

## CHAPTER THREE

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### IMAGINING EMANCIPATION

ON JANUARY 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. From a legal standpoint it was a peculiar document since it applied only to slaves in Confederate territory, and left slavery protected in Union-held areas. In effect it declared the enemy's slaves free and kept its own in bondage. Still, the proclamation was by no means an empty gesture. It did promise emancipation on a massive scale, for the millions of Southern slaves who could escape the Confederacy or who could hang on and wait for the Union army to liberate them. The proclamation thus confirmed what many already suspected and what the slaves themselves had begun to take into their own hands. The Civil War, which originated as a fight to restore "the Union as it was," now threatened the institution of slavery itself. From this point on, the Union's soldiers became an army of liberation, and the slaves of the South were invited to join it. The nation appeared to be heading irreversibly toward a final settlement of the question whether it was to remain a slave society or banish slavery once and for all.<sup>1</sup>

Later that year, in an art exhibition in New York, there appeared a two-foot-tall statuette fashioned in response to Lincoln's proclamation. Entitled the *Freedman* (fig. 3.1), it was made by the young sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward, Henry Kirke Brown's favorite pupil. Despite its modest size and its fledgling artist, the *Freedman* created an immediate sensation and fired the imagination of critics for years to come. The piece shows a seminude man poised on a tree stump, holding a broken manacle—an apparent fugitive from slavery, one of the many Lincoln hoped would escape to the Union ranks to secure the freedom promised by his proclamation. The design seems to emerge out of the experiments of Ward's mentor, specifically Brown's 1855 model of the slave seated on a cotton bale—as if that downcast figure had now sprung to life. The pose and action of Ward's figure break decisively from the iconography of abjection, particularly from the familiar abolitionist image of the black man in chains, kneeling on the ground and begging to be treated as a man and a brother. The *Freedman* does not plead or grieve. He has gotten up



3.1 John Quincy Adams Ward, *Freedman*, 1863, bronze statuette.

off the ground and broken his own chains, still clenched in one fist. His head turns alertly, the brows knit, the gaze intent on something in the distance. No longer passively awaiting salvation from above, this figure exudes an active force working to shape his own destiny.<sup>2</sup>

The work appeared initially in the form of a plaster model, shunted into a dimly lit, crowded corner at the National Academy of Design's annual spring exhibition. If not for Lincoln's proclamation and the official turn in wartime policy, the model would not have been exhibited at all.<sup>3</sup> It might easily have been lumped into the same marginal and ephemeral category as John Rogers's plaster *Slave Auction*, except that critics noticed a radical difference from the beginning. Ward's piece was not dismissed as genre, or as polemic. With its heroic nudity, it belonged to sculpture's classical tradition; its folded and subtly twisted midriff even echoed an antique work from the canon, the Torso Belvedere. Audiences accustomed to seeing the black body represented as the antithesis of sculpture (recall Nott and Gliddon's invidious comparison to the Apollo Belvedere) must have been surprised, to say the least, to see such a figure. Many critics sensed that this marked a profound shift not only in the

prevailing image of the black but in the very definition and practice of sculpture. To accommodate the black body to the classical sculptural tradition, that tradition had to be reinvented—or at least reconceptualized. The *Freedman* seemed to promise a new sculptural order, an escape from the white marble fantasies of neoclassicism like the *Greek Slave*; it put the classical tradition in touch with the demands of contemporary reality. “It is a negro, and nothing more,” wrote the *Independent*, and at the same time “it makes the nearest approach . . . to the statuary of the Greeks of any modern piece of sculpture we have seen.” The combination of ethnographic realism and classical perfection—of blackness and Greekness—struck many as both a moral and artistic triumph.<sup>4</sup>

It took only a slight stretch of the imagination for some of these critics to conceive of this little figure as a monument in public space. Several writers actually made the suggestion that the *Freedman* be enlarged to heroic size and erected permanently to mark the new era of freedom promised by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address. James Jackson Jarves, for example, envisioned it in the Capitol as a companion to Horatio Greenough’s statue of George Washington, an interracial conjunction that would complete the meaning of American democracy by “commemorat[ing] the crowning virtue of democratic institutions in the final liberty of the slave.”<sup>5</sup> Ward’s sculpture seemed to embody, in the simple form of a single black man, the abstract idea of a new national order.

