

## 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" .... 1863. (NY: NY)

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.

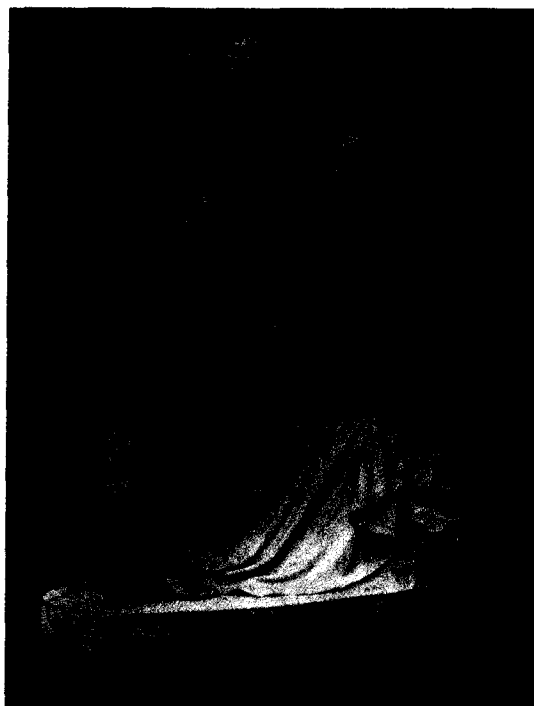
nudity did not jar critics is that for them the black man lacked a determinate social identity that demanded clothing. For a statesman or a soldier, realism and nudity were mutually exclusive—which is why Greenough's seminude Washington, for instance, had received so much abuse. One of the basic paradoxes 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

by slavery and its characteristic signifiers; new identities await them as they lift their thanks to God. Even their racial characteristics are mutable, as the Africanized physiognomy of the man is counterbalanced by the flowing hair of the woman, who might "pass" for white. Lewis's chief patrons were white abolitionists, and she originally intended the work as a tribute to Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Her group seemed to remain little known outside the Boston abolitionist circle. It was after all a private work, for a single patron, never reproduced as far we know and never shown in a major exhibition for another century.<sup>33</sup> Its marble medium and generalized modeling aligned it with an old-fashioned style that was beginning to be superseded by Ward among others.

By contrast, Ward's figure—despite its smaller scale and its apparently dated narrative—acquired a public reputation that lasted for several years. In the mid-1860s critics argued that it should reach the largest possible audience: Jarves suggested enlarging the piece for the Capitol building, while Henry Tuckerman advised that it be reproduced small-scale in a cheap material so that it would "be seen and possessed by the great mass of the people."<sup>34</sup> Howells in the essay "Question of Monuments" (1866) also envisaged a wide distribution. He called the *Freedman* a "sublime parable . . . the full expression of one idea that should be commemorated." The *Freedman* was the only piece of sculpture Howells mentioned in the essay, and he recommended it specifically as a prototype for a new kind of war memorial that "would better celebrate the great deeds of our soldiers" than the traditional martial images of battle heroes.<sup>35</sup> Both Howells and Jarves transformed Ward's open-ended piece into a commemorative artifact: the liminal figure becomes a finished "parable," bringing suitable closure to the long historical episode of slavery. Yet Ward's piece does not commemorate in this way, nor did he intend it to. Instead of fixing the meaning of the past, it raises questions about the future; in this narrative the black man's struggle is beginning, not ending.

The *Freedman* posed a series of questions about the fate of the black body, in sculpture and society. The task of public sculpture was to supply answers, not questions. Not surprisingly, Ward's figure never became public sculpture, never even found a private patron to enlarge it to life size. Writing in 1894, art critic Charles de Kay could still claim that the piece was Ward's "strongest work" while lamenting that "race prejudices" had consigned it to oblivion.<sup>36</sup> The piece did still have some life in popular culture. It appeared in 1890 as a print, without credit to Ward and under the title *Unshackled*, in the landmark history of black troops in American wars, *The Black Phalanx*.<sup>37</sup> Yet Ward himself never returned to the subject of the black male body, and only once again, in 1891, did

he execute an African American figure, a black girl who serves as a subsidiary figure in a monument to abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher. The *Freedman* remained, in many senses, a singular achievement.

EMANCIPATION, as we have seen, was not a historical event that could be tidily defined, demarcated, and commemorated. Even after the final abolition of slavery in 1865, the bitter struggle over the meaning of freedom and how it translated into social and political rights continued to intensify. Herein lay the basic dilemma for all sculptors who would face the problem of representing emancipation in public monuments. The subject defied the sort of historical closure they were asked to deliver. The public sculptor's task was not comparable to the printmaker's or even the painter's. Their images did not have to endure in public space, and so they had more license to represent the passions of the moment. But the public monument's terrifying finality put the sculptors of emancipation in a distinctly problematic position. They were testing the limits of what was culturally possible before anyone had a clear idea of what those cultural limits were.

Therefore, the theme of emancipation did not enter public sculpture as a subject in its own right. It entered public sculpture through the commemorative subject of Abraham Lincoln, as a means of locating—and "closing"—his unique historical achievement. In virtually all the numerous projects to build monuments to Lincoln in the 1860s and 1870s, emancipation figured in one form or another. As a sculptural theme, emancipation is simplified but obviously diminished once it becomes inseparable from the historical figure of Lincoln. Making Lincoln the primary historical agent tends to trivialize the role of slaves and other African Americans in bringing about their own liberation; a complex social phenomenon is shrunk to fit a great-man (and specifically great-white-man) model of history. The temporal horizon of emancipation is similarly shrunk to fit into a completed past that can be sealed off for commemoration. Such shrinkages are part and parcel of the business of commemoration, and they held true not only in white-sponsored monuments but even in some African American rituals as well. African Americans in Norfolk, Virginia, for example, celebrated their emancipation on the anniversary of Lincoln's proclamation taking effect (January 1) even though the proclamation actually had had no effect on slaves there, because the city was in Union hands and thus exempt.<sup>38</sup> The impulse to commemorate dates and heroes defined by the orthodox narrative histories of the dominant culture remained strong, even when those definitions worked to marginalize the very people doing the commemoration.

Yet within this reductive framework there was still room for sculptors to stretch the subject of emancipation into important new represen-

tational territory. In fact, insofar as sculptors chose to bring the black body into the representation at all they were in novel territory. The introduction of the black body into public sculpture, even within the limiting framework of a monument to Lincoln, raised some of those open questions about emancipation and society that commemorative monuments were supposed to suppress. The universe of possibilities suggested by the *Freedman*, while obviously shrunk by the commemorative subject of Lincoln, did not disappear altogether.

