

LIVING FORMS

ROMANTICS AND THE MONUMENTAL FIGURE



BRUCE HALEY

LIVING FORMS

SUNY series, Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Pamela K. Gilbert, editor

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Hubert Robert. Long Gallery of the Louvre. Louvre, Paris. Photo: Lauros-Giraudon, Paris/Art Resource, NY.

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BRUCE HALEY

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FIGURE 1. John Flaxman. Lord Nelson Memorial. St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Photo: The Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

INTRODUCTION



Thoughts on Nelson's Monument in St. Paul's

The artist's principle in the statue of a great man should be
the illustration of departed merit.

—Coleridge, "On Poesy or Art"

During the Napoleonic War a Committee on National Monuments commissioned several memorials to military notables. Lord Nelson's was assigned in 1807 to John Flaxman and erected in the South Transept nave of St. Paul's Cathedral. It is dominated by an imposing, realistic, life-size figure of the man standing on a high plinth. Below and to his right Minerva encircles two young midshipmen with one arm while directing their attention to Nelson's figure with the other. Figures typifying the Nile, the Baltic, the North Sea, and the Mediterranean are pictured in relief on the pedestal. A lion reposes at the hero's feet.

Flaxman's naturalistic detail gives the face lifelikeness, while the staring eyes, fixed features, and cold, hard materiality suggest the rigidity of death. That is the ambiguity with which the monumental sculptor must deal: recalling a living person while marking his death. As Nelson is pointed to *as* figure by the others in the scene, he becomes a figure for the dead and they, by contrast, figures for the living. On the other hand,

while Nelson the person is felt to be absent from the scene, his effigy is seen to be an effective presence *in* the scene, a moral influence conveyed by the allegory's suggestion of life, purpose, and therefore import. Dividing itself into a portrait-figure—Nelson—and an iconic response to that figure, the work turns what in future times might be a dead relic into a living form: always readable, always being read. Enacting a public interpretation, it underscores the public nature of the man and the representation.

If, as a record, a monument is the historian's "object of investigation" or "primary material" and a document is something that can be used to read or investigate the monument,¹ Flaxman's work is both. His inscription announces that the monument was erected "to record [Nelson's] splendid and unparalleled achievements," the most notable of which it then mentions, but this record is also interpreted pictorially by the pedestal's allegorical figures. The living tableau above these recalls to life not only its human subject but, from the world of records, portraiture itself.

Flaxman may have drawn the idea for his allegorical scene from an anonymous eulogy published on Nelson's death in 1807.² In this example of notional or suppositional ekphrasis the poet envisions a real boy taking inspiration from some future memorial to the hero:

... when autumn brings the shadowy year
The circled urn shall drink her warmest tear:
The mother there shall lead her child to con
The deeds engraven on thy sculptur'd stone!
The boy shall turn a hero from the pile,
And rise the future Nelson of the isle!

In this the boy reads an engraved text: an epitaph to Nelson on a sculpted tablet. With Flaxman the boys gaze at, and read, not the epitaph but the figure alone, a form intended to express by itself.

Presenting the record as a living form was a common aim of sculptors of that time, who, like Flaxman, would sometimes use several complementary representational modes to dramatize the continuing interpretive act. A composition in Westminster Abbey by John Bacon the Elder (completed 1783) features, in addition to the figure of the first William Pitt, five others: Britannia, Prudence, Fortitude, Earth, and Ocean. Another excellent example by the same sculptor resides in Christ Church, Macclesfield.³ A medallion profile of the industrialist Charles Roe (d.1781) is being held and contemplated by a Grecian allegorical form holding in her other hand a large cog-wheel. She sits atop three reliefs depicting buildings for which Roe was responsible: Christ

Church itself, a silk mill, and a copper-processing mill. Below these pictures is a eulogistic inscription. The symbolic wheel, the pictured buildings, and even the inscription may be regarded as the contemplative female's (or the artist's) interpretations of the medallion's significance: of Roe's life and works. Thus, as in Flaxman, the primary (portrait) figure records, while the other visual forms interpret that record, constituting in themselves a new text. So of course does the inscription. Portrait and its meaning are sundered, the meaning given its own figures, which are then juxtaposed with the portrait figure—side by side or one below the other.

Such elaborate semiotic reflexiveness—the lavish machinery of signs brought to bear on a simple effigy or portrait—might indicate the ease with which deceased persons are called to mind and their significance understood merely by viewing their likenesses. Though perhaps mute, the human form—focus of attention and subject of commentary in the Nelson monument—would seem to be the ideal monumental idiom: familiar and therefore always intuitively interpretable. On the other hand, such conspicuous explicating of Nelson's figure might itself be interpreted as the failure of portrait figures alone to express any *ideas* about the person beyond his death. With its several overlaid modes of representation, interpretation, and self-interpretation, the work may betray an anxiety about the life, not of its remembered subject, but of its own central figure and therefore of itself as record. Personal monuments, funerary or otherwise, are representations that offer to maintain a particular impression or memory of the subject itself only for a time. When viewed as monuments from the past, however, they are seen as replacing this memory *of* the subject with an idea *of or about or inspired by* the subject, generated *by* it, and this is what gives it its long life. The Nelson statue may be considered a series of commentaries on the idea-bearing capabilities of represented human forms.