Encouraged by the critical acclaim, Ward had the plaster model reproduced in bronze and sold on a limited scale to subscribers.<sup>6</sup> The *Freedman* thus became the first representation of an African American in the medium of bronze. After this, however, the piece fell into obscurity. Despite the calls from Jarves and others, the *Freedman* never was enlarged and erected as public sculpture. Moreover, its example turned out to be unrepeatable. It did not mark a turning point in American sculpture, nor did it even herald a new representation of the African American body in sculpture. Emancipation entered public sculpture instead through the body of the white hero Abraham Lincoln. Despite the efforts of numerous sculptors like Henry Kirke Brown to introduce the figure of the African American into the monumental equation, the bodies of the emancipated themselves for the most part did not even materialize. This chapter will examine why—why the claims made on behalf of the *Freedman* went unfulfilled, and a different order of sculpture arose to take its place.

WARD was the first of several important sculptors to probe the uncertain terrain of emancipation, to condense its complex struggle over human rights into the narrow sculptural language of human form. At the time the outcome of the war was very much in doubt and slavery was still pro-

tected in Union territory. Ward was certainly not thinking of the *Freedman* as a public monument. He was not engaged in commemoration but in anticipation. He wanted to be timely, perhaps even daring, so he chose a smaller, more experimental scale. This allowed the work to acknowledge more frankly the obvious questions of emancipation's prospects.

That uncertainty about the future is most evident in the unusual pose and action Ward gave the figure. The figure, as we have seen, breaks clearly from the emblematic image of the slave kneeling in abjection. Yet neither does the figure stand erect, as the classical hero would. The *Freedman* remains somewhere between the two sculptural poles of abjection and triumph. The action of the figure, at first glance so simple, becomes oddly indeterminate on closer inspection: he is neither relaxing into the seat nor getting up from it. Bent forward, the body balances edgily between repose and movement. The taut right forearm, veins bulging from the skin, pushes down on the stump in a strong vertical, transferring the brunt of his weight through the other arm to the leg planted in front. The abdomen too is pulled in and tensed, keeping the body's weight from sinking down into the seat. This conspicuous torso, framed by the taut muscular contours of the limbs, gives the whole body the effect of a compressed coil ready to spring up. The face staring upward only emphasizes the sense of anticipation; its precise intention or expression remains open to interpretation. The important point is not what he is thinking and feeling, but *that* he is thinking and feeling. It is this evidence of an alert, acting subject within the poised body that gives its ambiguous pose a concrete potential for liberation.

The material props, too, suggest that the *Freedman* is neither entirely beyond the world of slavery nor entirely within the world of freedom, but rather between the two. While the broken chains attest to the man's strike for freedom, slavery is still suggested by the manacle that continues to bind his left wrist. This ambiguity explains the curious slippage, in some of the original reviews from 1863, from the title "freedman" to the rather differently resonating label "contraband," the term that came into wide use in 1862 to designate the thousands of fugitive slaves who were streaming into Union forts and being treated as war booty.<sup>7</sup> A narrative of flight during wartime does seem to conform well to the spare cues Ward has given: having broken his own chains, the fugitive awaits—or awakens to—the recognition of freedom he will get only when he reaches the Union lines. Ward, it seems, deliberately set the figure within the paradoxical legal space created by the Emancipation Proclamation, which only freed slaves held where the proclamation was not recognized as law. In this space the fugitive must free himself, and his entry to the official "freedom" granted by Lincoln's proclamation is, ironically, the life of a contraband, a possession of war.



3.2 Currier and Ives,  
*Emancipation of the Slaves*,  
circa 1863, lithograph.

**FREEDOM TO THE SLAVES**  
Proclaimed January 1<sup>st</sup> 1863, by ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States.  
"Proclaim liberty throughout All the land unto All the inhabitants thereof" . . . . . 1774. 1863.

