Introduction: The Sentient Seer

In *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, chapter 25, Hardy, speaking through his wife Florence Emily, the nominal author of the work, answers the critics who at the publication of *Wessex Poems* in 1898 were sceptical of his 'modulation' from prose to poetry. There was, he suggests, 'in the art-history of the century ... an example staring them in the face of a similar modulation from one style into another by a great artist', namely Verdi. And he (or his wife) continues,

But probably few literary critics discern the solidarity of all the arts. Curiously enough Hardy himself dwelt upon it in a poem that seems to have been little understood, though the subject is of such interest. It is called 'Rome: The Vatican: Sala delle Muse'; in which a sort of composite Muse addresses him.

The poem, first published in *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901) and dated 1887, runs as follows:

I sat in the Muses' Hall at the mid of the day,
And it seemed to grow still, and the people to pass away,
And the chiselled shapes to combine in a haze of sun,
Till beside a Carrara column there gleamed forth One.

She looked not this nor that of those beings divine,
But each and the whole – an essence of all the Nine;

J. Grundy, *Hardy and the Sister Arts*
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With tentative foot she neared to my halting-place,
A pensive smile on her sweet, small, marvellous face.

'Regarded so long, we render thee sad?' said she.
'Not you,' sighed I, 'but my own inconstancy!
I worship each and each; in the morning one,
And then, alas! another at sink of sun.

'To-day my soul clasps Form; but where is my troth
Of yesternight with Tune: can one cleave to both?'
—'Be not perturbed,' said she. 'Though apart in fame,
As I and my sisters are one, those, too, are the same.'

—'But my love goes further— to Story, and Dance, and Hymn,
The lover of all in a sun-sweep is fool to whim—
Is swayed like a river-weed as the ripples run!'
—'Nay, wooer, thou sway'st not. These are but phases of one;

'And that one is I; and I am projected from thee,
One that out of thy brain and heart thou causest to be—
Extern to thee nothing. Grieve not, nor thyself becall,
Woo where thou wilt; and rejoice thou canst love at all!'

The composite lady's appearance and affirmations are hardly enough
to establish all that she and the Life claim for her, even with
the help of Marcus Aurelius ('Be not perturbed; for all things
are of the nature of the Universal'— quoted also by Paula Power
in A Laodicean); nevertheless, the poem is interesting for what it
tells us about Hardy. His Muses are not quite the usual ones;
we recognise Clio and Terpsichore and Polyhymnia, but 'Form',
the first named, has no exact counterpart among the Nine. Hardy
seems to be combining a statement about the qualities that appeal
to him in literature with an avowal of his devotion to the sister
arts generally. His soul clasps Form today because he is admiring
a work of sculpture (the 'chiselled shapes'); at other times he
finds 'the quality which makes the Apollo and the Aphrodite a
charm in marble' in painting, or in narrative. The phrase occurs
in his essay on 'The Profitable Reading of Fiction', where a little
earlier he had written,

Probably few of the general body denominated the reading public