In 1818, the year the Nelson memorial was completed and displayed, England was experiencing a period of tremendous popular interest in the visual arts—at home at heavily attended exhibitions, and, with peacetime continental travel now possible, abroad wherever famous masterpieces were housed and displayed. By this time a controversy had developed among historians, artists, and antiquarians over the adequacy of depicted persons as language: What can they alone, without text, express, and over what span of time? The focus was Addison's "Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals,"⁴ which for a century had been regarded as the definitive statement on these questions. Through the reading of medallion portraits, declared Leigh Hunt in the periodical *The Reflector*, the essay had given to history a visibility, an

explanation, and even an ordering: “Virgil and Horace, the most elegant of the Roman poets, have been explained; many points in history, chronology, and the customs of antiquity, have been illustrated; and a regular history of the kings of France has been composed by the assistance of medals.”⁵ Addison’s influence was acknowledged in the preface to a book that helped Keats gain his familiarity with Greek mythology, Joseph Spence’s *Polymetis*. As poets and visual artists think so alike, wrote Spence (in a statement sarcastically attacked in Lessing’s *Laocon*) “they must be the best explainers of one another.”⁶ I will return to *Polymetis* in my last chapter.

Addison seemed to have demonstrated the unquenchable humanity of portraits from the past, their ability to express what the people depicted were really like. Commenting, however, on his method, which compared “the face of a great man with the character that authors have given him,”⁷ the historian Gibbon doubted that the soul could often be read in the features without having some separate written account of the person.⁸ At issue between these two men was whether a represented figure alone could express ideas or even personal character. Beyond this was the question of the figure’s monumental efficacy: Whatever its significative power originally, to what extent could that power be retained over time without additional text? In the time of which I am writing, these issues were accentuated by a remarkable accumulation and public display across Europe of thousands of uncovered ancient artifacts—statues, urns, sarcophagi, memorial columns—from vanished cultures, many of these objects, certainly the most celebrated and conjectured about, bearing figurial traces.

“The monument without a text is weak and helpless,” observes Michael North; “no more proof against time than an ordinary stone.”⁹ Would this apply to the unmediated monumental figure? Does the mute image of Lord Nelson itself require those other verbal and iconic texts? Flaxman’s Nelson points up certain questions central to the Romantic ideal of the “living form” that I shall be exploring: *How* do human forms in literature or art “express” themselves, and how does the passage of time affect their expressive life? What possible meanings are conveyed by the words of the king Ozymandias? By his sneer? By the sculptor’s formal representation of these? By Shelley’s sonnet form? If the expression on that statue’s face still “tells” us something, does it in the same sense that Keats’s Urn *as* figure (unravished bride, foster child, or sylvan historian) “can express” a tale? And what of the capacity of the forms on the urn—the bold lover, the mysterious priest—to express emotion *or* to tell their own tales? Most important of all, is their expression, if they show any, of the same kind as that of the work, the “Attic shape”? Like the figures on Keats’s Urn, all those comprising the Flax-

man work lack the telling physiognomic expression that people have. They are of course voiceless, and their faces and stances convey little feeling or attitude. It is not as persons, however, but as representations—images—that they express. German critics promulgated the belief that visible form by its very muteness was equipped to express ideas with the most profound, hidden “source.”

Images of persons, meant to have the power of recalling or calling to mind, are depictions first; therefore as soon as made they represent something past: a face, or an expression on a face; a naval battle; a dead child. In a metaphysical sense they stand for a past that has passed away. The following chapters will trace the attempt by Romantic critics and poets to restore damaged, faded, or unfamiliar figures to the status of living forms. The writers scrutinized figures in poetry, sculpture, or painting in what Coleridge called a “figurative” reading, one meant to discern not only what they were originally figures of, but what they now may be taken as figures for. Coleridge contemplated figures in the Bible, Shakespeare’s plays, and other written stories; Wordsworth contemplated those—people and objects—from his own past. Byron and Felicia Hemans were especially drawn to sculptures from antiquity, as well as more recent effigies and other sepulchral works. Shelley was fascinated by portrait figures and Greek statues. So was Keats, but also by figures from old tales. All those monumental forms were reinterpreted as more than portraits, and therefore the works they belonged to as more than images of particular historical reference with meanings in danger of continually dimming or falling away.

Here I need to distinguish the two kinds of monuments whose figures or forms were of great interest to these writers. The first is the memorial work, the monument *to* someone or some occurrence—a grave sculpture, for example, something which “by its survival commemorates a person, action, period, or event” (*OED*). Obviously all portraits have this documentary function. Depending on their quality, these may also be monuments in the other sense, highly impressive or significant works, as when Coleridge spoke of “the permanent monuments . . . of genius and skill,” such as poems and paintings (emphasis added).¹⁰ These works were deemed monumental in the sense that they *were* permanent. “Glorious monuments of genius,” wrote the novelist and critic Alessandro Manzoni, “last precisely because genius has a way of perpetuating even things that by their nature are not otherwise certain to last.”¹¹ The subject and its image are deathless because the work is expressively self-existent—not destined always to refer to some past moment.

Whether we mean by “monument” a work of significant human achievement, like Michelangelo’s Moses, or a memorial object, like a

gravestone, or something that is both at once, like “Adonais” or the Flaxman work, it is an “impressive record” (Dorothy Wordsworth; see chapter 6), a durable representing presence. However, if it loses its power to impress, it no longer functions as a living record or text. If it loses its power to provide memory, it cannot long impress. The Nelson monument offers a tableau to remember and impress, thus to sustain the effect of its own central figure. It interprets more than its documentary signs; it interprets its own effect.

