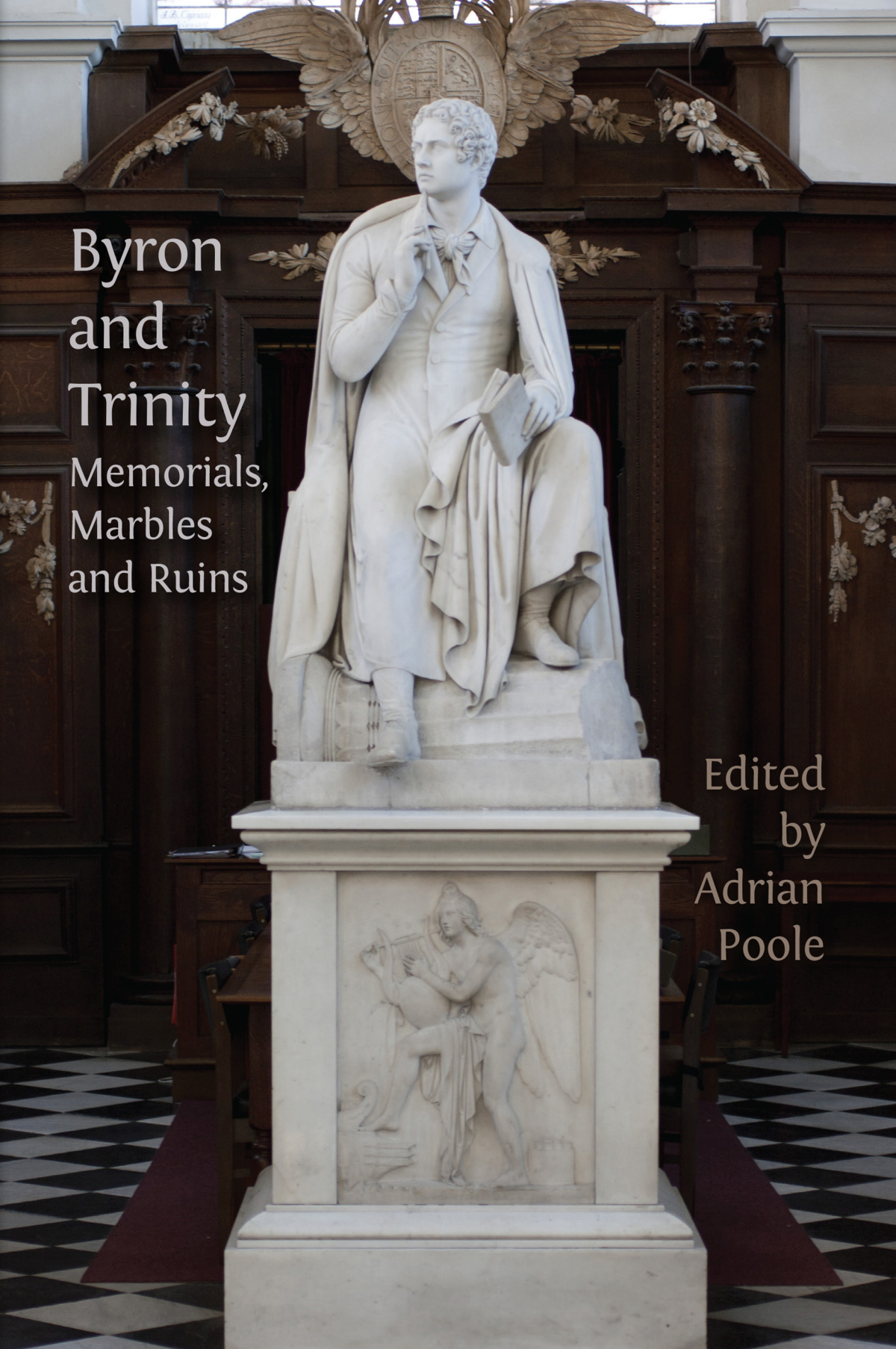

Byron and Trinity

Memorials, Marbles and Ruins

Edited by Adrian Poole

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Adrian Poole (ed.), *Byron and Trinity: Memorials, Marbles and Ruins*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0399

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-278-5
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-279-2
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-280-8
ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-281-5
ISBN Digital (HTML): 978-1-80511-283-9

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0399

Cover photo: Statue of Lord Byron by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. Photograph by James Kirwan, courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.
Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

2. Pretensions to Permanency

Thorvaldsen's Bust and Statue of Byron[1]

Robert Beevers

Fig. 2.1 Bertel Thorvaldsen, *George Gordon Byron*, original plaster model of the bust of Byron (April–May 1817). Thorvaldsens Museum, photograph by Jakob Faurvig, CC0, https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en/A257.