Ward himself steered clear of the label “contraband,” presumably to avoid drawing attention to its dehumanizing implications, so much at odds with the notion of emancipation. But his own more dignified title also dissatisfied him. He had this to say about his sculpture when he sent it to the academy for exhibition:

I shall send tomorrow or next day a plaster model of a figure which we call the “Freedman” for want of a better name, but I intended it to express not one set free by any proclamation so much as by his own love of freedom and a conscious *power* to brake things—the struggle is not over with him (as it never is in this life) yet I have tried to express a degree of hope in his undertaking.<sup>8</sup>

Though Lincoln’s proclamation obviously occasioned the subject matter, Ward wanted to distance his representation from the act itself because he intended to focus attention on the black man as an agent of his own liberation. He avoided the standard representation of emancipation that was already beginning to appear in pictures and prints: there is no figure of Lincoln or female allegory of liberty smashing the chains and raising the slave to freedom (fig. 3.2).<sup>9</sup> As a title, however, the *Freedman* has two drawbacks. With its stress on the past participle, it places the black figure once again in the passive position, acted upon rather than acting; and it

suggests a closure that Ward deliberately resisted. This figure, like the race he represents, is supposed to be seen in the midst of a historical struggle for freedom whose final outcome is still undetermined.

Thus the *Freedman's* very nudity—its most conspicuous and celebrated feature—becomes a double sign, pointing at once to vulnerability and to heroism. The lack of clothes suggests the precariousness of the man's position as he tries to move from one world to another, yet that same lack allows the "ideal" display of the male body, so much appreciated by contemporary critics. Nudity enabled Ward to push in two directions simultaneously: toward the evocation of the antique and toward a scrupulous realism of surface detail. Ward apparently modeled the figure from life,<sup>10</sup> and he took great pains to make "nature" visible in the surface of the bronze as it registers the minutiae of joint, muscle, and vein—not to mention the racial signifiers of hair, nose, and lips. Like his mentor Brown, Ward had spent some time in the South working for slaveholding patrons, and it was there that he supposedly had opportunities to observe slaves closely.<sup>11</sup> Ward's "naturalism" stood out to contemporaries because the marble sculpture of the day—the *Greek Slave*, for instance—tended to produce smooth or doughy surfaces, the anatomy more submerged beneath the stone skin of the figure. The shift in medium from marble to bronze not only signaled a shift in the "color" of the subject but also allowed Ward to exploit the superior surface detail of cast metal. It is that very detail of vein and flexed muscle that encourages us to read the body as I have—to grasp the precise tension of the pose, to enter imaginatively into the kinetic sensations of this moment.

Yet this same fidelity to detail that makes us imagine plausible narratives of the body raises two vexing issues. One is the very flawlessness of the detail, the absence of all scars by which the bodies of slaves were so frequently marked and which did appear in other types of representation (fig. 3.3).<sup>12</sup> The perfection of the body's surface shows the limits of Ward's realism, which remained comfortably within the classical notion of sculptural form as a language of "higher" truth distinct from commonplace reality. "Art means the selection and the perpetuation of the noble and beautiful and free," Ward was later quoted as saying; the equation of freedom with the ideals of art helps explain why slavery was so difficult to represent in art and why the representation of emancipation meant purifying the body of slavery's scars.<sup>13</sup> Second, the concreteness of Ward's representation might easily make us wonder why the figure is undressed in the first place. After all, tattered clothing was rapidly becoming the representational convention for fugitive slaves in the before-and-after prints and photographs of this period. It seems absurd that contemporary critics could maintain that this classically nude figure was "the direct expression of a fact."<sup>14</sup> The reason the *Freedman's*



GORDON AS HE ENTERED OUR LINES.

GORDON UNDER MEDICAL INSPECTION.

GORDON IN HIS UNIFORM AS A U. S. SOLDIER.

3.3 *Harper's Weekly* 7 (July 4, 1863): 429.