A permanently impressive object, to use William Wordsworth’s own formulation (see chapter 7), must impress visually and immediately. To be—in the most familiar sense of the word—“monumental,” it must convey presence, a sense of itself as being right here, remaining in our “midst,” as the Grecian Urn does, or “with us” as *Endymion*’s “thing of beauty” must always be. With the Flaxman, Nelson’s figure as object locates a site for the present viewing experience, one which underscores it as a presence. Naturally, the presence of the sculpted form as object was thought to play a large part in its aesthetic impact. Statues were not only “living” but “breathing” forms. Beattie’s “Triumph of Melancholy” spoke of “the breathing bust”; Joseph Warton’s “The Enthusiast” described the Pantheon in Rome as “The well-arch’d Dome, peopled with breathing Forms”; the sculptor Canova declared that everything about the Elgin Marbles “breathes animation.”¹² The poet Samuel Rogers called the Belvedere Torso a “mass of breathing stone” (see chapter 1), suggesting not only that the form lives, but that it imparts something of its life to those nearby. More important, the paradox “breathing stone” emphasizes a spiritual or aesthetic existence and presence apart from the purely material existence and presence. The Grecian Urn’s marble cold pastoral is “All breathing human passion far above,” but the Belvedere Apollo in *Childe Harold* IV “breathes the flame with which ’twas wrought.”

By necessity, artists depicting the dead must strive especially hard to make their *works* breathe life. Benjamin West, creator of the most celebrated memorial picture of its time, the *Death of Wolfe*, envisioned a similar painting that might honor Nelson. Such a work must offer such a charismatic presence, a theatrically “presented” image. “To move the mind, there should be a spectacle presented to raise and warm the mind, and all should be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the hero. No boy would be animated by a representation of Nelson dying like an ordinary man; his feelings must be roused and his mind inflamed by a scene great and extraordinary. A mere matter of fact will never produce this effect.”¹³ Thus a “representation of Nelson dying” must itself “warm” and “animate” the mind of the viewer, whose feelings will be

“roused” and “inflamed.” For the sake of this “effect” a monument may even need to lose something of its documentary accuracy. A “mere matter of fact,” the undistorted image of the man, must subordinate itself to “the highest idea conceived of the hero.” Perhaps West was thinking of those features disguised by Flaxman: the missing arm, the one sightless and patched eye.

The end of the eighteenth century marked a discernible shift in poetics away from the ideal of expression as a communication of feeling—an ideal epitomized by the natural body’s array of stances, voice inflections, gestures, and changes in countenance. This was supplanted by the ideal of expression as a revelatory embodiment of “mind,” “spirit,” or “character” typified by the devised body—the body’s representation. This shift in emphasis was to an extent inspired by the age’s interest in antique figures, especially Greek ones. Forever decipherable because always recognizable, the image of man represents the victory of the monumental, of the intrinsically and perpetually significant. Whereas the body conveys the feelings or attitudes of the moment, the represented figure conveys the human spirit itself, and in a more lasting way. That is why form is, in Coleridge’s words, “the ultimate end of human thought, and human feeling” (*LOL1*: 68). Originally articulated by Schlegel, Goethe, Schelling, Herder, and Hegel, a humanist archeology was developed at that time based on interpreting artifacts as “works” whose “form” or “forms” could be read as embodying spirit or soul. Thus to recover forms of the past and what they expressed was to recover purpose itself.

The ambiguous nature of “form,” however, may be seen in the twenty-two principal definitions and dozens of subheadings given the word in the *OED*. In art or literature it can mean either the idea for a work or the work itself, “the structuring power and that which is structured.”¹⁴ Also, by “form” literary historians and theorists now mean either a type of work with identifiable characteristics, like the personal essay or the Pindaric ode, or an aesthetic principle of “unity” evident in a work as a whole. “Form operating as a structural principle and genre conceived of as a nexus of conventions and a frame of reference” (9–10) are the two relevant meanings in Stuart Curran’s astute study of Romantic forms.¹⁵ Neither “form” is usually visible. Little attention, however, has been paid to the historical relation between these various versions of form and visual forms in the arts, especially human figures.

Thus far I have been mainly using “form” to mean the human figure depicted in a visual medium. The German term *Gestalt* can mean a person’s build, shape, or stature. “Form” (or *Gestalt*) can also refer to

any artistically realized visible configuration. When Kant referred to sculpture, painting, and architecture as the “formative arts,” he meant—as English critics would in speaking of the arts of form—“those for the expression of ideas in sensuous intuition (not by means of representations of mere imagination that are excited by words).”¹⁶ But more and more at this time artists, critics, and philosophers were using the word to mean an ideal, as well as a visible entity and presence, something communicated by what West called “effect.” “Effect” was the artist’s term for what Schlegel called “unity of impression” and Coleridge “Unity of Effect” (see chapter 3). A monument’s unity of impression or effect was how its “living form” was grasped. Living form meant shape not merely as seen, but as felt or experienced. “A block of marble,” declared Schiller’s influential *Aesthetic Letters*, “though it is and remains lifeless, can nevertheless, thanks to the architect or the sculptor, become living form [*lebende Gestalt*]. . . . Only when [a person’s] form lives in our feeling and his life takes on form in our understanding, does he become living form; and this will always be the case whenever we adjudge him to be beautiful.”¹⁷ Schiller’s *Gestalt* is essentially the concept in modern Gestalt psychology and aesthetics, that of experienced shape or form, which, I have been suggesting, is the subject of Flaxman’s tableau. We must “spiritually melt” solid forms in nature or art, fusing their energy with that of our own spirits. “We must go beyond form,” Schelling argued, “in order to regain it as comprehensible, living and truly felt.”¹⁸