1 Published in *The Byron Journal*, 23 (Jan. 1995), 63–75. Reprinted by permission of Liverpool University Press.

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0399.02

The initiative that brought Lord Byron to sit for a portrait bust by the eminent Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen in May 1817 came from John Cam Hobhouse. The impetus to immortalise his friend in stone seems to have been purely personal. Whereas most of those close to Byron, whether as lovers or as friends, were happy to receive as a gift a miniature or even an engraving from a larger portrait, Hobhouse wanted something monumental, and tangible—and he was prepared to pay for it. He was, he liked to believe, Byron's dearest friend, and certainly he was the most selflessly devoted: 'a friend often tried and never found wanting', as Byron himself testified in that warmest of encomiums, the dedication to him of the fourth Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.[2] Hobhouse may also have been anticipating an eventuality in which he might never see Byron again. When they parted at Dover on 24 April 1816, on his leaving England as a self-imposed exile, Byron had hinted at a premonition that he might never return; Hobhouse noted the inference in his diary and the feeling of foreboding it evoked.[3] The choice of Thorvaldsen for the commission may have been influenced by the fee, which would probably have been less than the more celebrated Canova might have charged; but the latter, though still active, was approaching the end of his career and taking few commissions. Thorvaldsen, by contrast, was at the height of his powers; his studio, in which as many as forty men might be seen at work, was one of the sights of Rome to be visited by popes and princes; and his output was prodigious. His personality was no less formidable than his talent: tall and imposing in appearance and sardonic in manner, he was not a man to be overawed by his subjects, however famous and aristocratic. His encounter with Byron—the sittings were no less than that—inspired Thorvaldsen to produce one of his finest busts and the only great portrait of the poet.

Hobhouse's choice of the most austere of the Neo-Classical sculptors of the day must be seen in the context of his own enthusiasm for classical antiquity. By the time Byron arrived in Rome Hobhouse had spent nearly

2 *Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), II, 120–24. All subsequent references to Byron's poetry are to this edition, hereafter *CPW*.

3 Lord Broughton, *Recollections of a Long Life*, 6 vols (London: John Murray, 1909–11), I, 336, https://archive.org/details/recollectionsofa007946mbp

five months in the city, most of them in close study of the archaeological remains of Imperial Rome and of literary sources, both ancient and modern. His typically painstaking work is now remembered only for his contribution to the *Notes*, written jointly with Byron, accompanying the fourth Canto of *Childe Harold*; the book he was to publish in the following year containing material which could not be compressed into the *Notes* because of its 'disproportionate bulk' is now forgotten. Among the literary sources which he and Byron drew upon for the *Notes* was Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose *Geschichhte der Kunst des Alterthums* published in 1764 imitated the essentially Romantic interpretation of the surviving artefacts of ancient Greece (or, more typically, Roman copies of lost originals) which came to be known as Neo-Classicism. Byron and Hobhouse read Winckelmann in an Italian translation, which they were to cite in the *Notes*. Another who almost certainly had read that translation was Thorvaldsen, who, as the brilliant gold-medallist of the Danish Academy, made the pilgrimage to Rome in 1797 where, almost inevitably, he fell under the influence of the prevailing Neo-Classical doctrines. In the words of his French biographer:

> The young Dane had hardly taken the first steps in the cause, which was destined to be so illustrious, when he met a fervent disciple of Winckelmann [...] Thorvaldsen was strongly encouraged by the learned archaeologist in his enthusiastic admiration for the grand style of antique statuary, and abandoned himself unreservedly to his inclination, thenceforward pursuing resolutely the course which was to lead to the complete development of his genius.[4]

The learned archaeologist was Georg Zöega, 'the Danish Winckelmann' and doyen of the artistic and literary circle of his fellow-countrymen in Rome. Whilst he recognised Thorvaldsen's outstanding talent as a sculptor, Zöega found him 'ignorant of everything outside art'. How is it possible, he complained, 'to study as he ought, if he does not know a word of Italian or French, if he has no acquaintance with history and mythology [...]?'[5] The young Bertel became a habitué of the Zöega household, where it seems he set about rapidly learning Italian. He formed a liaison with an Italian maidservant in the Zöegas' service, by

4 Eugène Plon, *Thorvaldsen: His Life and Works*, tr. by Mrs Cashel Hoey (London: Richard Bentley, 1874), p. 178.

5 Plon, *Thorvaldsen*, p. 22.

whom he was to have two children. And he adopted the Italian version of his name—Alberto—which he was to use professionally for the rest of his forty-year sojourn in the city.