To grasp this point we need a few remarks about the public monument as a sculptural genre, with its constraints as well as its possibilities. In the nineteenth century monuments were expected to double as high art and popular expression. They were usually thought of as architectural landmarks, and so they were often envisaged and described with terms such as shaft, pile, and column. What is curious, though, is that Americans as often as not turned to sculptors to design monuments, even when the commemorative work was couched in terms frankly architectural. The sponsors of the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield, Illinois, in their fund-raising appeals anticipated a grand "Memorial Structure," a "mighty shaft," yet they chose the design of sculptor Larkin Mead, who did give them an obelisk but surrounded it with several large groups of bronze statuary.<sup>39</sup> Sculpture was essential because it transformed the landmark into a meaningful object. History, the stuff of commemoration, was taken to be a chronicle of great acts performed by great human actors, and the sculptor's task was to recreate those actors in stone or metal. In a rather literal way, preserving the memory of a hero meant preserving his image for posterity. In the comportment of his body and the lines of his face, the traces of his moral example and achievement were thought to be readable. Hence Charles Eliot Norton in his 1865 essay on monuments asserted the primacy of sculpture, particularly portrait statuary, and argued that almost all the major architectural types of monuments were really vehicles for it. And Howells, while proposing less orthodox monumental types such as parks or town halls, still believed that they had to include "some significant piece of statuary" to be properly commemorative.<sup>40</sup> The canonical examples of monuments often cited by critics were those that combined grandeur of site and mass with significant sculpture, like Rauch's monument to Frederick the Great in Berlin or the Edinburgh monument to Sir Walter Scott.

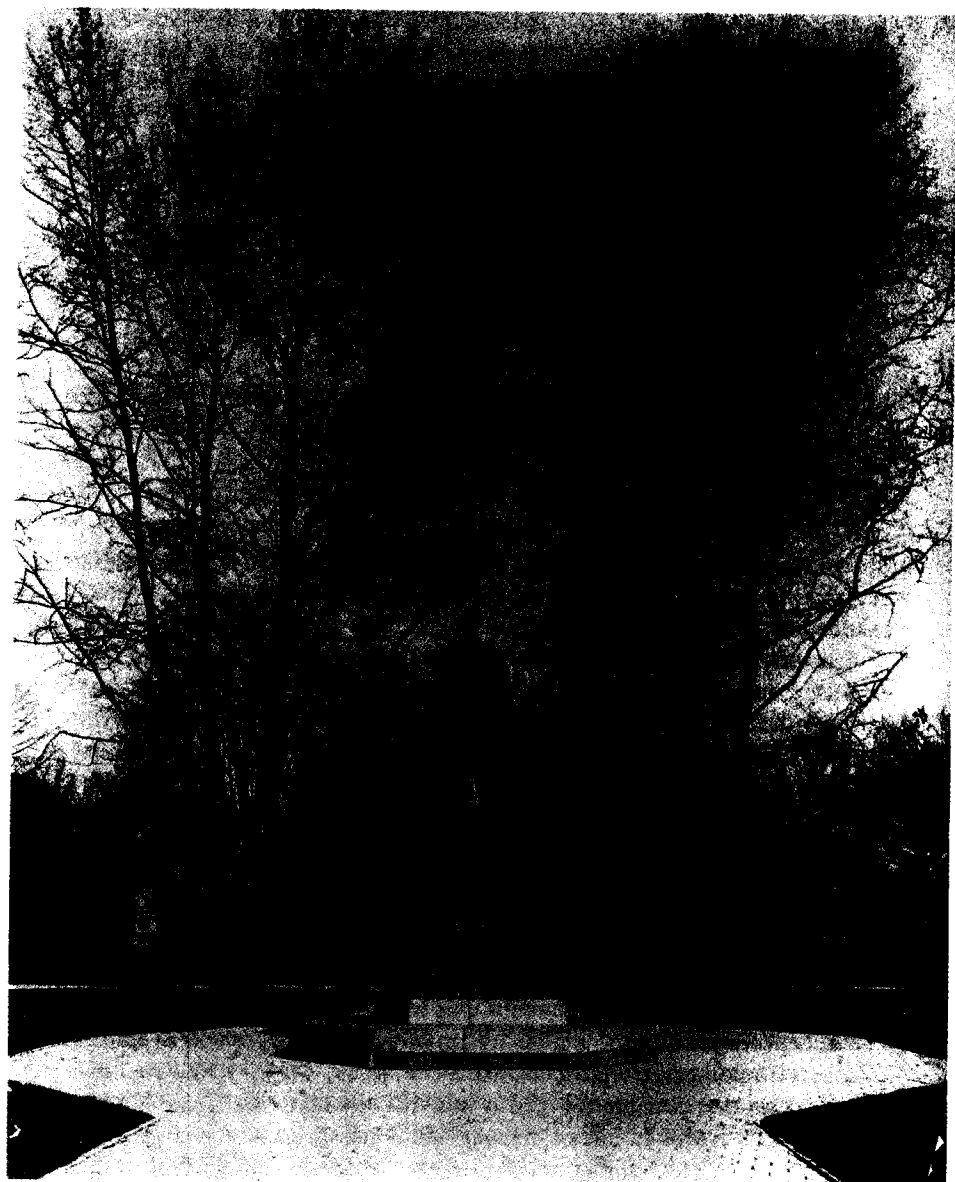
Though sculpture was considered essential to both the artistic and the expressive aims of the monument, its possibilities were nevertheless highly restricted. Meaning had to be compressed into a narrow compass: the language of pose, gesture, expression, attributes, and accessories. When faced with the task of representing the significance of complex

events, sculptors tended to condense expression into a few standard sculptural formulas. Consider the rather elaborate explanation offered by Henry Kirke Brown for his simple figure of Lincoln, cloaked and holding a scroll [fig. 3.6]:

In any view of the late rebellion the Southern interest in human slavery was its foundation and its motive power and, in consequence, the destruction of that institution by the President's proclamation was the final blow to it, and the basis upon which the war was closed. It has therefore appeared to me proper to represent the late President unfolding the sublime purpose of emancipation to the people—symbolized by the scroll he holds in his hands—upon which may be engraved the body of the proclamation and the finger of his right hand pointing to those ever living words "forever free." I have introduced as accessories two wreaths, indicating the army and the navy, and also the arms of the United States, as identifying his acts with the country. On the reverse side of the monument may be represented the arms of the City of Brooklyn.<sup>41</sup>

Brown does not have to justify the standing pose, which identifies Lincoln as a man of action, or the surrounding cloak, which adds a hint of classical drapery as well as mass to the body; these are the long familiar generic devices of portrait sculpture, and they were especially appropriate here because Lincoln's figure was thought to be ungainly and intrinsically unsculptural. Instead Brown begins with a sweeping (and acute) analysis of the historical significance of the war and then condenses that lesson into a simple sculptural device, the scroll in Lincoln's left hand highlighted by the pointing gesture in his right. Reading the monument to grasp Brown's lesson, we must move from the general meaning of the heroic body to the specific meaning of the scroll and finally to the decorative accessories on the pedestal that connect those meanings to the nation and to the locality sponsoring the monument. Though Brown frowned on abstract devices such as allegories, his hierarchical procedure for conveying complex historical lessons in a few simple steps was in all respects exemplary.