Thus to experience form is to grasp the idea of or for the work, not necessarily ideas in it. The ideal monumental work makes an indelible unified impression, in Kantian aesthetics called *Anschauung*—the immediate knowing of an object as a form or unified entity, “the living picture,” as A. W. Schlegel called it, that “makes an impression on the imagination which can never be effaced.”¹⁹ Coleridge used the term “intuition,” a “conscious presentation” of an object, “immediate and individual.”²⁰ A thing “is known, because it is, and is, because it is known.”²¹ An act of the inner sense, a “realizing intuition,” provides a “living contact” with something, giving an awareness of “the whole.” The “whole” grasped by the imagination is the idea of the work, not any material shape. A painting, sculpture, or vase has an external aspect: its form can be seen and described directly, its meaning grasped directly in its phenomenal presence. It is brought before the eyes “all at once” (Herder: see chapter 5). Poetic form brings the work all at once before the mind’s eye with what Coleridge calls a “joint impression of the *mind*” (emphasis added; see chapter 3).

Having the real or virtual object in the mind as one thing offers the possibility of reimagining and reconstituting it, as Flaxman may have, if

he read the Nelson elegy quoted earlier. Through this process a work from the past can be invested or reinvested with an ideal or virtual living presence.²² An 1809 study by the antiquarian Society of Dilettanti concluded that all the best qualities of the Greek mind, “represented under human form,” could be directly deduced in Greek sculpted figures, many of those traceable to Homer, where “the attitude, action, and expression of every figure, introduced or described, are so just, and brought so completely before the eye of the reader, that a picture or statue is spontaneously formed in the mind; and a wish to execute it, in some visible or tangible material, excited.”²³

This points toward a kind of experience especially important in early nineteenth-century aesthetics, one involving the feeling of having caught on to something by having caught hold of it in the mind’s eye, of having grasped its form by framing and contemplating it as an image. Not only for Coleridge but for many others who found Kantian or Hegelian ideas less congenial, the nature and form of the art work were to be apprehended through its effect and by means of a mental picturing, analogic or metaphoric—a seeing as, or as if. For example, the impression, and therefore the monumental “effect,” of a play or poem depends on its being imagined as a statue, a picture, a circle. As image in the mind and not in stone or on canvas, the visualized work is a formal potentiality. A portrait is imagined, then reexecuted as a poem on that portrait. The unified, ideal presence, a living form or image in the parlance of the day, is brought “completely before the eye of the reader” with more effect than either that of statue, picture, or written description. A vital medium between one figure made of words and another made of bronze or paint, it is so vivid and detailed that it may be itself an object of contemplation. Addison’s contemporary Pope had praised the “Dialogues” for creating such an image from the “sacred rust” of the coins, one that “rises to view” brightly: “Touch’d by thy hand, again Rome’s glories shine:/ Her gods, and godlike heroes rise to view,/ And all her faded garments bloom anew” (“Verses Occasioned by Mr. Addison’s Treatise on Medals”). A medal or coin becomes an essay by Addison, then a poem in couplets by Pope. The envisaged thing, the image as image, can realize itself in different forms, as the Dilettanti treatise put it, “in some visible or tangible material.”

Formal reproduction, then, is one way of displaying Gestalt, or comprehension of living form, if by reproduce we mean more than merely copy. When Shelley writes that poetry “reproduces all that it represents” (see chapter 2), he means it produces once more, creates anew. In this sense aesthetic forms live eternally: “Sculpture retains its freshness for twenty centuries: The Apollo & the Venus are as they were. But

books are perhaps the only productions of man coeval with the human race. Sophocles & Shakespeare can be produced & reproduced forever.”²⁴ This idea that poetic forms may be forever reproduced is, as we shall see, a central one in the “Defence,” as well as in Keats, who says that the thing of beauty’s “loveliness increases” (*Endymion*) and for Byron, whose “beings of the mind” are “essentially immortal”—they “create/ And multiply in us a brighter ray” (see chapter 9). Ekphrasis, converting material forms to ideal or poetic ones, makes possible endless further reproductions.

To depict human forms, as Flaxman does with his Nelson figure, is to use a figural language. To imagine figures for thoughts, as he does with the Minerva form, is to use a figurative or notional one. The figural idiom of painting and sculpture is mimetic. The tendency is to imitate them, either with graphic reproductions or by emulation—in either case by copying. Figurative language, an embodiment of an idea, not a copy of a thing or person, can be endlessly reproduced. What I shall be calling “re-production,” to distinguish it from the making of mere likenesses—painted portraits, engravings of such portraits, etc.—is what Coleridge meant by “imitation” when he would distinguish that from copying, the representation of nature as mere object.

It was Keats who spoke both of “fair living forms” and of “fixed shapes.” Fair living forms (*Endymion*) are those susceptible to perpetuation through reproduction such as ekphrasis, which supplies not just a different form to the idea but a different mode of form. This very mutability constitutes the idea’s vital principle. Under the sculptor’s hand the animate human figure becomes a stilled stone one, which the poet can turn into a sonnet or other verse form. No forms thus changeable are really dead.