Thorvaldsen's Danish biographer, J. M. Thiele, who knew the sculptor personally, believed that he found Byron's manner at their first meeting distasteful or even repulsive.[6] Thorvaldsen's own account, as told to an English visitor to his studio some ten years later, does not suggest antipathy so much as the wryly cynical amusement of a man approaching fifty at the antics of one not yet thirty. Byron 'appeared the first day in his atelier without any previous notice, wrapped up in his mantle, and with a look which was intended to impress upon the artist a powerful sentiment of his character. It was the first introduction; and Thorvaldsen from whom I heard the fact, admitted that the effect was commensurate with his wishes.'[7] But, if Thorvaldsen was not expecting Byron at that particular moment, he was not altogether surprised to see him for Hobhouse had prepared the way in a tactfully worded and even flattering letter. He wrote in the *lingua franca* of diplomatic and cosmopolitan society, which Thorvaldsen presumably had learned to read after twenty years in the company not just of scholars like Zöega but of his social superiors:

> Milord Byron, *dont peut être vous auriez entendu parler comme du premier poète Anglais de nos jours est maintenant a Rôme. Je desire beaucoup qu'il puisse avoir un autre lien sure la postérité, pas moins durable que celui que lui ont fourni ses vers.—Voila pourquoi je le voudrais voir eternise par votre ciseau*.[8]
>
> [[trans. by ed.] Lord Byron, whom you have perhaps heard spoken of as the leading English poet of our time, is now in Rome. I very much wish him to have a further hold on posterity, no less enduring than that which his verses have afforded him.—This is why I would like to see him immortalised by your chisel.]

Thorvaldsen's reply has been lost, so we do not know how many sittings there were or when they took place. The probability is that they were few, perhaps no more than two—an initial sketch in pencil and then the wet clay. He

6 M. R. Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen, Collated from the Danish of J. M. Thiele* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1865), pp. 170, 171.
7 *New Monthly Magazine*, 19 (1827), 232.
8 J. M. Thiele, *Thorvaldsen in Rome, 1805–1819*, 4 vols (Copenhagen, 1852), I, 340.

> worked in clay with extreme ardour, until he had set free from it the form which he had imagined, until he had given it the imprint of the thought which he had conceived. When it seemed to him that the clay had adequately rendered his ideas, he executed a plaster from it himself, which he generally finished very carefully: then he gave this to his workmen as a model, and it was their business to translate it in marble […] he constantly superintended the work, frequently retouched it, sometimes finished it himself.[9]

Hobhouse was no less impressed by the sculptor's zest for the job; 'the artist worked *con amore*', he said, 'and told me it was the finest head he had ever under his hand.'[10] According to Thorvaldsen himself, recalling the events as an old man in conversation with his friend Hans Christian Andersen, he asserted his authority from the start:

> 'Oh, that was in Rome', said he, 'when I was about to make Byron's statue; he placed himself just opposite to me, and began immediately to assume quite another countenance to what was customary to him. "Will you not sit still?", said I; "but you must not make these faces". "It is my expression", said Byron. "Indeed?", said I, and then I made him as I wished, and everybody said, when it was finished, that I had hit the likeness. When Byron, however, saw it, he said, "It does not resemble me at all; I look more unhappy."' 'He was, above all things, so desirous of looking extremely unhappy', added Thorvaldsen, with a comic expression.[11]

Much has been made of Byron's remark, usually to the detriment of Thorvaldsen who, it is said, was of too humble a background and of too simple a nature to 'comprehend imaginary Misery'.[12] Mario Praz, the historian of Romantic modes, suggests a fundamental antipathy between the poet and the artist, not only personally, but as to their aesthetic assumptions. 'Byron', he declares, 'posed as a romantic, but Thorvaldsen carved in the Biedermeyer manner; he was alien to the portrayal of true sorrow: what then could he make of its imitation?'[13] There could hardly be a harsher dismissal of Thorvaldsen as an artist:

9 Plon, *Thorvaldsen*, p. 210.
10 Letter to John Murray, 7 December 1817 (John Murray Archive).
11 H. C. Andersen, *The True Story of My Life: A Sketch*, trans. by Mary Howitt (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847), p. 170.
12 Plon, *Thorvaldsen*, p. 53.
13 Mario Praz, *On Neo-Classicism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 273.

'biedermeyer' was no more than a term of abuse, the mid-nineteenth century equivalent of 'kitsch'. Those of us who know Byron from his letters to his close friends may suspect him of being facetiously ironical, not a little at his own expense. Thorvaldsen can be forgiven if he did not perceive such a nuance in his sitter's apparent rejection of his work.

Fig. 2.2 Bertel Thorvaldsen, *George Gordon Byron*, marble bust of Byron (1824). Thorvaldsens Museum, photograph by Jakob Faurvig, CC0, https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en/A256.

But the bust itself reveals that he had recognised in Byron a luminous and resolute spirit to be compared with that of a Greek god. As soon as he saw the plaster model, Byron must have been aware that he had undergone an apotheosis at the hands of the sculptor. He was slightly embarrassed, but at the same time he took a sheepish pride at being thus 'immortalised in marble while still alive'.[14] This sense of unease was revived some four years later, when he heard that a young American visitor had obtained a copy of the bust from Thorvaldsen.

14 Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1957), II, 693.