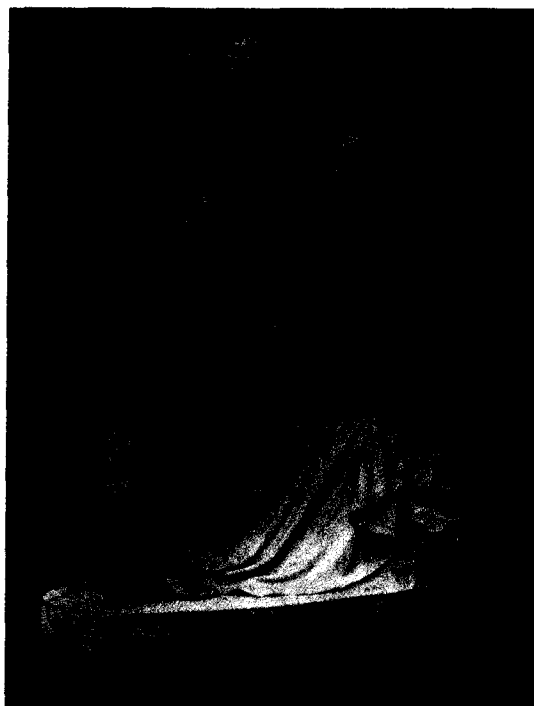
nudity did not jar critics is that for them the black man lacked a determinate social identity that demanded clothing. For a statesman or a soldier, realism and nudity were mutually exclusive—which is why Greenough's seminude Washington, for instance, had received so much abuse. One of the basic paradoxes of mid-nineteenth-century sculpture is that nude flesh, the essence of the classical sculptural tradition, could not be shown in the representation of the contemporary hero. It is no accident that Ward's most important early works, the *Freedman* and the *Indian Hunter*, were mostly nude studies of racially defined others. He was working out his brand of realism on the male bodies of the socially marginal, where his attention to nude flesh could be made plausible and acceptable. The *Freedman's* nudity at once connected the figure to the highest sculptural tradition while marking its difference from the standard white hero.<sup>15</sup>

The *Freedman*, then, embodied a peculiar kind of realism. The piece was obviously not an allegory of liberty in the traditional sense—a generic figure holding a conventionalized attribute like a liberty pole—yet it was not a portrait of an actual fugitive either. It escaped generic classification, which is why the novelist and critic William Dean Howells singled it out in his *Atlantic* essay of 1866, “Question of Monuments.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the *Freedman* makes sense not in the conventional categories of mid-

nineteenth-century sculpture but instead as a kind of sculptural analogue of the literary realism Howells championed; like Howells's model of good fiction, it navigated between the extremes of brutal fact and improbable romance. What we are seeing is not so much a "real" freedman as a generalized representative of the new black man poised on the threshold of freedom. The sculptural cues of pose, props, and clothing all reinforce the idea that the social identity and prospects of this new man remain uncertain, undetermined. Yet that indeterminacy does not only mean lack—of material goods, political rights, social position. The Freedman in his very indeterminacy also carries heroic potential, a possibility for transformation into a fully formed, fully acting social being. If he has not yet won the struggle for freedom in the largest sense, he has not yet lost it either. As shaped by Ward, this freedman has exchanged one problematic status for another—the institutionalized alienation and dehumanization of slavery for the difficult rebirth and rehumanization of emancipation.