Monuments of whatever condition whose forms cannot be apprehended or mastered by reproducing them are “fixed shapes” (*Fall of Hyperion*). These convey the sense of a dual identity: as signs, whose referent has been lost, therefore as signs of absence; and as objects, persisting in time as dense apparitional presences. In some works by Byron, Shelley, Felicia Hemans, Keats, Samuel Rogers, and others this oppressive shape necessitates a special kind of ekphrastic performance, one ultimately failing to refigure and restore the work, which falls into dense objecthood, where it serves as ideogram for the poet’s own self. Living forms belong to the monument as a radiant expression of mind or spirit, fixed shapes more typically to memorials associated with death either originally (tomb sculptures, cinerary urns, grave markers), or ultimately (the ruins of cities or civilizations). Throughout this study I shall be concentrating on those literary genres that seek to reflect on or preserve the past: Shelley’s retrospective poetry defence, Coleridge’s historical Shake-

spere lectures, Shelley's elegiac meditations on Keats, Wordsworth's retelling of his own life, Keats's readings of old legends and old artifacts. Through these writers' eyes I shall look also at various painted portraits, sculpted effigies, and edifices meant to hold the fame of those who decreed their making.

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FIGURE 2. Hubert Robert. Long Gallery of the Louvre in Ruins. Louvre, Paris.
Photo: Lauros-Giraudon, Paris/Art Resource, NY.

CHAPTER ONE



Imaginary Museum

Pursue the road,
And beat the track the glorious ancients trod;
To those eternal monuments repair,
There read, and meditate forever there.

—Marco Girolamo Vida, *The Art of Poetry*

AN AGE OF MUSEUMS

André Malraux remarked that museums change the very nature of the items they house. They “estrangle the works they bring together from their original functions and . . . transform even portraits into ‘pictures’” (9).¹ When we recognize a portrait figure, painted or sculpted, less by its subject than by its maker—Reynolds, Lawrence, Flaxman, Chantrey—we can’t help thinking of it as an art “work,” as appropriate to a museum as to a dining hall or stairway wall of a home. Many such pieces in fact reside in art museums, while others, like the Nelson monument and the memorial tombs of Chaucer and Tennyson, have been given homes in buildings like Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral, places looked upon by visitors and guidebooks more as museums than as burial sites. The museum space rescues artifacts not only from vulnerable objecthood² but from dead iconism, a semiotic bondage to the past. The visitor’s concern is with their present effect, enhanced as much as possible by the way they are displayed. At sites where monuments have a significant referential setting—the

Roman Forum, or a necropolis—figures invite retrospective meditation. In the museum of art, itself a monument, they are viewed as forms, therefore as speaking of themselves, not of something that is gone.

“Every work of art is characterized by a deep structural identity,” Ernst Cassirer observed, “an identity of form, not of matter.”³ Thinking of any work in terms of form always emphasizes certain things: 1) the mental or spiritual as against the merely physical or material; 2) the human and living as against the nonhuman and dead; 3) present effect as against past reference (forms are experienced, not merely understood); 4) ultimately, incorporating all of the above, the aesthetic as against the merely artifactual. During what has been called the Museum Age⁴—the latter half of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth—the concern with aesthetic forms in art and literature coincided with the spread of art museums, and especially of sculpture galleries, for as Hegel declared, the concern of the sculptor is “*Form and nothing more.*”⁵ The monumental figure came to embody form itself and all its possibilities. In the world of sculpture and painting, “form” meant outline or shape, especially the human shape treated artistically, and viewed as distinct from color, texture, and expression. Art museums were home to the arts of form; they housed human figures carved, molded, painted, drawn, or engraved.

Therefore, when the most celebrated displaced monumental figures in history were moved from the outside of a partially ruined temple—the Parthenon—to the inside of a new temple—the British Museum (by way of Burlington House)—they became reinterpreted as “the paragons of sculpture and the mould of form” (Hazlitt).⁶ Transplanting such pieces—rescuing them, it was thought—from abandoned or neglected sites around the world replaced their meaning as relics or ruins with a new aesthetic significance that suggested man’s transcendent spiritual life. Their new homes needed to reflect this. In 1816, as the British Museum prepared to house the Marbles, much interest was shown in just how they should be displayed. Complaining that the major continental museums were “wretchedly lit,” and that by contrast the Townley Marbles in London were more effectively positioned below a twelve-foot-high skylight, a writer in Hunt’s *Examiner* demanded that “England first shew, with her usual understanding, that she considers the beauty of the production as the first requisite, and that she will sacrifice all splendour and magnificence and height of apartment for the attainment of an object of infinitely more importance, viz. the exhibition of this beauty to the greatest effect.”⁷ The museum’s project was to realize spatially the mental character of individual artists and their culture, and thus to express human purpose as visible form, the element of clarity and definition, as Benjamin Haydon said, in all the visual arts.⁸ By emphasizing one kind of original intention, formal identity, over another, indication or reference,

the museum gave the monumental artifact a living humanity.