> *I* would not pay the price of a Thorwaldsen [*sic*] bust for any human head & shoulders [...] If asked—*why* then I sate for my own—answer—that it was at the request particular of J. C. Hobhouse Esqre.—and for no one else.—A *picture* is a different matter—every body sits for their picture—but a bust looks like putting up pretensions to permanency—and smacks something of a hankering for *public* fame rather than private remembrance.[15]

Byron sometimes affected a kind of philistine indifference towards the fine arts, but his writings reveal that he could be as deeply and powerfully affected by painting and sculpture as by poetry. What he objected to was not art as such but the pretentiousness, as he regarded it, of the attitudes struck by those who professed to appreciate it. Writing from Florence, where he visited two galleries in the course of a visit of no more than a day *en route* to Rome, he had to admit that 'there are sculpture and painting—which for the first time gave me an idea of what people mean by their *cant* [...] about those two most artificial of the arts'.[16] He was overwhelmed by the visual experience of Rome, its architecture and, perhaps most of all, its sculpture: 'my first impressions are always strong and confused', he wrote soon after his arrival in the city, '& my Memory *selects* & reduces them to order—like distance in the landscape.'[17] In the fourth Canto of *Childe Harold*, which he started writing within a month of leaving 'the city of the soul', Byron painted Rome in brilliant *chiaroscuro*: men and gods, past and present seem to emerge suffused with light briefly to be seen before retreating into the shadows. Apollo, in the form of the Belvedere statue in the Vatican, inspired three stanzas which immediately precede the final immolation of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* now hardly distinguishable from the poet himself. 'The God of life, and poesy, and light— / [...] in his eye / And nostril beautiful disdain,' though 'made / By human hands [...]' still 'breathes the flame with which 'twas wrought'. Harold, by contrast, 'His wanderings done, his visions ebbing fast / [...] His

15 'Detached Thoughts', no. 25, Pisa, Oct.–Nov. 1821; *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–94), IX, 21. All subsequent references to *Byron's Letters and Journals* are to this edition, hereafter *BLJ*.

16 Letter to John Murray, 26 April 1817; *BLJ* V, 218.

17 Letter to John Murray, 9 May 1817; *BLJ* V, 221.

shadow fades away into Destruction's mass'.[18] Byron's apostrophe to Apollo carries echoes from Winckelmann.[19] In one of the most famous passages in his *Geschichte* Winckelmann evokes the spirit of Apollo in the most romantic terms. 'Apollo's lofty look, filled with consciousness of power, seems to rise above his victory, and to gaze into infinity. Scorn sits upon his lips, and his nostrils are swelling with suppressed anger, which mounts even to the proud forehead [...].'[20] And Byron, like Winckelmann, might well have said to himself in the presence of 'this miracle of art, I feel myself transported to Delos and into the Lycaean groves'.[21] Byron's debt to Winckelmann does not, of course, in any way detract from the originality of his verse but his personal identification with the Apollo, at least in some of its features, is clear. Scorn becomes beautiful disdain—a facial expression of Byron's often commented on by observers, and one which he may have tried to assume in front of Thorvaldsen.

Whether or not Byron saw himself in the image of Apollo, Thorvaldsen certainly did not regard himself as limited to any particular classical model. He aspired towards a classical essence. In this search for an archetype the sculptor would borrow certain features from the antique portraits and combine details from a variety of types which were originally very far removed from each other, in time and space, so as to obtain a result serving his own purpose.[22] The Neo-Classical doctrine, in Thorvaldsen's interpretation, could virtually submerge the individual in the ideal. 'What you allow in portrait painting', he declared, 'is inadmissible in sculpture, because a work of sculpture is a monument, and just as the purpose of a monument cannot consist only in a record of the actual event, thus a statue can achieve this and without reproducing the features.'[23] Fortunately for posterity, the sculptor did not adhere to this doctrine in its daunting austerity when faced with Byron. Indeed,

18 *Childe Harold*, IV, 161, 163, 164; *CPW* II, 178–79.
19 Hugh Honour, *Neoclassicism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1968), p. 61.
20 *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, selected and ed. by David Irwin (London: Phaidon, 1972), p. 140.
21 Ibid.
22 Else K. Sass, 'The Classical Tradition in Later European Portraiture, with Special Regard to Thorvaldsen's Portraits', *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Classical Studies*, vol. III: *The Classical Pattern of Modern Western Civilization, Portraiture* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1957), p. 90.
23 Sass, 'Classical Tradition', p. 98.

his bust revealed the sitter's features in actuality, even in such a minor detail as his lobeless ears. In short it was a good likeness; Byron himself had to admit, if a little grudgingly, it was 'reckoned very good'.[24] When he sought to evoke the spirit of the poet—the ideal—Thorvaldsen did so without resort to extravagant mannerism; the eyes are only slightly uplifted, and their gaze suggests inner reflection rather than a search for inspiration from above. The lightly arched brows unite the separate features as might a frieze across the façade of a classical building. The head rests firmly and easily on a neck of great strength, though it is possible to perceive in the throat that alabaster beauty which was reputed to make women swoon. On first confronting the bust, at least in the original model, Byron's physical presence almost assaults the viewer. The sculptor recognised what all other portraitists had failed to see, so obsessed were they with the poetical ideal, that Byron was an athlete, a man capable of feats of physical skill and endurance. Only then perhaps does one become aware of a resonance that transcends the purely physical: the strength resides in the whole being, in the spirit made manifest in the flesh. And Byron's famous affirmation of the immortality of the spirit seems to transpire through the marble: 'But there is that within me which shall tire / Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire; […]'[25]