The repertoire of signifying devices in portrait sculpture was so limited that certain solutions were continually recycled. Thus virtually all the Lincoln statues erected in the 1860s and 1870s—standing figure holding scroll, seated figure in act of writing—had precedents in one previous sculptural subject, the figure of George Washington.<sup>42</sup> While critics seemed to demand the clarity and conventionality of such sculptural language, they also deplored its repetitious banality. Norton believed that very few sculptors had the talent to carry off portrait sculpture successfully, and Howells found the typical sculptural solutions so impoverished that he could cite only the example of the *Freedman* as an alternative. The basic problem was how to make the subject of contemporary



3.6 Henry Kirke Brown, Lincoln Monument, 1869, Prospect Park, Brooklyn.

man convincingly sculptural, especially when he no longer looked or dressed like the canonical models of the body from antiquity. For sculptors and critics Lincoln was the very exemplar of this disparity: his figure was too tall and bony, his physiognomy craggy, his clothing a shambles. Summing up the standard opinions, critic Marianna Griswold Van Rensselaer wrote that "in physical structure and attire he might have seemed almost the embodiment of the sculpturally impossible."<sup>43</sup> How was a sculptor to produce anything eloquent from such intractable material?

For some sculptors and some critics, the black body held that promise of eloquence. Like Lincoln the black man was not canonical, but unlike Lincoln his contemporary likeness was not yet fixed, his identity not yet defined by conventional types of pose and gesture and attribute. In its very indeterminacy the black body was liberating. It opened up possibilities for commemorative sculpture that the figure of Lincoln alone could not contain, which explains why the conventional single-figure formula for Lincoln justified so cogently by Brown failed to satisfy many sculptors, including Brown himself.

The aesthetic problems of commemorative sculpture cannot be separated from the more obviously political pressures inherent in this public medium. The dividing line between the aesthetic and the political is in fact difficult to define since the generic characteristics of heroic sculpture themselves carry profoundly political significance. The whole notion of history as a tale of great men is made palpably glorious in the statues of heroes; that glory works to marginalize cultural constructions of the past that might represent other groups and other categories of historical experience. The intertwining of heroic history and heroic sculpture is precisely what Brown took for granted in his discussion of the Brooklyn statue. The choice of Lincoln as the commemorative focus, and the representation of him as a heroic body, rested on presuppositions which were so self-evident that they surely did not strike the sculptor as politically charged. But within that undisputed framework important political dilemmas still arose and intruded into the consciousness of the public sculptor, all the more so because the sculptor, unlike say a writer of history, had to secure the approval of a commissioning body and the public it claimed to represent.

Nowhere was this more true than in the field of monuments to Lincoln. After his death dozens of monument associations formed in cities across the country and competed with one another for funds and legitimacy. In addition to the local associations, there were at least four groups going by the name of National Lincoln Monument Association or Lincoln National Monument Association, all vying in public to stake out this preeminent commemorative territory.<sup>44</sup> This outbreak of commemorative fever was unprecedented in American history. Certainly nothing comparable

had taken place after the Revolutionary War or after Washington's death. There was of course an extraordinary confluence of events that helps account for this: the first presidential assassination in the United States, coming right on the heels of a traumatic civil war—the bloodiest war in American history before or since. The monument campaigns of 1865–66 cast their scope over the whole historical panorama; they sought to commemorate not simply the figure of Lincoln but the era he helped to define.<sup>45</sup> In effect they sought to give some shape to the incredible events of the previous years, which had changed the destiny of the nation and the personal lives of everyone in it. But in the process of seeking closure through commemoration they opened up questions about the present. The various associations and the sculptors vying for their commissions were forced to imagine, articulate, and embody a Lincoln for the post-Lincoln nation—a historical founder for what the new nation had come to be, or was in the process of becoming.

For sculptors thrust into this momentous task, the subject of the emancipated, or emancipating, black body held enormous promise on both aesthetic and political fronts. It offered a means at once of transcending the formulaic solutions of portrait sculpture and of connecting Lincoln's presidency with the new order apparently dawning in Reconstruction. Yet the subject held risks that were equally impressive. Against the strong tradition of dehumanizing representation in both popular and scientific media, the sculptors of emancipation threatened to legitimize the black body. Making the African American body a monumental subject would alter its marginality, would make African Americans newly visible and historically significant in the physical and cultural landscape. What was at stake fundamentally was the notion of an interracial monument. Such a monument was bound to be read not simply as an image of Lincoln's historical achievement but as a representation—literally a personification—of the new interracial order emerging after slavery.

THE first interracial monument dealing with emancipation actually appeared just on the eve of the war, as the national election campaign got into swing. This was a marble relief panel located in a cemetery in Pittsburgh on the tomb of Charles Avery, a wealthy industrialist who was also famous as a philanthropist dedicated to antislavery causes (figs. 3.7, 3.8). The panel is the first known instance of African American representation in marble or bronze. Designed by an obscure New York sculptor, Louis Verhaegan, for a town that was hardly a cultural center, the work was easy to miss. Although it was described effusively in the black newspaper *Christian Recorder* in 1869, the monument soon enough fell into oblivion.<sup>46</sup> Cemetery monuments, in general, occupied a marginal zone; Norton, for example, specifically excluded them from the category of the



3.7-8 Louis Verhaegen,  
Charles Avery  
Monument, 1860,  
Allegheny Cemetery,  
Pittsburgh.  
*Below:* Detail of  
relief panel.