In thus being linked to the truly monumental—human greatness expressing itself intelligibly over the ages—rather than the merely memorial or historical, “form” came to symbolize man’s conquest of time itself. A person may be beautiful “only for a moment,” Goethe observed in his appreciation of Winckelmann, but the figural work of art, standing “before the world in its ideal reality . . . produces an enduring effect . . . and by breathing life into the human figure, it raises man above himself, completes the cycle of his life and actions, and deifies him for the present moment, in which the past and future are also contained.”⁹ To Goethe the classical mythic sculpture was the epitome of the pure figural, and therefore of pure form. It “divests man of all inessential elements,” thus attaining “perfection,” so that the viewer can attend only to the work. “A subject at rest presents solely itself, and therefore is complete by and in itself.” That is, it need only present itself, not represent anything. Figures like the regally reposing Juno or the contemplative Minerva “have no contact with the outside world but are completely self-contained.” They “reign in splendid isolation.”¹⁰ Such figures contain “the motion together with its cause.” Even figures in groups are wholly involved in one another and wholly explainable by reference to one another. Goethe was really defining the aesthetic in terms of the image and designating the image as non- or anti-historical: ideal in origin and thus, like a figure in an art museum, creative of its own essential dramatic space. The figure in an art museum or museum-like space is *essentially* a “breathing” presence, not a representation.

Nonetheless, some early nineteenth-century critics, most notably those of Lord Elgin, held that dissociating works from what Malraux calls “their original functions” was murder or at least captivity. In a work published in England in 1821, the archeologist Quatremère de Quincy, who had himself visited Paestum in the 1770s, argued against the transporting and enclosing of such works, whose real influence derives “less from their beauty and perfection than from their antiquity, their authenticity, and their publicity.” It was a “death” to this direct knowledge of the past to “withdraw its elements from the public, to decompose its parts, as has been done without intermission during the last twenty-five years, and to collect the wreck in dépôts called *Conservatories*.”¹¹ (He was referring especially to the Musée de Monuments Français.) The emotions attached to these artifacts in their native settings give that historical instruction a special potency when all is seen as a whole. Therefore, “To displace all these monuments, collect the scattered fragments, class methodically the remains, and compose from such an assemblage a practical course of modern chronology” is to deprive them of their sustenance (56).

Especially interested in what happens to the original meaning of monumental figures, Quincy conveyed the new monumental meaning with his own, distinctive figure:

Who can now make us sensible of the meaning of figures whose expressions are only grimaces, whose accompaniments are enigmas? What emotion do we in reality feel from the contemplation of that disenchanted figure of a woman pretending to weep over an empty urn? What mean these images which retain nothing but their substance? What signify these mausoleums without graves, these cenotaphs doubly empty, these tombs which death animates no longer? (56)

The monuments' loss of their own historical context means the death of their "images," leaving only their "substance," their material identity. Without what "explained" them we are left to contemplate them as enigmatic objects. Quincy's model for the artifactual corpse is an emblematic tomb figure, lifeless as the body it is supposed to honor, an allegory arousing no "emotion" for the viewer. The viewer now is in the position of an allegorical figure of Grief, and the work itself is an "empty urn" not studied and understood archeologically, but mourned over.

Though Quincy laments the historian's effort to reimagine figures according to a modern scheme, the historical reading of figures, even the contextual kind he favors, is always a departure from the maker's intention. The original aim of the monument as a religious icon, an insigne of grief, or a bearer of personal fame (of the subject, the maker, or both) is always incompatible with its subsequent use as an indicator of historical situations. Monuments are usually made for the first, but ultimately read for the second. Quincy lamented the loss to monuments of a "publicity," which depended on their "antiquity" and "authenticity"—their true historicity—rather than on their "perfection and beauty." What a museum does, whether it is an institution of art or of archeology, is provide a new visible context, one imaging a modern or a transhistorical perspective. The assumption behind the museum of art, which underlay much literary and art history of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was that a work's grander historical significance was not to be found by learning its original social or even intellectual context, but by grasping its Gestalt, the impression it makes. In this Gestalt or experienced form may be grasped the work's true historical meaning: the character of the age in which it emerged. More than anyone, it was Winckelmann who has inspired museum curators to look for perfection and beauty, and thus to Greek art, as the standards for their collections. And it was from him that art historians and later literary historians inherited what I shall call a museum sensibility or consciousness.

IMAGINARY MUSEUMS: WINCKELMANN AND SCHLEGEL

Winckelmann, “the greatest antiquary of his time and the first modern art historian” (Bazin 164), supervised productive excavations in Rome as Clement XIII’s Prefect of Antiquities and directed the building of Rome’s Villa Albani, as well as the assembling and arranging within the Villa of a major collection of antiquities. Thus his relation to classical forms was personal and immediate, as his writings reflect. He developed a method of reading art objects that made cultural history possible, one based on drawing historical generalizations from the present character and effect of the individual work or art object.

The premise of his *History of Ancient Art* is that art began with the drawing of human figures and has always been centered on them. From his first chapter, “The Shapes with Which Art Commenced,” he writes the story of the represented human form evolving toward its greatest perfection with the Greeks.¹² Here and in other writings he circumscribes and isolates the sculpted artifact, in many cases also providing an engraved version of it. He then muses upon it, emphasizing its aesthetic (often its erotic) expressiveness, which he then uses to interpret its period or phase of history. As Goethe’s appreciative essay on him phrased it, he taught that great works of art exist “through their continuing reality as ineffable creations,” and that we should “contemplate” each work “as an individual whole” (“Winckelmann” 236).

