacy.

Diss Debar, looking on, turned “red as peony.”⁸⁹ But Marsh was resolute. “Mr. Marsh declared his unshaken belief that these communications [the ‘spirit’ letters] really came from the ancient worthies whose names they bore through Madam Diss de Bar, as did portraits of Shakespeare and Claudius.”⁹⁰ Marsh eagerly told the story of the “spirit” portrait of Appius Claudius Caecus, the giant picture exhibited to the reporters, that first night in his study. “Mr. Marsh . . . said that the big Claudius had been promised through Madame by Claudius himself. Madame lived then at No. 41 South Washington Square. He unsuccessfully sat for the picture several days. One day he did not visit her house, and her daughter came for him, with the news that the picture had come, and when he got to the house, lo! there it was sure enough.”⁹¹

“Big Claudius” was the supreme symbol of Marsh’s faith: an assurance of his place in a living classical tradition. Promised to him by Adelaide Neilson,⁹² the portrait showed his great ancestor smiling down on a worthy heir. Marsh swore that it “was painted according to Mme. Diss Debar’s statement by Apelles, court painter to Alexander the Great and Philip of Macedon.”⁹³ As the prosecution’s case drew to a close, more and more of the arguments began to center around “Claudius.”

First thing on Monday morning, when proceedings resumed, the pictures were called for. “The celebrated productions of the spirits of the world’s great painters were brought in an uncommonly prosaic express wagon and temporarily dumped on the stone pavement among the huge pillars of the Tombs.”⁹⁴ They “lay around in unhappy and irreverent positions. The big wooden-looking ‘Claudius’ leaned beside the ‘Bridge of Sighs.’”⁹⁵ “When they were arranged inside the railing of the court-room and the covers were removed they stood revealed in all the glory of fresh paint and bright gilt frames. Appius Claudius smiled and looked pugilistic.”⁹⁶

“This picture bears the words ‘Thy Ancestor.’”⁹⁷

Then “the bell in the Tombs courtyard sounded out five times. . . . At this moment big Mr. Howe and little Mr. Hummel pushed their way through the crowded room and took their places at the prosecutor’s table. . . . The prison bell sounded out again louder than before, and preceded by a member of Byrnes’s staff, she [Diss Debar] made her stately entrance.”⁹⁸

When Luther R. Marsh’s ancestor’s picture was held up there was a shout of laughter.

“Does it remind you of an eminent citizen of this town?” asked Mr. Howe. . . .

“No, sir. Perhaps it may remind me somewhat of yourself.”

“Emphatically no,” replied Mr. Howe in a horrified tone.⁹⁹

In case any doubts remained about the quality of the “spirit” paintings, Howe called Augustus Maurice Friedlander to testify. “An intellectual-looking man, with a fair Vandyke beard and high forehead, [he] took the stand, adjusted his eye-glasses on his well-shaped nose, and said that he was an artist.”¹⁰⁰ Friedlander built a critical bonfire: the pictures said to be by Apelles were “‘vile,’ ‘abominably executed,’ ‘very vile’ and ‘absolutely worthless.’”¹⁰¹ As for the rest, they were “anatomically wrong. Very bad. The worst I have ever seen. Beyond comment.”¹⁰² Marsh looked furious—and told Howe that he had still not shown the court how the pictures could have appeared in an instant, and “that if any one else could produce an instantaneous picture in oils on a blank canvas he would be glad to bow his knee to them. ‘We will show you that trick in this court-room before we get through,’ promised Mr. Howe.”¹⁰³

Ever the showman, Howe had saved the best until last. The crowds which had gathered on previous days were nothing to the one which assembled on April 26, to hear the last day of the prosecution’s case. Thousands of New Yorkers clamored at the door for admittance. “Fashionably dressed women, swell men about town, actors and actresses

and mature business men, ministers of religion and Spiritualistic lecturers all crowded round the entrance to the Special Sessions Court-room.”¹⁰⁴ The case had been commanding the front pages of all the major New York newspapers for weeks, and if seats in the Court “were given by favor none but McAlister’s four hundred would get within sight or hearing of the counsel and witnesses, for big money has been eagerly offered for any kind of a seat in the court-room.”¹⁰⁵ The crowd in the evil-smelling room awaited Howe’s performance (for performance this was), and the explosion of Diss Debar’s classical con, with all the excitement of a first-night audience at the theatre, waiting for the curtain to rise.

“Howe and Hummel entered smiling and bland as usual, and with an air of conscious triumph.” Diss Debar looked “saucy and defiant.” The last witness for the prosecution was David Carvalho, a librarian who was an expert on photography and handwriting. Howe’s examination of him would have done credit to any stage:

“Mr. Carvalho,” said Mr. Howe, “have you a piece of paper in your hand?”

“Yes,” and the witness produced a roll of blank paper about 25 by 30 inches.

The paper was handed round and every one saw that it was perfectly blank. . . .

“Now,” continued Mr. Howe, “in what way can a picture be instantaneously produced on that paper?”

“By one touch with a wet sponge,” was the reply. “It is merely a chemical change. It is no trick.”