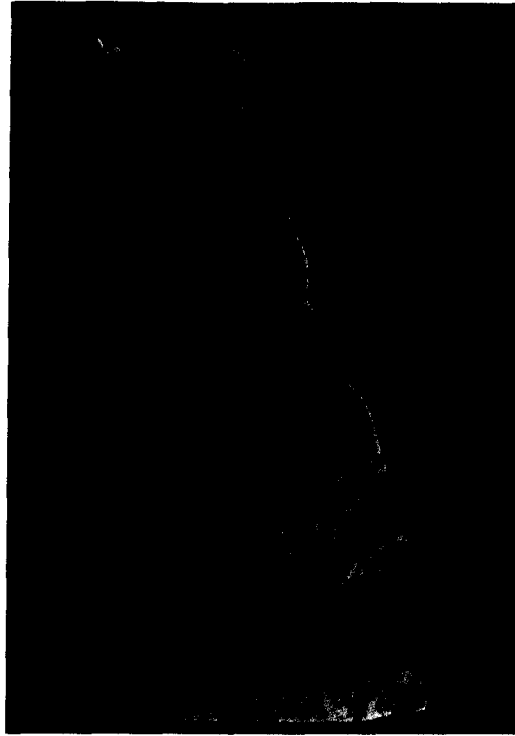
public because they were usually sponsored by families for themselves. Avery's tomb was not a family affair, but the project of several important Pennsylvania Republicans who obviously intended to make a public statement. They lavished money on the project even though Avery himself had explicitly requested a modest burial, and by locating the tomb in the most prominent site of Pittsburgh's fashionable garden cemetery they created what was probably the first public monument in the region. The marble panel on the front of the pedestal has long been severely mutilated, but the early description and photographs indicate that in its original state the figure of Avery orchestrated an emancipation narrative. Avery had founded a black school in Pittsburgh and supported black missionary work in Africa. Consequently the panel represents a series of black figures changing from nude to clothed, downcast to upright; they are progressing from an abject state of slavery through education to the role of African missionary. Avery culminates the narrative, waving a Bible in one hand and pointing with the other to a ship that will take the black missionaries under his wing to Africa. It is a narrative of uplift from slavery achieved by white benefactors and Christian education, a narrative whose ultimate end was the uplift of Africa itself. On the great political question of abolition, the panel offered no obvious answer; certainly it could be read as abolitionist but it could just as easily be interpreted instead as a plug for colonization, the scheme advanced by Lincoln among others for the deportation of American blacks to Africa.<sup>47</sup> The panel seems to have been designed to appeal to a broad spectrum of conservative and radical antislavery viewpoints, precisely the coalition which the Republican Party was trying to put together for the 1860 election.

Although there is no reason to think that the Avery Monument was known to sculptors outside Pittsburgh, it prefigured the earliest efforts to find a sculptural solution to the postwar problem of Lincoln and emancipation. Like the Avery panel, these early solutions transformed the idea of emancipation into a personalized narrative of racial uplift orchestrated by the white hero. One simple image recurred often. This was the image of Lincoln standing above, and lifting or blessing, a crouching black figure below. When asked in 1866 to propose a design for a Lincoln monument in Philadelphia, John Rogers, the sculptor of small-scale genre groups, replied that "the design that strikes me without having had time to think of it much, would be to represent [Lincoln] as just risen from writing, and as receiving with one hand a petition from a crouching negro, whom he is raising with the other."<sup>48</sup> It is interesting that this was Rogers's first instinct, as if the image sprang from the most deeply ingrained assumptions about race and slavery. Of course by this time such images had already materialized and were circulating in popular prints, issued by Currier and Ives among others (fig. 3.2) Sculptors with more

time to think and work on the problem also arrived at the same two-figure solution. Henry Kirke Brown, Randolph Rogers, and Thomas Ball all went so far as to produce models that were considered seriously by monument committees; as we shall see, only Ball's was ever erected.

The kneeling or crouching black slave refers us back once again to the abolitionist emblem, "Am I not a man and a brother?" We have already discussed the physical abasement of the figure, his contact with the ground. But the pose also establishes a peculiar relationship with the audience consuming the image and repeating its rhetorical question: the audience becomes the imaginary object of the slave's petition, the potential intercessor standing to receive the pleadings of the lowly. It is not much of a leap to materialize this unseen intercessor in the figure of Lincoln, thereby completing the image and bringing its narrative to closure. Yet that act of completion has enormous consequences for the representation of emancipation.

Consider the model proposed in 1866 or 1867 by Brown for a Lincoln monument in New York. The only surviving photograph shows a standing Lincoln pointing to heaven with his right hand and gesturing with his left toward a partially nude black male who kneels at his feet (fig. 3.9).<sup>49</sup> Lincoln looks down with a kindly gaze while the freed slave, his hands clasped over one knee in gratitude, looks back up. The upward tilt of his head exaggerates the receding slope of his forehead and thereby calls to mind the notorious facial angle used by racial theorists to measure intellectual inferiority. (In the abolitionist emblem this effect was avoided, whether intentionally or not.) Brown's kneeling figure seems oddly out of scale, only about two-thirds of Lincoln's height if imagined at full extension. Too small to be a man, too muscular to be a mere boy, he perhaps reads as an adolescent. He is barefoot, shirtless, slung with a canteen and some indeterminate drapery; his outfit seems intended to suggest the condition of a young "contraband," perhaps already in the unofficial service of the Union army. Whatever the precise status of the slave figure, Brown has rendered him less "manly" than Ward's "lusty negro" in order to emphasize more clearly the oppositions between Lincoln and the slave. The nudity of the *Freedman* was double-edged, a sign at once of ideal heroism and social deprivation. But the nudity of Brown's figure reads differently when juxtaposed with the clothed figure of Lincoln, standard-bearer of civilization. The ideal aspect evaporates and the black body reads more simply as difference, as lack. This contrast is reinforced by the multiple layers of Lincoln's outfit, each adding a literal and metaphorical weight to the figure, culminating in the massive cloak clasped around his neck that spreads behind him to create a sense of columnar stability and stature. The oppositions of posture, pose, dress, size, physiognomy, and, finally, race all combine to lock the two figures into unambiguous roles.



3.9 Henry Kirke Brown, model for monument to Lincoln, 1866–67, plaster (now lost).

To Lincoln belongs human agency and divine favor; the slave is left only with gratitude and potential. Lincoln is the benevolent white authority who mediates between God and the lowly slave, while the recipient of that kindness represents a thankful, though undeveloped, race.

Brown's solution not only transforms Lincoln into "Massa" but conceptualizes emancipation as an act of manumission orchestrated by the Massa. *Manumission*—the master's voluntary release of individuals from bondage—was a rite stretching back to antiquity that did not in fact sever the relationship between master and slave but usually perpetuated it in another guise. Patterson in his cross-cultural study argues that manumission was a gift exchange in which the master gave the slave the gift of freedom in exchange for gratitude, patronage, and often continuing service from the ex-slave. In many cases the master continued to function as the ex-slave's authority figure and mediator with outside society. In the United States manumission was practiced but it occurred relatively rarely, generally only with slaves most likely to retain ties of dependence.<sup>50</sup>

Brown's two-figure model can easily be seen to illustrate this relationship of master and slave in the act of manumission. Lincoln stands as the master figure who gives the slave the benefits of freedom and divine guidance, and the slave properly kneels to show gratitude and a recognition of his benefactor's higher authority. In the ancient Roman ceremony the slave crouched beneath an official who bestowed freedom with the light touch of a rod.<sup>51</sup>

The reason for this tradition of placing the manumitted slave in poses of obeisance in both rite and image was to reinforce the structures of authority and submission threatened by the act of manumission. The representation of the act upheld the power relations of slavery even as the act itself freed individuals from slavery; obviously such representation was necessary since manumission took place within the system of slavery and had to be reconciled with it. All of this should underscore why the adaptation of the formula to commemorate Lincoln was so much at odds with the principle of emancipation. The case for Lincoln's historical importance rested on the abolition of slavery itself and the permanent state of dependence it fostered; the whole point of emancipation was to make slaves independent citizens, participants in the American contract. Brown's design and others like it reinforced the notion of the freed slaves as a dependent class, beholden to the white authority that had generously bestowed freedom.