Byron never saw his bust in marble; his favourable judgement was almost certainly based on a report from Hobhouse, who stayed on in Rome for nearly two months before joining his friend in Venice. During that time he called on Thorvaldsen in his studio and in the course of one of these visits he proposed a radical shift of emphasis away from the Greek ideal: he wanted to add a laurel wreath across the brow in the manner of a Roman military conqueror. The sculptor was not averse to this (he used such a motif on his bust of Napoleon), but the idea drew a furious response from Byron.

> I protest against & prohibit the '*laurels*'—which would be a most awkward assumption and anticipation of that which may never come to pass.—*You* would like them naturally because the verses won't do without them—but I won't have my head garnished like a Xmas pie with Holly—or a

24 Letter to John Murray, 4 June 1817; *BLJ* V, 235.
25 *Childe Harold*, IV, 137; *CPW* II, 170.

> Cod's head and Fennel—or whatever the damned weed is they strew round it.—I wonder you should want me to be such a mountebank.[26]

So vehement a rejection of the trappings of military honours may seem surprising from one who no more than four years ago had sat for his portrait wearing the dress of a warlike tribesman with a dagger in his belt. But Byron had changed since then and his underlying mood was sombre, barely concealed behind the flippant manner of the rest of his letter. He may, too, have been irritated by the verse which Hobhouse wanted to have inscribed at the base. In the face of such an onslaught Hobhouse could hardly persist; but he did not entirely relinquish the idea. '[W]hen the marble comes to England', he told John Murray later that year, 'I shall place a golden laurel round it in the ancient style, and if it is thought good enough suffix the following inscription, which may serve at last to tell the name of the portrait and allude to the existence of the artist, which very few lapidary inscriptions do.'[27] But the bust took an unconscionable time to reach England and Hobhouse's clumsy quatrain was never incised. One of Thorvaldsen's assistants simply chased the name *Byron* on the front of the herm. Thorvaldsen offered a choice of two modes: the herm, where the head and neck rest on a plain cubic base, or a bust proper where the upper shoulders and chest are revealed in a manner that is Roman rather than Greek. Hobhouse chose the former mode in which Winckelmann's neo-classical ideal of 'noble simplicity and serene greatness'[28] is perhaps more perfectly realised. But Hobhouse's frustrated desire to decorate the head of his hero reflects a general drift of taste from the formal and austere towards a naturalism which, at least in Britain, was ultimately to suffuse forms in a layer of glutinous sentiment.

'Chantrey does not think much of my bust of Lord Byron by Thorwaldsen [*sic*], nor does he think a great deal of Thorwaldsen'.[29] Hobhouse was on friendly personal terms with Francis Chantrey, the doyen of English sculptors, and he had a high regard for his opinions on sculpture in particular and art in general. His bust, his masterpiece, as

26 Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 20 June 1817; *BLJ* V, 243.
27 Letter to John Murray, 7 December 1817 (John Murray Archive).
28 'Edle Binfalt und stille Grosse', quoted W. D. Robson-Scott, *The Younger Goethe and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.
29 Broughton, *Recollections*, II, 176.

he justly believed it to be, had only recently arrived into his possession, nearly five years on from the heady days with Byron in Rome. Sensitive to a degree to anything which might imply, even indirectly, adverse criticism of his friend, Chantrey's remarks upset Hobhouse enough for him to record them in his diary. But he may, in his ruffled pride, have misunderstood Chantrey's words or read more into them than the sculptor had intended. For Chantrey had met Thorvaldsen at the latter's studio in Rome in October 1819 (he could have seen the Byron bust there) and, according to his Victorian biographer, who knew him far better than did Hobhouse, formed a high opinion of the Dane's work.[30] When, only a year or two later, Hobhouse was faced with the melancholy task of commissioning a statue as a monument to his dead hero it was to Chantrey that he turned.