Starting from this close reading of individual forms and their separate parts, Winckelmann was the first to lay out an historical scheme of ancient art, based on the evolution of style or treatment. It has been argued that his work had a major influence on nineteenth-century European museums and indeed on all thinking about represented human forms as artifacts: “After the appearance of Winckelmann’s *History* it became possible . . . for more and more people to arrange sculpture [chronologically] in their minds and eventually in certain publications.”¹³ The conceptual influence of Winckelmann can be seen in the imagery of many of the German writers who followed, particularly Schiller, Herder, Goethe, and Hegel. Schiller, like Winckelmann, saw civilization as the evolution of defined, forever expressive, forms from indefinite, by now inexpressive, ones. “The monstrous divinity of the Oriental, which rules the world with the blind strength of a beast of prey, shrinks in the imagination of the Greeks into the friendly contours of a human being. The empire of the Titans falls, and infinite force is tamed by infinite form.”¹⁴ Herder’s *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* described the Near East as a mysterious ruin—“fables of fables, fragments of history, a dream of the ancient World.” The Greeks, however, left “noble monuments, monuments that speak to us with a

philosophic spirit.”¹⁵ Their *monumental* articulateness is empowered by the “philosophic spirit” of the age, which penetrates both “letters” and “the arts.” As the spirit of the artist then was in perfect harmony with that of the age, the same quality could be found in all remaining monuments of the time.

Nearly everyone credited Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art* (1764) with effecting a true revolution in the reading of what he called “splendid forms,” and by means of those, in the reading of literary works.¹⁶ Winckelmann’s contributions were, first, a definition and examples of pure beauty and, second, a truly historical approach to aesthetics: a history of art constructed of individual works alone, not biographies of artists—monuments, not lives.¹⁷ And in his *History*’s gallery of Greek marbles he provided both a starting place for understanding our past and a standard by which to measure all post-classical achievements. Before passing to “the masterpieces of painting,” Mme. de Staël’s heroine Corinne (1808) commences her art tour of Italy with the Vatican Museum, “that palace of statues where you see the human countenance made divine by paganism, just as Christianity makes the soul’s emotions divine.”¹⁸ It is in these halls that she embarks on reflections about the history of the human spirit, a history embodied not only in art forms representing the human body, but in the social forms discernible through these figures. “In our modern day, society is so cold and oppressive that suffering is man’s noblest aspect, and any man who has not suffered has neither felt nor thought. But in earlier times, there was something nobler than pain; it was heroic equanimity, the sense of strength that could develop among unequivocally free institutions” (142). The whole climate of the age can be read, as Winckelmann and Corinne do read it, in the faces and postures of these antique forms.

Like the author of *Corinne*, Winckelmann was less interested in what the sculpture was once meant to depict than in the cultural character it embodies symbolically and forever. For example, the “character of wisdom” found in the father’s face in the Laocoon group, its “noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur,” he attributed to the characteristically “great and dignified” Greek soul.¹⁹ This habit of “Physiognomic Perception,” which the historian uses to “wake the dead” and to “unriddle the mute language of the monuments,”²⁰ underpins art and cultural history from Winckelmann on. It is a practice resisted in our own time by Foucault, who, unlike the humanist, insists that statements of the past be treated as “an incomplete, fragmented figure.” He describes the aim of creating a total history as one of seeking to “reconstitute the overall form of a civilization . . . what is called metaphorically the ‘face’ of a period.”²¹ Foucault himself here disfigures history *with a figure*, thus rejecting the accepted practice of monumentalizing the past by humanizing it.

Foucault of course is arguing against such modern humanist philosophers as Ernst Cassirer, who insisted that the concepts of form were basic to the existence of the humanities.²² While Foucault emphasizes the status of the monument as “relic,” Cassirer sees it as a living symbolic idiom. The “true historian” must regard his material not as “petrified fact” but as “living form.” “History is the attempt to fuse together all these *disjecta membra*, the scattered limbs of the past, and to synthesize them and mold them into new shape” (*Essay* 225). Perceiving an artifact as a “work” helps rescue it from the necessary oblivion of all material creations. Monuments and documents have an *objective* past that is “gone forever.” They cannot be awakened “to a new life in a mere physical, objective sense.” Humanist history, though, can give them an “ideal existence” (*Essay* 221) by interpreting them “not only as dead remnants of the past but as living messages from it, messages addressing us in a language of their own.” Therefore, no matter what its nominal subject, the humanist reads every work of art as a monument to man generally, not to a particular person. “Beneath the temporal flux and behind the polymorphism of human life [historians] have hoped to discover the constant features of human nature” (*Essay* 208, 218–19).

The act of *converting* monuments from “dead and scattered” historical facts into living “forms” was central to Romantic cultural theory and art history, a tradition to which Cassirer belongs. It is a kind of archeology, the archeology of revivification. The mental reproduction of the monument to create the sense of a new, living form is what Cassirer and earlier historians referred to as an historical “palingenesis.” Goethe praised Herder’s historical descriptions as providing no simple “husk and shell of human beings” but as “regenerating the rubbish . . . to a living plant” (quoted by Cassirer, *Essay* 225).

Such regeneration, according to Cassirer, has been central to humanist thought for centuries and indeed underlay the humanist idea of the “Reformation.”