Brown and his abolitionist colleagues would probably have objected that such a reading runs counter to their intentions. Typically, abolitionists argued that blacks were not naturally dependent but that slavery had plunged them in a degraded condition, which emancipation could not immediately reverse. According to the *Freedmen's Record*, an antislavery organ published in Boston, "the freedman compared to the educated white man is a child needing instruction and guidance."<sup>52</sup> In this way of thinking Lincoln's act could be seen as the beginning of a national effort to "raise" the slaves from their infantilized state to the new standard required of free citizens. Thus the juxtaposition of standing Lincoln and kneeling slave was probably meant to suggest a narrative of uplift from slavery rather than continuing dependence after slavery. The problem with this argument is that it takes no account of the genre of commemorative sculpture in which this image would be created and read. A monument fixes a permanent image meant to define a historical event for all time. In marble or bronze, the black youth kneeling beneath Lincoln would not get up or grow up, or change the angle of his head, or put on a shirt or a pair of shoes. Even if we accept the abolitionist narrative of degradation and elevation—which certainly has problems of its own—the composition in monumental form works to disrupt the sense of historical flow and to freeze the narrative in a premature closure. The closure



3.10 Randolph Rogers, *Lincoln and the Emancipated Slave*, circa 1866, plaster.

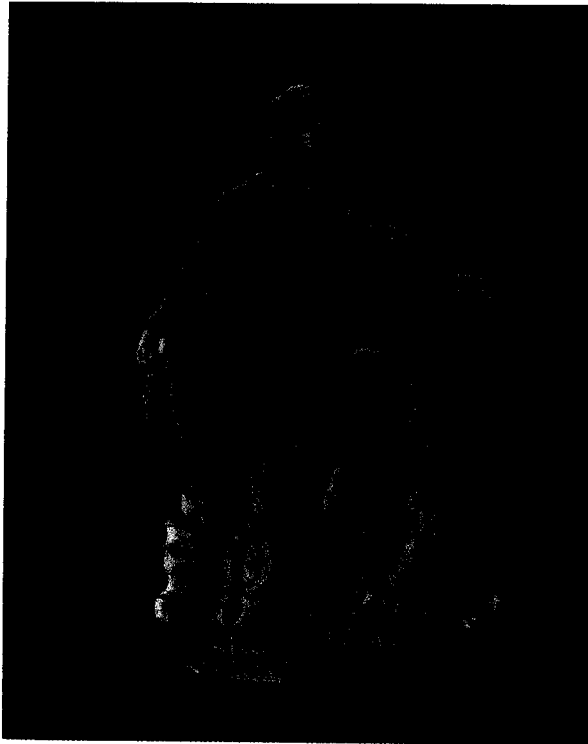
left by Brown's composition is the inscription of radical inequality, infantilized dependence on the part of the slave and the black race he represents and masterly benevolence on the part of Lincoln and the white race he represents.

While Brown reinforced this opposition between the two figures by contrasting age and maturity, expatriate sculptor Randolph Rogers devised a polarity on the axis of gender. The design he proposed in 1867 for the Philadelphia monument to Lincoln is the only known example of a female slave paired with the president. The design has been lost but a related plaster model does survive which, in the particulars of the two figures, is probably very close to the Philadelphia version<sup>53</sup> (fig. 3.10). This model features a standing Lincoln gazing down upon a crouching, seminude woman whom he is lifting by the wrist with his left hand. Wearing a bandanna wrapped in the shape of a liberty cap (the *pileus* worn by manumitted slaves in Rome), she gazes back up at Lincoln as she steadies herself with her left hand. The physical touch between the two figures is extremely significant. His hold of her wrist—rather than her hand—

erases any suggestion of romantic gallantry, which Rogers surely wanted to avoid; it places the action outside the familiar rubric of lady-gentleman contact. The gesture suits more the interaction of parent and child. Lincoln's clutch in effect replaces the manacle still visible on the woman's left wrist, the hold of the slaveowner exchanged for the hold of the emancipator. The other significant feature of the model is the drapery. The sculptor arranges Lincoln's coat and his limbs in a series of crisp, gently undulating verticals, while the slave's skirt is disposed in a repeating pattern of V-shaped folds, which visually anchor her to the ground. Hence the oppositions suggested by gender, pose, and gesture are extended to the costume and its abstract sculptural patterns.

Rogers's design insists even more blatantly than Brown's on the subordination of freed slave to emancipator *qua* manumitter. While the relationship is neatly condensed in the extraordinary hand gesture at the center of the composition, the controlling fact of the design is the juxtaposition of gender. No longer is the pairing a sculptural rumination on black manhood and its possibilities for development. The slave's nudity, for example, now takes on a new meaning. Her exposed breasts add a dimension of sexual allure and vulnerability absent in Brown's design. The narrative of elevation also has a new cast. The black woman could not become even in theory Lincoln's equal since women as a class were stripped of political rights. Even if we imagined the group transformed by the slave's rising to a "civilized" status—which means refusing to accept the closure already enforced by pose, gesture, and dress—the free black would still remain outside the polity by virtue of her gender alone. By deflecting the narrative from the complex of issues surrounding black masculinity and its social and political rights, the sculptor seriously undermines the prevailing abolitionist rhetoric of elevation.

One more design of note was proposed for both the New York and the Philadelphia projects, this one by another expatriate in Italy, Thomas Ball<sup>54</sup> (fig. 3.11). Ball's slave is once again male, stripped to just a loincloth and a liberty cap. The figure is bound by manacles but the broken chains that had connected them lie near his feet. Behind him, on Lincoln's left, is a whipping post, the archetypal sign of slavery's cruelty. The original plaster model, which was reproduced in studio photographs and stereographs, departs in a few interesting respects from the designs of Brown and Rogers. Lincoln does not touch the slave but reaches his left hand out over the man's body in a sort of benediction gesture; his right hand grasps a shield resting on the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>55</sup> The slave does not look back up at Lincoln but stares out into space. Ball's slave is a man, fully grown, and his muscular presence in the composition foregrounds the issue of black masculinity. More than any of the other models, Ball's seemed to pose the problem this way: would the slave stand up and



Reproduced according to Act of Congress in the year 1867, by A. A. Childs & Co., in the Child's Office  
of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts.

**THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL.**

From the Bronze Statuette Group, by Thomas Ball.

"And upon this act I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and  
the gracious favor of Almighty God."

Published Aug. 25, 1867, by A. A. Childs & Co., 127 Tremont St., Boston.

3.11 Thomas Ball, stereograph of plaster model for monument  
to Lincoln, circa 1866.

become a man and, if so, what kind of man? Would he come to hold the conventional prerogatives that defined white manhood—in other words, would the sameness of his gender overcome the difference of race—or would both his rights and his manhood be called into question?