Here gender is crucial, for it is only the male in nineteenth-century society who had the claim to citizenship and, with it, full economic and political agency. This drama of emancipation<sup>17</sup> could not be represented with such meaning on or through the female body because, as we have seen in our discussion of the *Greek Slave*, that body remained wedded to narratives of dependence or entrapment or victimization. The story of escaped female slave Sojourner Truth, for example, inspired Ward's contemporary, then celebrated sculptor William Wetmore Story, not to portray Truth herself but to create an appropriately distanced piece of ideal sculpture—an ancient and enigmatic *Libyan Sibyl* (1861) brooding passively over the tragic fate of the African race (fig. 3.4). Or Anne Whitney's frankly erotic plaster statue of *Africa* exhibited in 1864, an ideal figure of Grecian profile with only the slightest suggestion of black African features in her wavy hair, rouses from an evidently deep slumber, as if trying to shake off the paralyzing weight of centuries of oppression.<sup>18</sup> Story's *Libyan Sibyl*, in particular, earned considerable notoriety as an antislavery work, helped in part by an article written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1863; in a sense it represented the ideal marble alternative to Ward's narrative realism.<sup>19</sup> Removed both in time and space from the historical moment of emancipation, and from the racial configuration of American slavery, the *Sibyl* could not even claim to represent the black American experience. As Story himself said, it was "Libyan African of course, not Congo"—meaning that his North African type deliberately differed from the Central Africans who populated the slave ships to America.<sup>20</sup>

In Ward's hands, by contrast, the drama of emancipation liberated the black male not only from physical enslavement but from the conventional poles of oppressive representation: the "whitened" ideal represented by the *Libyan Sibyl* or *Africa*, on the one hand, and the grotesque caricature



3.4 William Wetmore Story, *Libyan Sibyl*, 1862, marble.

of popular and scientific illustrations, on the other hand. This helps explain why Ward's apparently simple achievement of making the black man a sculptural subject impressed critics to no end, and why in that achievement some critics saw a turning point in sculpture itself. Ward's figure, they argued, showed how to transcend the sterile tradition of conventional ideal sculpture because it managed to reconcile the demands of truth to reality with the demands of classicism. "Here was the Greek's conception of art—repose and simplicity—applied to a modern fact," the *New York Evening Post* argued.<sup>21</sup> The point the critics stressed repeatedly is that the *Freedman* approached the classical ideal of form and proportion without being a mythological subject or in any other obvious way mimicking Greek sculpture. Hence the irony that this marginal subject, generally debased in the representational practices of American culture, "more nearly approach[ed] the classic" than neoclassical subjects themselves.<sup>22</sup>

It is crucial to stress here that both the artist and his audience were white—in other words, the production as well as the reception of this

image took place within a privileged community of people who, whatever their particular racial beliefs, saw the black man as *different* from themselves.<sup>23</sup> In this context, insofar as Ward's figure was true to reality (i.e., "a negro, and nothing more") he was different; insofar as he was ideal or classic (i.e., conforming to white European models) he was similar. It was this simultaneous assertion of racial difference and human similarity that so impressed critics like James Jackson Jarves, who saw the figure as the symbol of "a new people," "the African race of America." The reception to the *Freedman* suggests that it did not erase racial categories but showed how they might—at least in visual imagination—be brought into harmony rather than opposition. Africans could become Americans, so the *Freedman* seemed to declare.

A more recent critic, Michael Hatt, has argued that the *Freedman* posed a question that it ultimately could not answer: "Is this general humanity or specific blackness?"<sup>24</sup> Yet the *Freedman* impressed critics of the 1860s precisely because it did seem to answer the question Hatt poses as a paradox. The simple answer to this either/or question was both. And Ward's achievement was to make it look simple, as if it were merely what true sculpture demanded of its subject. Still, racial difference did remain problematic in one crucial respect—in the erotic potential of the figure's nudity. In that eroticism there were troubling implications for the new black man's masculinity.<sup>25</sup>

If the *Freedman's* humanity was generally celebrated by critics, his *masculinity* was received rather differently—called into question by the very nudity that seems to confirm his manhood so vigorously. The critics of the 1860s register the figure's equivocal masculinity in various ways. One claimed that the figure "spoke powerfully for the manhood of the negro"; another depicted the figure as only beginning to sense "a faint conception of his manhood, his soulhood."<sup>26</sup> The *New York Times* pointedly framed the issue this way: "The final question will be, whether he makes a good and sufficient fight. When the difficulties are fairly shown, is there yet manhood enough in the figure to overmatch them?"<sup>27</sup> The figure's uncertain hold on "manhood," read in this instance as a political problem, becomes the basis of its erotic tension as well. Without a fixed masculine identity, a clear place in the world of men, the figure is ripe for erotic fantasy. The problematic space he occupies between social worlds is the sort of liminal space often eroticized because it is removed from social convention; indeed the liminality of the space makes possible the nakedness of the figure to begin with. While contemporary reviewers certainly did not engage in any obvious erotic fantasy, they did allow themselves to revel in the display of anatomy. Ward "exposed a lusty negro with firm and expanding muscle," the *Evening Post* reported, in

