CHAPTER FOUR

# FREEDOM'S MEMORIAL

ON THE NATIONAL STAGE, in the center of political power, a monument to "freedom" finally emerged. This was the Freedmen's Memorial to Abraham Lincoln, a project begun immediately after Lincoln's death and completed finally in 1876—neatly spanning the whole era of Reconstruction. Financed entirely by contributions from free blacks, the monument campaign was the most conspicuous attempt in public sculpture to capture the spirit of Reconstruction, to translate into the sculptural language of the human body principles of freedom that remained abstract and barely imaginable. While the nation attempted to redefine itself as a free interracial society, the Freedmen's Memorial—first on its own, then in concert with other national monument projects—sought to make the interracial nation a palpable reality in public space.

The commemorative projects discussed in the preceding chapter were more local in their scope, meant to boost the reputations of the big cities that sponsored them. The Freedmen's Memorial, and a few others like it, appealed explicitly to a larger collectivity, cutting across local and regional boundaries, and by doing so they opened up new possibilities for the imagination. The sponsors of national monuments were less likely to settle for a single-figure design and were more determined to realize grander ambitions, both in historical scope and artistic originality. It is in this arena that we see, for the first time, proposals for large-scale sculptural cycles devoted to African American history and emancipation. New possibilities opened up in part because locally defined constituencies like the Irish in New York had much less impact; the "public" was much bigger and more diffuse. Without the more clearly drawn parameters of local politics to fall back on, the makers of national monuments were forced in effect to invent their own public. But in that process of invention was the opening for real innovation. The right tactics could create room to nurture a public into existence that might bring something genuinely novel, something unpredictable, into public sculpture.

This effort was in itself a test of emancipation's strength. If historians have tended to focus on other tests, on measures of political or economic

rights, they have overlooked the more subtle structures that hold such measures in place. The task of imagining new forms of interracial sculpture and new national publics to legitimate them put direct pressure on the most profoundly embedded racial attitudes and concepts. Sculpture, as we have seen, mapped the racial terrain of the human body, where the hierarchy of difference clung most tenaciously. The question was whether a national monument to freedom could succeed in remapping the terrain of race in a genuinely liberating way. This monumental project was not simply an ornament to Reconstruction, but rather an enactment of the cultural change that the nation had to bring about. The grand designs of Reconstruction were unlikely to succeed without the fundamental change that emancipatory sculpture promised and demanded.

It is important to restore the sense of historical possibility at this moment in American sculpture because the final result of the Freedmen's campaign—Thomas Ball's monument in Washington, D.C.—seems so predictable in hindsight. An early twentieth-century photograph of it (fig. 4.1) hauntingly evokes the distance between the African American public and its monumental image, between the monument's claim to uplift and the condescension of its imagery. For the bronze freedman functions not as an exemplar for the rumpled youth staring up at it but as a foil through which white mastery is revealed. Ball's emancipated man is the very archetype of slavery: he is stripped, literally and figuratively, bereft of personal agency, social position, and accouterments of culture. Juxtaposed against the fully dressed, commanding figure of Lincoln, the black figure's nudity loses its heroic aspect and works instead as negation—most drastically a negation of the conventional markers of masculinity now monopolized by the white man above. Frozen forever in this unfortunate juxtaposition, the monument is not really about emancipation but about its opposite—domination. Ball's work hardly lived up to the great ambitions of the sponsors or to the even greater rhetoric of Reconstruction. Most disastrously, perhaps, the monument failed to speak to the experience of those who actually paid for it and made it possible. None of these failures was foreordained, however; no one in 1866 could have predicted that Ball's design would emerge triumphant from the profusion of schemes circulating at the time. By retracing the tortuous series of events—artistic, political, and sociological—that led unexpectedly to Ball's monument, we can recapture what was at stake at this pivotal point in national representation.