Judge Kilbreth, at the request of Mr. Howe, produced a glass of water. . . .

“Now, Mr. Carvalho,” asked Mr. Howe, “what picture do you intend to produce on that paper?”

“The picture of Adelaide Neilson,” said the witness. . . .

Mr. Carvalho took the wet sponge in his hand, passed it lightly over the surface of the paper, and, amid intense excitement, a clearly defined and excellent portrait of the dead actress appeared on the virgin surface of the paper. The audience burst into loud ap-

plause, which all the vigor of the court officers could not suppress for some moments.

"Excellent!" "Wonderful!" "Admirable!" were expressions heard on all sides.

Judge Kilbreth looked delighted, while the prisoners were obviously much discouraged.¹⁰⁶

The prosecution rested its case. Howe could barely resist taking a bow.

After that, the defence did what they could—which was not much. Since the Lawrences had only hovered around the edges of the con, they were released, and "joyfully departed."¹⁰⁷ "General" Diss Debar took the stand, and "got very mixed up."¹⁰⁸ First, he had to admit that he was not a General. Then he had to admit that he had a wife in Philadelphia. Then he had to admit that he "did purchase a few canvases and some paints"¹⁰⁹—but could not explain what he had done with them. Howe kept the "spirit" pictures lined up in the courtroom, all the way through his cross-examination. "I believe," he said to the "General," "you have painted portraits with some degree of success." "Oh, no, sir," the "General" replied, "I may have painted one or two small portraits, but not very successfully." Howe stalked over to "Claudius," and looked the picture slowly up and down. "No," he said, "so I should judge."¹¹⁰ Marsh's great ancestor had become a punch-line. Howe dispatched the "General" viciously: "Better go back to your own true wife and family in Philadelphia, General, and support them as an honest man should, than to cling as a parasite to that portly swindler, that juggler in black art, that slanderer of an aged mother, that lecherous, web-weaving spider!"

Looking on, the "spider" "turned livid and then green and then black."¹¹¹ The defence "then, in the midst of great excitement, called 'Mme. Diss Debar.' The fat defendant gathered up her skirts in great state and waddled up to the stand. She was very much agitated and fairly gasped for breath." She barked at Justice Kilbreth, snapped at her lawyer, and generally did herself very little good. "Mr. Howe sat serene by Mr. Hummel's side and smiled sarcastically."¹¹² For his cross-examination,

Howe had little need of theatrics. Instead, he “took her patiently through all the testimony of the examination and made her declare that Inspector Byrnes . . . Mr. Randolph, and the others had lied.” Diss Debar would still not let go of her telegraph-line to the ancient world. She “explained how she came to give the house back to Mr. Marsh: . . . In determining my actions I am guided by a council of ten spirits. One night they said to me with one voice: ‘Get up and write!’ I got up, borrowed pen and ink from the matron, and wrote, at the spirits’ command, the letter in which I surrendered the house.”¹¹³ Her case and her claim on the classics would stand or fall together.

The rest of the Diss Debars’ defence was equally threadbare. A number of Spiritualists—whom *The Evening World* uncharitably described as “other Spiritualistic cranks”¹¹⁴—argued for the authenticity of the “spirit” pictures. One, Harriet Beech, wife of the editor of *Scientific American*, simply would not stop talking, and had to be bodily removed from the stand. “As court officers carried her out, she kept talking, waving a picture of an ancient Egyptian astronomer with her right hand and pressing smelling salts to her nose with her left.”¹¹⁵ Kilbreth looked on, unmoved. When the defence rested—“reluctantly and grumblingly”—it took him but a few short minutes to decide that Ann O’Delia Diss Debar and the “General” should be held for the attention of the Grand Jury. “Ten minutes later the Diss Debars were back in the Tombs and a crowd irreverently chaffed some van men who with a struggle managed to ship the big portrait of Claudius, and having laid the other spook works beside it, drove up Center St., with their curious freight.”¹¹⁶ The power of Diss Debar’s antiquity had evaporated even before her flimsy props were hauled away. The ancients would remain silent—and the past would remain tangled up with loss.



A BARNUM AND BAILEY WORLD

AFTER THAT, everyone, for the most part, went their separate ways. The Diss Debars were indicted for conspiracy and grand larceny, and pleaded not guilty. Howe, resplendent in “a brand new drab overcoat and delicate tinted gloves,” watched their first appearance in the Court of General Sessions, “ready to give Assistant District-Attorney Bradford points for the people.”¹¹⁷ Bradford had none of Howe’s love for the dramatic—and the trial was an often-mundane affair. “There was,” remarked *The New York Times*, ruefully, “no music from unseen orchestras, nor the sound of the sweeping of angels’ skirts in Part II. of the Court of General Sessions yesterday.”¹¹⁸ In the end, it took the jury twelve rounds of voting to convict the Diss Debars—but convict they did, on the charge of conspiracy. “Then the District Attorney’s office took its half-holiday and drank the jury’s health.” When the verdict was read out, “Ann O’Delia’s lower jaw dropped a little, and for a moment she appeared ghastly. . . . The act was finished.”¹¹⁹