These were the very questions that underlay the whole legislative agenda of Reconstruction: they defined the problem of equality. Ball had to supply the answers in the peculiar language of sculpture, embedded as it was in the form and action of the human body. His design seems to embody the abolitionist ideal of uplift, with its tantalizing promise of manhood and equality. But his narrative is less straightforward than

either Brown's or Rogers's, and the meaning of the slave's body is more difficult to read. In particular the slave's pose is quite peculiar, as anyone would soon find out by trying to hold it. Ball himself, according to his recollections written several decades later, took the pose and modeled the group in clay from a kneeling position by the use of mirrors. By so doing he "could appreciate exactly the position I required, and could not only see, but feel the action of each muscle."<sup>56</sup> If we as viewers follow the same procedure and try to approximate this uncomfortable position, we discover at once that the body is not in the process of standing up, as casual observers might assume. The figure crouches uneasily, leg muscles tensed, the left arm steadying his balance instead of pushing the body upward. To arrive at this strange and complicated pose, Ball must surely have studied two widely known prototypes on display in Florence, where he lived and worked. One was Bandinelli's group of *Hercules and Cacus* from 1534, located outdoors near Michelangelo's *David* in the Palazzo Vecchio. The figure of Cacus, who is about to receive a death blow from the hero above, also crouches on one knee, his head strained upward and his right arm steadying himself in a similar gesture. Of course the narrative energy of the group is entirely different, and Cacus's pathetically twisted torso has no parallel in Ball's design. Yet it is worth noting that this extreme image of lethal domination could supply much of the basic body language of Ball's solution.

The other prototype is the *Arrotino*, the one classical model of any relevance to Ball's problem (fig. 3.12). Often identified as a slave figure in the mid-nineteenth century, the *Arrotino* also appealed to racial theorists like Blumenbach as an example of a barbarian, an ethnic other.<sup>57</sup> Thus Ball had many reasons for appropriating the figure, but what is striking is how he has revised it. In the *Arrotino* the distribution of the body's weight is much different: the figure sits back on his right heel and stabilizes himself with his left foot planted in front; neither knee touches the ground. Ball's slave, with his weight thrown more forward on the knee and his back more horizontal, must exert considerable strain just to hold the head up as he does. The narrative thus shifts subtly but crucially. Unlike the *Arrotino*, Ball's slave must have been in abject misery, his face dropped toward the ground, only an instant before. What we see is the moment after, when the man has just raised his head as if awakening to the new fact of his freedom. It seems that Ball was trying to represent, in the language of the body, the very first moment of emancipation, that precise instant when the slave, still in an abject position, realizes his chains have been broken—sundered magically from above—and lifts his head in recognition. Needless to say Lincoln is the agent of this transformation: the slave is acted upon rather than acting in his own right. Yet the



3.12 *Arrotino*, Hellenistic marble, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

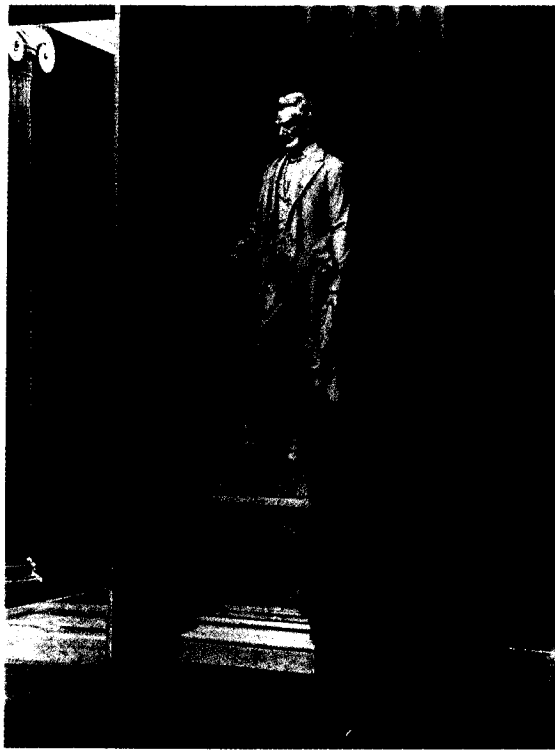
slave does not respond to Lincoln but instead to his own new state of being. It is a narrative of coming to consciousness, of rebirth, set into motion by the unseen action of the white savior above.<sup>58</sup>

In one crucial respect Ball's design departs from the traditional manumission formula. The model does not represent a personal relationship between emancipator and slave; there is no direct interaction based on gratitude or patronage or dependence. As commentators then pointed out, the design is meant to be more poetic or ideal.<sup>59</sup> Lincoln's act of abolition and the slave's initial awakening are really two separate narratives brought together here to suggest cause and effect, yet without recourse to the realist fiction of an interaction between great man and lowly slave. The idealization of their relationship allows the slave figure a small internal space for self-consciousness, whereas the other designs forced the slave figures to direct their attention entirely to Lincoln. But that idealization also magnifies the unbridgeable distance between the two figures: Lincoln becomes a messianic figure of total consciousness while the slave is reduced to a newborn, just on the threshold of being. In the abolitionist narrative of degradation and elevation, the slave's ascent has hardly begun, only hinted by the lifting of the head.

Some observers later remarked that the slave figure itself was ideal, which was their way of observing that the physiognomy was less noticeably Africanized.<sup>60</sup> The old notion that the African body was intrinsically anti-ideal died hard. It is true that Ball began with a life model, presumably black, but rejected him in favor of self-modeling; the resulting physiognomy has some of the conventional cues of blackness familiar from visual representation (tightly curled hair, broadened nose and lips) but still remains racially indistinct. Ball in his autobiography recounted that the original model "was not good enough to compensate for the unpleasantness of being obliged to conduct him through our apartment. . . . As I did not require an Apollo," Ball explained, he used himself.<sup>61</sup> Ball's nonchalant reference to Apollo—accepted standard of male beauty—betrays the real distance between his conception of the black body and Ward's for the *Freedman*: for Ward the ancient canon and the black body occupied the same universe. Ball's visceral discomfort with the living black model is repeated by other white sculptors working on the African American subject for public sculpture. Brown referred to his model for the Lincoln group as "that thriving 'nigger'" and wrote his wife that he did not expect him to "show his miserable muzzle here again."<sup>62</sup> These comments point to an obvious disparity between the artists' informal characterizations of real black people and the formal narratives of elevation in which the black subject was supposed to take part. But the attitudes betrayed here were common even among dedicated abolitionists, and they help account for why each design insisted so systematically on the opposition between Lincoln and the freed slave.