According to Ficino, the whole point of religious and philosophical *knowledge* is nothing other than the eradication from the world of everything that is deformed; and the recognition that even things that seem formless participate in form. . . . If redemption is conceived of as a renovation of the *form* of man and of the world, i.e., as a true *reformatio*, then the focal point of intellectual life must lie in the place where the ‘idea’ is embodied, i.e., where the non-sensible form present in the mind of the artist breaks forth into the world of the visible and becomes realized in it.²³

Thus the basic act of reforming the “deformed” has focused on reimposing form on monumental works disfigured by time, especially those of the human figure: a “renovation of the form of man.” Form, by

which the work expresses its character, is something concealed, to be unfolded or disclosed by viewer, reader, or, in the case of the ekphrastic poem, the poet. It is "a significant exterior," A. W. Schlegel observed, "the speaking physiognomy of each thing, which, as long as it is not disfigured by any destructive accident, gives a true evidence of its hidden essence" (*Lectures* 340). To the eye of the connoisseur, even disfigured works were integral in their form if not in their shape. When Shelley's friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg visited Florence, he was drawn like everybody then to the Medici Venus. He discovered that it had once been broken to pieces, then badly repaired: the head and hands he thought perhaps modern. The head was "insipid." Nothing about its expression could he admire, "but the form I praise."²⁴ Clearly the whole was greater than any of its parts when expression was subordinated to form. The Belvedere Apollo had also been mutilated and restored, but its state of repair mattered little to Byron, who declared that in its "delicate form . . . are exprest/ All that ideal Beauty ever bless'd/ The mind with in its most unearthly mood . . ." (*Childe Harold* IV, St. 162).

Rudolf Arnheim has more recently framed the matter in terms of Gestalt aesthetics. Although an artwork has a weak Gestalt as an object, it has a strong one as an experience. It is physically "an object of low organisation. It makes little difference to the marble of the Laocoon group that an arm is broken off, nor does the paint of a landscape revolt when a busy restorer adds a glaring blue to its faded sky." But "the *work of art defined as an experience* turns out to be a Gestalt of the highest degree" (emphasis added).²⁵ Form is the *visualized* whole of any "work," as shape is the visible whole. Thus form brings together the two aspects of monumentality: durability of the work as record and durability of the work as effect. In fact, it gives a work like the Belvedere Torso a monumental Gestalt and thus protects it from disfigurement. Long regarded as proof of the indestructibility of aesthetic identity, the Torso received its most celebrated reformation by Winckelmann. If Renaissance humanists sought the "renovation of the *form* of man," in Winckelmann's reading²⁶ we see a later example of such reformation. The process is one of reconstructing and reproducing the Torso form by imagining it: presenting it to his "inner eye." The passage, written in 1759, was later incorporated into his *History*.

If it seems inconceivable that the power of reflection be shown elsewhere than in the [missing] head, you can learn here how a master's creative hand is able to endow matter with mind. The back, which appears as if flexed in noble thought, gives me the mental picture of a head filled with the joyful remembrance of his astonishing deeds, and, as his head full of wisdom and majesty arises before my inner eye, the other missing limbs also begin to take shape in my imagination. . . .

The manner in which our thoughts are directed from Hercules' feats of strength to the perfection of his soul constitutes one of the mysteries of art; and the perfection of that soul is recorded in the torso as in a monument that could not have been equaled by a poet who limited himself to celebrating the strength of the hero's arms. . . . The world of art weeps with me in seeing this work . . . half destroyed and cruelly maltreated. Who does not lament, on this occasion, the loss of hundreds of other masterpieces? Yet art, in wishing to instruct us further, recalls us from these sad thoughts by showing us how much might still be learned from this fragment, and how an artist should look at it.

Reading the torso (which he identifies as that of Hercules) as a record of its own composition, Winckelmann first invites us to imagine the "master's creative hand" in order to "learn" how to see a "work," matter endowed with mind. Supplied by the writer, the "hand" and arm so obviously missing in the thing become the power of the artist's expression and craftsmanship. The "head full of wisdom and majesty" rising before Winckelmann's inner eye is equally that of Hercules and of the creative "master." As it emerges, so then does the idea of the work itself, its form, taking "shape in [his] imagination" as the "missing limbs" do.

Figural works, especially those like sculptures or oil portraits, which are nothing but figure, have a presence, phenomenality, depending little on their being intact. As Arnheim says, the mutilated Laocoon may give the experience of wholeness more than an overpainted landscape. Perhaps mutilation itself, as has been surmised, "requires us to imagine that the work in question is sustained by an underlying, albeit sometimes invisible, ideal order."²⁷ Through its form the partial figure with a strong Gestalt is a language for the ideal order which generated it and which it embodies. That order as imagined is form, but imagining it is undoubtedly easier if the original shape of the object is a familiar one, a centered recognizable figure.

Partly owing to Winckelmann, the Belvedere Torso came to exemplify the monumental power of the "work of art"; it can be mutilated but never deformed: its formal presence belongs to the idea, its essence, rather than to the object, its material existence. "When a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole," Blake declared. "The Torso is as much a Unity as the Laocoon" ("On Homer's Poetry"). In its original state the Torso expressed the strength of the human body. Maimed, it imaged the comprehensive unity of the Greek mind. For Blake's friend and patron William Hayley, that unity, discernible to the tactile imagination, was the secret of classical sculpture's ability to reproduce itself in figures designed by later artists like Michelangelo: "The veteran, while his hand, with science fraught,/ Roved o'er the stone so exquisitely wrought,/ His fancy giving the maim'd trunk a soul,/ Saw,