The idea of a Byron monument to be erected in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey derived from Hobhouse's almost obsessive desire for official recognition and public acknowledgement of his friend's genius. He seemed to want a kind of canonisation as a symbol of secular acceptability. As an attitude to the authority of church and state it hardly accords with his Unitarian upbringing and political radicalism; but Hobhouse was in the process of sloughing off both, and in courting the establishment he invited rebuff. Undeterred by Dean Ireland's refusal to have Byron buried in the Abbey followed by a brusquely discourteous rejection of an effigy,[31] Hobhouse bided his time, waiting upon Ireland's death. He set up a Byron Monument Committee with John Murray as secretary, and solicited public subscription. They circularised members of both Houses of Parliament and appointed corresponding members abroad, but the result was disappointing. By 1829, when the fund was effectively closed, the sum in hand was more than three hundred pounds short of the £2,000 they needed.[32] It is not unlikely that Hobhouse consulted Chantrey in arriving at this figure, for he was his first choice for the commission. Again, Hobhouse was rebuffed: Chantrey refused the offer, probably because the fee

30 George Jones, R.A., *Sir Francis Chantrey, R.A.: Recollections of his Life, Practice, and Opinions* (London: E. Moxon, 1849), pp. 29, 30, https://archive.org/details/sirfrancischantr00joneiala

31 Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 17 Dec. 1834 (John Murray Archive).

32 Byron Monument, Account of Subscriptions Paid (John Murray Archive).

available was too low. And, as if to add insult to injury, he made a bust of Ireland in the same year. He had already done Wordsworth and was later to immortalise Southey in marble; he was to become a darling of the Court of William IV, and his work began to reflect a sycophantic appreciation of the great and the good.

Angered by Chantrey's shabby attitude, as he called it,[33] Hobhouse immediately wrote informally to Thorvaldsen, who responded with a warmth and generosity which put Chantrey to shame. The great sculptor, by then in his sixtieth year, regarded the commission as an honour:

> With an inexpressible pleasure I shall start work on a piece which will pass down to posterity the memory of the great genius already well enough known through his works and his talent. For my part, I assure you of my every care that this work shall be worthy of the Committee which orders it, and of the great poet whom I have known and whose loss I shall regret forever. In this task I shall have absolutely no regard for my personal interest, and thus I should like to make, if you wish, for this price (£1,000 sterling) a bas relief on the pedestal. [...] As soon as I have your reply, I shall start work on a monument, in order to finish it as soon as possible.[34]

It is clear that Thorvaldsen's admiration for Byron was deep-seated and more than just a response to the hero of Greek independence, which his biographers have tended to emphasise. A native of a country which fought as an ally of Napoleon; an artist whose firm adherence to the Neo-Classical ideal identified him with the art of Revolutionary France, Thorvaldsen perhaps recognised in Byron the spirit his country's rulers feared and wanted to suppress. He would affirm that spirit in a monument which, like the poet's own works, would live when his detractors were long forgotten.

The monument committee formally accepted Thorvaldsen's offer in November 1829 and, true to his word, the sculptor set to work quickly; his first rough sketches on paper were made in August of the following year and work began on the marble in 1831.

33 John Cam Hobhouse, letter to John Murray, 31 Aug. 1829 (John Murray Archive).
34 Letter from Bertel Thorvaldsen to John Cam Hobhouse, 25 July 1829 (from a transcription of the original in the John Murray Archive).

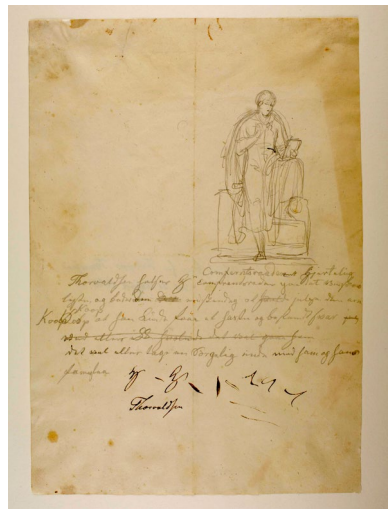

Fig. 2.3 Bertel Thorvaldsen, *Monument for George Gordon Byron*, pencil sketch of Byron statue (1830). Thorvaldsens Museum, photograph by Helle Nanny Brendstrup, CC0, https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en/C352.

Fig. 2.4 Bertel Thorvaldsen, *Monument for George Gordon Byron with the Relief the Genius of Poetry on the Plinth*, pencil sketch of Byron statue and relief for the plinth (1830–31). Thorvaldsens Museum, photograph by Jakob Faurvig, CC0, https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en/C350r.

He must have considered many options for the memorial, the most obvious of which, perhaps, was the heroic. That was the image chosen by the Belgian painter Joseph Odevaere (a former pupil of J.-L. David in Paris) in his painting of 1826; the hero as a classical nude stretched out on his death bed. Thorvaldsen's approach was to show 'the ideal picture of a gifted poet, as antiquity would present the very muse of poetry'.[35] The final outcome, achieved only after some searching, was a figure of great originality, imbued with vitality though quietly reflective, and yet clearly a man of his own time—and indeed of our time.