Despite the great ambitions of these local monument campaigns to represent the whole historical era, in the end all the local projects through the 1880s resorted to the traditional single-figure portrait statue. None of the monument committees chose the designs we have been discussing, even though these designs were obvious attempts to connect Lincoln with the broader historical phenomenon of emancipation. In both the New York and Philadelphia projects the final designs represented emancipation merely as an attribute of Lincoln's fame. Brown's monument has a standing Lincoln, in the role of statesman, holding the scroll signifying the Emancipation Proclamation. This formula would be used over and over again, most notably in the Vinnie Ream statue of Lincoln commissioned for the U.S. Capitol in 1866 (fig. 3.13)—the only truly "official" Lincoln statue of the nineteenth century. Rogers's work instead has a seated Lincoln, in the role of creative genius, as if composing the celebrated document.

The precise reasons for the dismissal of the earlier designs are now obscure. We have it on the authority of Brown's son and biographer that the kneeling-slave design "was rejected by the committee because of fear that the figure of a negro in a public monument would arouse the resent-



3.13 Vinnie Ream [Hoxie], *Abraham Lincoln*, 1871, marble, U.S. Capitol.

ment of the Irish citizens.”<sup>63</sup> If the story is true it shows that, despite the clear subordination of the black figure to the white one in the design, the sheer power of the medium of public sculpture to honor and ennoble its subjects overwhelmed the formal aspects of this composition. It should be remembered that, except for the obscure case of the Avery Monument, the figure of the black had not appeared anywhere in American public sculpture, and the mere appearance in any pose or guise was therefore enormously significant and threatening. This was precisely the point in time when white ethnic groups were beginning to mobilize and sponsor monuments representing themselves and their place in American society. The Irish in New York could point to an absence of Irish figures in public sculpture; the idea that their city might erect a monument to African Americans before erecting a monument to Irish Americans might well have galled them.

Although the information about Brown’s design is uncorroborated, it would seem to speak volumes about the severe obstacles facing any kind

of black representation in public sculpture—even when the subject seemed to cry out for it and even when the sculptor was careful to install a racial hierarchy in the representation. If even the manumission narrative, with its reinscription of the power relations and racial order of slavery, could not win the approval of a white public, what could? How much safer for sculptor and sponsor alike simply to include a small device like a scroll signifying the act of emancipation. Besides, the emancipated themselves could easily be imagined without actually being represented. In Vinnie Ream's version for the Capitol (fig. 3.13), a slight downward tilt of Lincoln's head was all that was required to suggest the presence of passive slaves. In the most widely reprinted description of the statue, the writer imagines Lincoln looking down "with anxious solicitude," ready to use his ample cloak to protect the now invisible bodies of "the defenceless beings who are to receive the inestimable boon of freedom."<sup>64</sup>

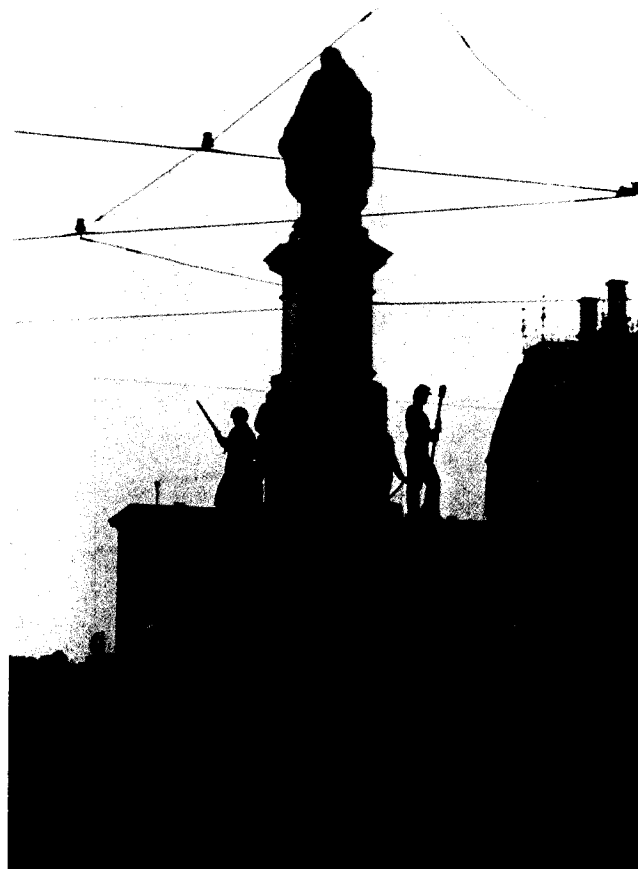
We know that the African American body represented a fundamental threat to public sculpture. But it was still possible for monument sponsors to contemplate African American representation if it was suitably subordinated to the claims advanced for white heroism. The Philadelphia case, which is the most amply documented of the local projects, is the best example. The committee there originally invited a few chosen sculptors to submit two designs, one for a conventional single-figure monument and the other for a two-figure group consisting of Lincoln and an allegory, the whole to represent Lincoln "as the defender of our nationality, or as the author of the Emancipation Proclamation."<sup>65</sup> There is no reason to believe that the committee at this point was even contemplating a black figure. Yet the only two designs the committee received, by Randolph Rogers and Thomas Ball, both substituted a slave figure in the place of the allegory. Ball's design came recommended by none other than Hiram Powers, and had already gotten some favorable publicity in the New York press and elsewhere.<sup>66</sup> We do not know why the committee rejected Ball's model, for only its response to Rogers's design survives (in draft form). But here the committee made clear that even though a black figure hadn't originally been contemplated, it was "entirely satisfied" with his crouching female slave figure and "would not have any of its details or its relation with [the] principal figure altered."<sup>67</sup>

This response is all the more striking given that the letter criticized almost everything else about Rogers's design—the stiff pose of Lincoln, his narrow shoulders, the tightly buttoned coat, and especially the inclusion of a demon being crushed beneath Lincoln's right foot to represent the vanquishing of rebellion. The committee thought it important to represent the strength of the Union "particularly as it is shown by the destruction of slavery when slavery threatened its dissolution." But it wanted the idea embodied in a form less likely to cause offense to the

defeated side since the monument was to last for ages and the time was coming, it hoped, when "fonder feelings" between the two sides would reemerge.<sup>68</sup> This argument is notable for two reasons. First, the achievement of abolition is subsumed under the achievement of Union, a priority that Lincoln himself maintained. More important, it recognizes the potential for disparity between a permanent image and the changeable social conditions and sentiments surrounding that image. The white South and its many "Copperhead" sympathizers in the North (Philadelphia included) would not want to see themselves forever represented as demons ground beneath the martyr's feet. What might do for a popular print created in the passion of the moment would not do for a monument meant to last in perpetuity. Of course the same logic is not applied to the figure of the black. Would the emancipated like to see themselves forever represented stripped and subservient, even as they were supposed to be raising themselves up through education and free labor? Wouldn't the time soon come when the representation became obsolete, and didn't that outcome deserve as much hope as "fonder feelings" between victor and vanquished? The unqualified approval of Rogers's freed slave indicates two interrelated attitudes: first, that within the committee's notion of the "public" for the monument, African Americans had much less standing than their white political enemies; second, that the idea of black subordination was so deeply rooted in their minds that a future equality could not even be imagined.