But in New York, the act was never truly finished. “Information for spooks,” ran *The Evening World’s* banner, “Medium Ann may now be found in the penitentiary, and the ghosts of Socrates, Euripides and any others of the Ancients who may care to call, will be warmly welcomed.”¹²⁰ Instead of Euripides, as it transpired, reporters crossed the river on visiting-day to goad their beloved adversary. Dressed in prison issue black-and-white stripes, she informed them that, upon her release, she would “lecture and tell her prison experiences and relate some of the soothing messages which Socrates and Plato sent her while she was sewing shrouds for the city’s dead.”¹²¹ Across the river in Manhattan, Luther Marsh was finding antiquity a troublesome companion. On Diss Debar’s release, he came—rather uncertainly—to greet her. “He was hailed [by her], to his great discomfort, as “Appius Claudius, the proud descendant of the Roman Caesar.” He begged Mme. Diss Debar to

desist, as he would be held up to scorn in the papers.”¹²²

One night brought the threads of this story together for the last time—and, in the Barnum and Bailey world of old New York, it was, of course, a magician’s night. Herrmann the Great—the greatest of them all, a conjurer supreme—gave a performance at the Academy of Music in aid of the New York Press Club. Many of the reporters who had covered Diss Debar’s case were in the audience. District Attorney Fellows looked down from a box. Side-by-side in two orchestra seats were Luther Marsh and Dr. Lawrence. A few rows away sat Justice Kilbreth, who had lately sent Ann and the “General” to the Grand Jury. Herrmann’s theme, of course, was Ann herself:

The spook picture act of Mme. Diss Debar was performed in a way which deceived the whole audience until the method was shown. It was very simple. A prepared picture was covered with a thin and pliable sheet of paper, which was simply pulled off and palmed. The picture, by means of which the imposition was exposed, was a picture of Mme. Diss Debar, and when it was handed around it fell into the hands of Dr. Lawrence, who found fault with it because the paint was not fresh enough.¹²³

Herrmann left the stage to prolonged applause, with a sweep of his hat and a swish of red curtain. The audience spilled out, chattering and happy, into the night.

Perhaps the matter should rest here, amidst New York celebrating and performing itself with laughter and showers of doves. It would be a fittingly theatrical finale to Diss Debar’s classical misdirections, her claim on the past which was overturned by the testimony of a conjurer and a drunk, challenged not by scholars but by magnificently corrupt lawyers—and ultimately chronicled by Harry Houdini. Her bogus “ancients” had riveted New York as thoroughly as the cast of any play—even if the play was ultimately judged to be a farce. But some of this story’s endings were darker. Howe and Hummel, of course, flourished rudely. The Lawrences gave some angry lectures—complaining about

the “cesspool”¹²⁴ of the Tombs—and faded into obscurity. The “General”—looking “like a chidden poodle”¹²⁵—fled his gigantic consort as soon as he was released from Blackwell’s Island. Ann O’Delia Diss Debar departed for New Orleans, Detroit, South Africa, Chicago and England, trailing angry believers in her wake every step of the way. The Queen of the Flying Rollers, A-Diva Veed-Ya—and once, unhappily, Cupid on a Harlem stage, wedged into “the largest pair of tights ever made to order”¹²⁶—she finally came to grief in London, as Swami Laura. Accused of running a “Purity League” which was anything but, she was prosecuted by the Solicitor-General himself in the Old Bailey, and sentenced to seven years of penal servitude. After the failure of her ancient “spirits” in New York—and the rejection of her “Plato” and “Apelles”—she never again built her cons upon the ancient world.

Marsh would soon leave New York City too, for Middletown in upstate New York—and the clutches of another medium, Clarissa Huyler. Mrs. Huyler eschewed the classical, preferring to furnish Marsh with letters from Biblical figures and the occasional clumsy “manifestation,” where “spirits” emerged from a cabinet. (A local photographer, enlisted to document one such happening, reported gloomily that “the spirits that appeared included those of Rameses I., Rameses II., Moses, Joseph and several others. . . . When developing the negatives I noticed that the beards of some of the spirits had been carelessly adjusted.”)¹²⁷ Marsh never saw Diss Debar again—but retained his faith in her. “I believe her,” he later said, “to be a thoroughly bad woman, though a wonderful medium, all the same.”¹²⁸ He kept the “General’s” pictures, and treasured them, certain they were not of earthly origin. “On the third floor [of his house in Middletown] is the gallery of “spook” pictures. Here an arrangement of the light serves to show the works to the best advantage, and here it is that Mr. Marsh passes much of his time. He sank down in the cushions of a settee today . . . pointing to the likenesses of Plato, Socrates, and dozens of

other equally well-known characters of ancient history.”¹²⁹ Still confident in his classical inheritance, he never tired of showing off his portraits by Apelles—or telling visitors of his great ancestors. There he sat in the afternoon light as the years went by, the last believer in a deceitful history, “the big wooden-looking ‘Claudius’”¹³⁰ smiling down upon him from the wall.¹³¹

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