The statue is replete with references to classical antiquity. Byron is depicted in a seated position which is said to have been partly derived from two statues of Greek philosophers in the Vatican, copies of which Thorvaldsen kept in his studio.[36] The figure rests amongst the debris of an Attic temple with a fragment of a frieze as a seat and a broken column, fluted in the Doric style, supporting the feet. On either side of the frieze, Thorvaldsen carved in relief the owl of Minerva and the lyre of Apollo, possibly taken from the images on his extensive collection of Attic coins. After such a clutter of symbols on the statue proper, the base seems refreshingly plain; only the forward-facing side is decorated, and there the sculptor carved an exquisite bas-relief representing the Genius of poetry and song, Apollo himself.

A lesser sculptor than Thorvaldsen might have allowed the weight of antique allusion to overwhelm the figure itself; and indeed his first essay, as revealed in a bozzetto of 1830, is singularly inert. In this small gesso model Byron is seated, holding a book in his left hand which rests on his knee, which in turn is propped up by a foot on the broken column. Each of these features was eventually to appear in the finished work; but in the model the head faces directly to the front, as in the original bust. Thorvaldsen's decision, which must have been made in the same year, to turn the head half right across the shoulders introduced the suggestion of tension, which is the source of the astonishing vitality that suffuses the effigy from top to toe. Other features contribute to the effect, most importantly the graceful but powerful drapery which the sculptor was able to introduce by wrapping the figure in a riding cloak. Thorvaldsen had seen Byron so dressed as he first entered his studio thirteen years

35 Wilhelm Wanscher, *Artes*, tome 1 (Copenhagen, 1932), p. 308.
36 Sass, 'Classical Tradition', p. 76.

earlier; the figure he now created was that of the poet as a man still young and in his full vigour.

This, then, is the Byron of the grand tour, seated among the 'shatter'd splendour' of ancient Greece and, perhaps, anticipating the day when the past glory might 'vanquish Time and Fate' and renew itself in our time.[37]

Fig. 2.5 Bertel Thorvaldsen, *Monument to George Gordon Byron*, full-size plaster model of statue of Byron (May 1831). Thorvaldsens Museum, photograph by Jakob Faurvig, CC0, https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en/A130.

As if to emphasise the poet, rather than the hero, Thorvaldsen has him holding a copy of *Childe Harold* whilst he ponders the verse—pen in hand. And, if evidence were needed, the statue itself reveals the sculptor's acquaintanceship with at least the earlier Cantos of Byron's great poem,—even if he read it, as he could only have done, in translation. But, although there is a lightness of spirit about the effigy he created, Thorvaldsen has not romanticised Byron. The power and strength of the

37 Words supposedly uttered by Newton shortly before his death in 1727, reported by Joseph Spence in *Anecdotes, Observations and Characters, of Books and Men* (1820), I, 158; referred to in *Don Juan*, Canto VII, 5; *CPW* V, 338.

bust now spread through the whole figure: the capability of soldierly action is latent.

The fatal consequence of such action is, however, only hinted at in a visual metaphor, explicit enough in itself, which is half hidden behind the broken column. There, to the left of the figure, which faces away from it, Thorvaldsen placed a human skull; and, as if to emphasise the reference to Byron, he allowed folds of his cloak to come to rest upon it.

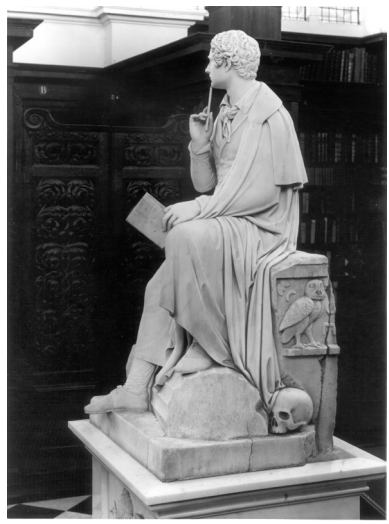

Fig. 2.6 Bertel Thorvaldsen, statue of Byron in the Wren Library, showing the owl of Minerva and the skull as memento mori. Photograph courtesy of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Whilst the sculptor's intention is clear, the introduction of yet another symbol, of a very different kind from the others, only serves to confuse; the effect is the antithesis of noble simplicity. The skull as a reminder of the mortality of the flesh is far from classical in spirit; no Attic sculptor, for whom men and gods inhabited one cosmos, could have countenanced it. Thorvaldsen's eclecticism in this respect does not diminish the power of this masterpiece of his later years. Like other artists trained in the Neo-Classical aesthetic, most notably Delacroix, the imperatives of the times—and in this case a tempestuous genius as a subject—demanded of Thorvaldsen that he should wrestle with the conventional forms handed down to him; and much of the strength of the statue stems from his struggle. Byron himself would surely have understood. He too,

however much he might revere the Augustan poetical mode, found that his genius could not be so trammelled.