terms that would have been considered strange and improper if applied to a white hero.<sup>28</sup> Even the defenders of Greenough's seminude Washington, for instance, did not revel in its anatomy but focused soberly on its moral significance.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the *Freedman's* masculinity read at once as extreme and insufficient. The lack of a socially fixed masculinity in the figure permitted Ward to represent more flagrantly its erotic masculinity. This is not simply a matter of naked anatomy but the tactile approach to the anatomy Ward's technique and composition invite. The subtle turns in the figure—notice how the arms and the legs are paired in nearly perpendicular planes—and the sensuous voids in the composition created by the spaces between torso and arms, trunk and legs, all lead our eye to wander through and around the figure, as if to caress it; and indeed small bronzes like this were meant to be explored by hand as well as by eye.<sup>30</sup> This was precisely the sort of erotic scrutiny foreclosed in realist representations of contemporary white male bodies.

As a turning point for sculpture, then, Ward's little figure turns out to be highly problematic. Though it appeared to many viewers as a declaration of reform for American sculpture, it could not readily be repeated. Its careful synthesis of lifelike detail and ideal form could not be so obviously duplicated on the clothed surfaces of white male bodies, nor could it be understood as a legitimating precedent for nudity in modern subjects since its erotic potential had to be actively suppressed in the more canonical representations of great men. On a semiotic level, its ability to suggest complex meanings without recourse to allegory or other neoclassical devices also seemed to be limited by the peculiar status of the subject. In the more typical subjects of public sculpture which Ward was soon to pursue—individual heroes with socially fixed identities—the *Freedman's* suggestiveness was very difficult to emulate. The sculptural problems that the *Freedman* appeared to overcome continued to bedevil sculptors for decades.

Moreover, the liminality of the *Freedman* made it a peculiar precedent even for the sculptural representation of the black body. Shortly after the *Freedman's* exhibition, events seemed rapidly to overtake its story, to render it obsolete. The fortunes of the Confederacy began to turn sour that summer of 1863 with the defeat at Gettysburg, and a few weeks later fugitive slaves and free blacks mustered into the Union army fought their first major battles and displayed their heroism to a skeptical white public. The black man, it seemed, was no longer between worlds; he was standing erect, in uniform, armed and ready to fight for the cause of freedom. Slavery's disintegration was accelerating, so that by January 1865 Congress had passed a constitutional amendment to abolish it forever. By the



3.5 Edmonia Lewis,  
*Forever Free*, 1868,  
marble.

end of the year the amendment took effect. Emancipation had seemingly been won, and black “contrabands” like Ward’s freedman had made the victory possible.

In that moment of victory a new optimism appeared and intruded into sculpture in the work of Edmonia Lewis, one of the growing colony of expatriate women sculptors working in Rome. Daughter of a Chippewa woman and a black man, she was the only sculptor of identified African American descent working in this period.<sup>31</sup> In her marble group *Forever Free* (fig. 3.5), originally modeled in 1866–67, the freedman does indeed stand erect, holding aloft broken chains and looking up to God. The emotional and historical distance from Ward’s figure seems clear enough, but Lewis’s bodies remain liminal in certain crucial respects. The partial nudity of the man, the shackles which bind wrist and ankle, and the kneeling woman—whose pose is virtually identical to that of the abolitionist emblem—all combine to locate the narrative in the first joyful flush of freedom (the *Morning of Liberty*, as the group was titled in its early stages).<sup>32</sup> Though no longer slaves, their identities are still defined