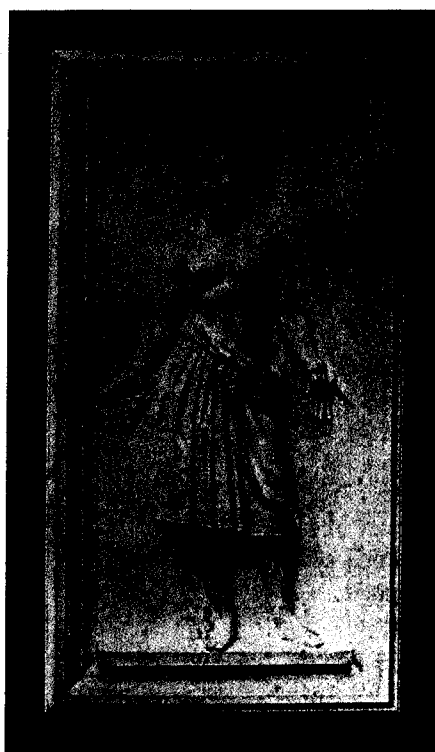
In the end it is not clear why the committee settled for a single-figure design. Money may have been a factor, since the dual-figure design obviously would have cost more. Rogers apparently proposed the seated Lincoln himself after the severe reaction to his first design. One of the committee members later expressed regrets; after visiting Ball's studio in Italy, he wrote back enthusiastically about Ball's model, which had been revised somewhat and cast in bronze, but by then the decision to accept Rogers's new design had already been made.<sup>69</sup> Whatever the specific reasoning was, it almost certainly did not turn on the question of the black figure. The committee seemed to understand and to accept without question the opposition of Lincoln and the slave, along with the complex of attitudes that opposition implied.

Unexpectedly, then, the first image of emancipation appeared not in a monument to Lincoln but in a soldier monument—the very type of memorial Howells had had in mind for the *Freedman*. Yet when the image did appear, it was not the primary focus as Howells had intended, or as the Lincoln sculptors had envisaged in their projects. It was a subsidiary relief panel embedded within a huge multfigured monument which the state of Rhode Island erected to its soldiers in 1871 in the capital city of



3.14 Randolph Rogers, Rhode Island Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, 1871, Providence.

Providence (fig. 3.14). The sculptor once again was Randolph Rogers, and he initially proposed a design in 1866 shortly before he began working on the Philadelphia project.<sup>70</sup> That initial design laid out all the elements of the final monument—the figure of America triumphant at the top, the four servicemen around the middle, the allegorical bas-reliefs and name plaques below—except that none of the four reliefs dealt with emancipation. By 1870 the subject of one of the reliefs had changed from “History” to “Emancipation,” and Rogers had sent a photograph of a preliminary version in plaster (fig. 3.15).<sup>71</sup> The figure was a female slave, nude from the waist up, identifiable as African American by the full lips and tightly curled hair. Displaying with open palms the manacles and



3.15 Randolph Rogers,  
model of emancipation  
relief, 1870, plaster  
(now lost).

broken chains still clinging to her wrists, she looked upward, as if to meet the gaze of God or some other unseen higher authority. She was, in effect, a standing version of the crouching figure Rogers had contemplated for Philadelphia. Distinguished from the other three allegories by her "color," she represented a unique interjection of racial difference into the most conventionalized kind of sculpture there was—the allegorical. In the final version, erected a year later, Rogers moderated the nudity and changed the face slightly, but retained the same pose and content. When the monument was dedicated, the high-relief figure on the back of the pedestal was the first figure of an African American on a monument outside a cemetery. Despite its exceptional status, it has received virtually no attention, local or otherwise, and it was still misidentified as "History" in the most recent guide to the city's public sculpture.<sup>72</sup>

Rogers went on later to create one more subsidiary image of emancipation, in a soldier monument erected in Detroit (1872–81).<sup>73</sup> As in Providence, emancipation was one of four female allegorical figures, the only one made to look African American. In Detroit, the figure is in the round

and therefore more difficult to ignore. She is not a slave but in every respect the equal of the other three allegories who, like her, hold out wreaths above soldier figures below. It is only her hair and physiognomy that distinguishes her and that associates her allegorically with emancipation. This figure was so exceptional that its allegorical status was even called into question. African American audiences reappropriated it as a portrait of escaped slave Sojourner Truth, who had lived and died in Michigan. According to *Ebony* magazine, "the sculptor denied that he intended to portray Sojourner, but the public seized on the 'African-type' figure as a fitting monument" in itself. For many years the figure was reproduced in black publications, one of the only works of public sculpture they could claim as their own.<sup>74</sup>

African American audiences could also admire a work by Austro-Italian sculptor Francesco Pezzicar that was sent by the Austrian government to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. It was a bronze figure of a standing black man, chest swelling and arms outstretched, holding in one hand a crumpled sheet signifying the Emancipation Proclamation. The figure was based on a European prototype, a commemorative medal struck in England in 1834 to celebrate the British act of emancipation. In freestanding sculpture such a work had never been seen before: a vital, active, erect black man reveling in his own freedom. There was no subtlety about it; it was a one-dimensional historical fantasy, unmarked by the ambiguity and uncertainty of Ward's *Freedman*. But it was also a bold assertion of political and spiritual independence. Made by a foreign sculptor for temporary exhibition, it had little chance of finding a permanent home on a public monument in the United States.<sup>75</sup>

THE burgeoning new interest in public monuments, which had seemed to promise a vast space for the representation of emancipation, yielded little in the end beyond the conventional formulas of heroic representation. The experiment of the *Freedman* proved impossible to emulate in monumental sculpture. We know that the logic of commemoration imposed heavy constraints on the subject of emancipation. To imagine emancipation, for the most part, was to imagine Lincoln. But even within this narrow compass sculptors still tried to innovate, to transcend the prosaic domain of portrait statuary and create an image that would speak to what the nation was in the process of becoming. Their most common innovation—the pairing of a standing Lincoln with a kneeling slave in what I have described as a narrative of manumission—turned out to be more of a look backward than a look forward; it embodied deeply paternalistic aspects of abolitionism. Ultimately even this solution was bypassed in favor of safer, and more conventional, signifiers of emanci-

pation located on the body of the white hero; the black body melted back into invisibility. The image of Lincoln with a scroll or a pen in hand carried no commentary on the status of blacks in America or on the future of race relations in an emancipated world. Out of all this sculptural activity only one major monument to emancipation came to be erected, and the long history of how it emerged in public space is the subject of the following chapter.