The statue arrived by cargo vessel from Rome in November 1834 and Hobhouse went down to the docks to deal with formalities at HM Customs and Excise, in one of whose warehouses it was stored. It was to stay there for ten years. The sole reason for this ridiculous state of affairs was Hobhouse and his committee's insistence that the statue should go to the Abbey and the stubborn refusal of an Evangelical-minded clergy to have the poet within its precincts. There was no point in looking to a haven in St Paul's, if only because the Bishop of London, the Rt Revd Charles Blomfield, regarded Byron as a species of Infidel and was to use the privileged platform of the House of Lords to execrate his name when the matter was briefly debated there in June 1844.[38] His experience as an undergraduate contemporary of Byron at Trinity College, Cambridge may perhaps have affected his judgement.

In his second letter to Thorvaldsen, Hobhouse had mentioned two other possible destinations for the Byron monument, namely the British Museum and the National Gallery. There is however no evidence of any approach being made to the authorities of either of these institutions, where the religious impediment could hardly have been raised. It is difficult to believe that they were seriously considered, at least by Hobhouse. There is, too, no evidence that Thorvaldsen was consulted or even informed about the course of events, though he could hardly have been indifferent to the fate of the work which had engaged his generous sympathy no less than his skill. His monument to Byron still lay in a crate in a London warehouse, when Thorvaldsen himself laden with honours, died in his native city in the spring of 1844.

The initiative that was to resolve the problem and, incidentally, to rescue Hobhouse and his committee from their embarrassing position came from Trinity College. As early as March 1840, a graduate member of the college wrote to the Senior Tutor with a proposal that the statue should be placed in the college itself or in the University's new museum, The Fitzwilliam, then still under construction. Nothing came of this approach and the matter hung fire for another three years. Undeterred, this persistent young man, whose name, Charles De La

38 *The Times*, 15 June 1844.

Pryme, deserves to be remembered, wrote to the Master himself, Dr Whewell, who responded very warmly. He clearly wanted the statue for the college; a formal application was made on behalf of the Fellows to the subscription committee in April 1843.[39] De La Pryme was too young to have known Byron, but his father must have remembered him for he was a Fellow of the College when the poet was an undergraduate. In 1832 he was elected a Member of Parliament for the city of Cambridge in the Whig interest, and in that capacity he was to work closely with Hobhouse in the House of Commons. It is highly likely therefore that Hobhouse knew of the approach to Trinity College from the beginning; he was to use it as an option which he could hold in reserve while he played politics with the Abbey. He was to persist almost to the point of public humiliation; not until July 1844 did he agree to the acceptance of the offer from Trinity. Even then he had to assert the righteousness of his cause in a privately printed and anonymous pamphlet in which he argued his case at tedious length.[40]

The pamphlet is memorable only for Hobhouse's appreciation of Byron, a kind of belated obituary, almost as moving for its expression of heartfelt love for his friend as for his evocation of the man himself. It does much to explain his prolonged and tenacious struggle with the Abbey: if only the truth were known as he knew it, even the prejudices of a hostile clergy would be dispelled and the statue welcomed within their precincts. He never really came to terms with his defeat. For him Trinity was a place of exile of Byron in effigy comparable, as a symbol of rejection, with the real exile thirty years earlier; and in a sense he was right. When the statue finally reached the college and was hoisted in the Wren Library on October 18th, 1845, there was no ceremony to mark the event. Byron's reputation was sinking into a slough of moral disapproval and incomprehension of his genius from which it was not to be rescued for over a century, and Thorvaldsen's monument was largely unappreciated, if not forgotten.

39 The correspondence was summarised by the then Librarian, Dr Robert Sinker, in *Notes and Queries*, 6.4 (December 1881), 421–23, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015020441013&seq=612.

40 Anon. [John Cam Hobhouse], *Remarks on the Exclusion of Lord Byron's Monument from Westminster Abbey*, n.d. [London, 1844].

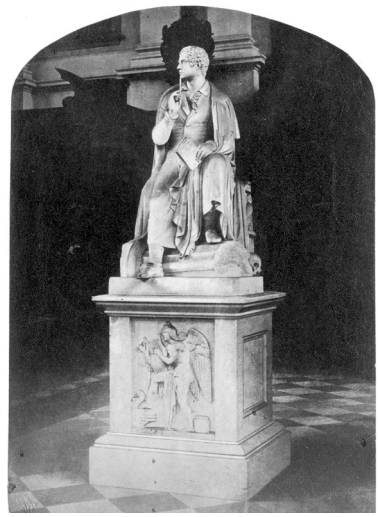

Fig. 2.7 Photograph of the Byron statue shortly after its installation in the Wren Library in 1845. Courtesy of Trinity College, Cambridge (Add.PG.13[5]).

Only now perhaps can we recognise the utter appropriateness of its setting. Sir Christopher Wren's library at Trinity is one of the architect's masterpieces, his finest secular building. To view the statue there in the constantly changing light from the vast windows is to experience something of the spirit of Enlightenment and Reason which, however fiercely assailed, always remained Byron's 'last and only place / Of refuge'.[41]

41 *Childe Harold*, IV, 127; *CPW* II, 166.