From its extraordinary and much-publicized origins, the campaign for the Freedmen's Memorial was mired in contradictions. The story begins after Lincoln's assassination with a five-dollar donation entrusted by an ex-slave named Charlotte Scott to her ex-master for a monument to the martyr-president. The local newspaper in Marietta, Ohio, instantly publi-

4.1 Thomas Ball, Freedmen's Memorial to Abraham Lincoln (Emancipation Monument), 1876, Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C.

cized the act, and others took notice. African Americans from the area apparently augmented Scott's gift and began to create a real fund, but this homegrown fund-raising effort was soon supplanted and erased by larger forces. Word of the original gift reached a Union general who thought "such a monument would have a history more grand and touching than any of which we have account," and he persuaded the Western Sanitary Commission of St. Louis—a volunteer war relief agency—to sponsor the project and "make it known to the freedmen."[1] The commission seized on Scott's offering as a model gesture of black gratitude, made doubly sentimental by its transmission through the bond of master and slave. In the first broadside for "Freedom's Memorial," the commission reported that an "old negro woman" gave the money "'to build a monument to good Massa Lincoln.'"[2] That image of black deference to white patronage then became reproduced in the institutional structure of the

campaign—and ultimately in the monument itself. African Americans, mostly soldiers, contributed the cash, while the white sponsors collected the money and decided how to spend it. There was never any possibility that the donors themselves might influence the design; the sponsors made clear that it was "the friends of the freedmen" who would "determine the character of the monument."[3]

After a few months $20,000 or so had been deposited with the Western Sanitary Commission, enough for a modest bronze statue. But a modest statue was not what the commissioners wanted; they were determined to erect nothing less than a great work of art. The commissioners let it be known that they were now working for $50,000 but actually hoping for much more, so that "the magnificence of the memorial may correspond to the distinguished excellence of the man." Toward that end they asked every freedman in the country to donate "one week's free work, or its equivalent."[4] They also redoubled their fund-raising efforts by appointing the distinguished black lawyer and activist John Mercer Langston to solicit contributions personally from African American communities in the South and Midwest. By this time, though, Andrew Johnson had vetoed the Freedmen's Bureau bill, and pessimism was already beginning to hurt the campaign. This did not stop the commissioners from adopting an elaborate design by expatriate sculptor Harriet Hosmer late in 1866, which they had exhibited in Boston and proclaimed in a published circular to be "the greatest achievement of modern art."[5]

As these few facts suggest, this was not a straightforward case of a monument to be erected by and for African Americans. The public for the monument was peculiarly fractured from the inception. The subscribing public—the black donors—were really addressing not their own but a separate public. They wanted to make a "dignified offering" (as Langston later put it) to the white public that constituted the civic realm; they wanted to demonstrate their own civic responsibility in a medium that brought notice and prestige. For them the grandeur of the design probably mattered little. As Frederick Douglass argued in the *Anglo-African*, no matter how humble the monument it "would express one of the holiest sentiments of the human heart."[6] The white sponsors, in turn, recast that "sentimental" civic project in the language of paternalism, making appeals to the freed slaves to "prove that they are capable of appreciating the greatness of their deliverance and of the sacrifice by which it has been sealed."[7] The sponsors, in other words, were not simply executing the wishes of their subscribing public. They were competing on a wider stage with other monuments to Lincoln, and they wanted theirs to outshine them all in artistic quality and emotional effect; their monument was supposed to capture the new era that seemed to be dawning with Reconstruction. And here is where the poor black donors played an indispensable

role. Driven by a gratitude the white audience could not match, they gave the sponsors' project a distinctive aura that ennobled and expanded the white artist's intention.

It is surprising that the Western Sanitary Commission came to sponsor the project at all because its members did not have credentials in the abolitionist movement. Any of the prewar abolitionist societies would have been a more likely choice. The project fell into the commission's lap because its relief work for the many thousands of black refugees in the western theater during the war had pushed the agency unexpectedly into dealing with freedmen's issues.[8] The eminent men from St. Louis who promoted the commission's work lived and prospered in a slave state, and they had in one way or the other accommodated to the local institution. The most outspoken opponent of slavery among them was the founder, Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, a leading Unitarian minister and college president. Yet, before the war, Eliot repudiated abolitionism as extremist and only favored gradual, compensated emancipation as a policy.[9] Wayman Crow, who was in the commissioners' circle and one of the most active in the monument campaign, was himself a slaveowner until 1853 when he manumitted his domestic servants. Harriet Hosmer was a close family friend of Crow and in his household came to have a benevolent view of slavery, which was only tempered years later under the influence of female abolitionist friends like Lydia Maria Child. Hosmer threw her energies into the "darkey monument" (as she sometimes referred to it) because she thought there lay her best chances of securing a major Lincoln commission.[10]

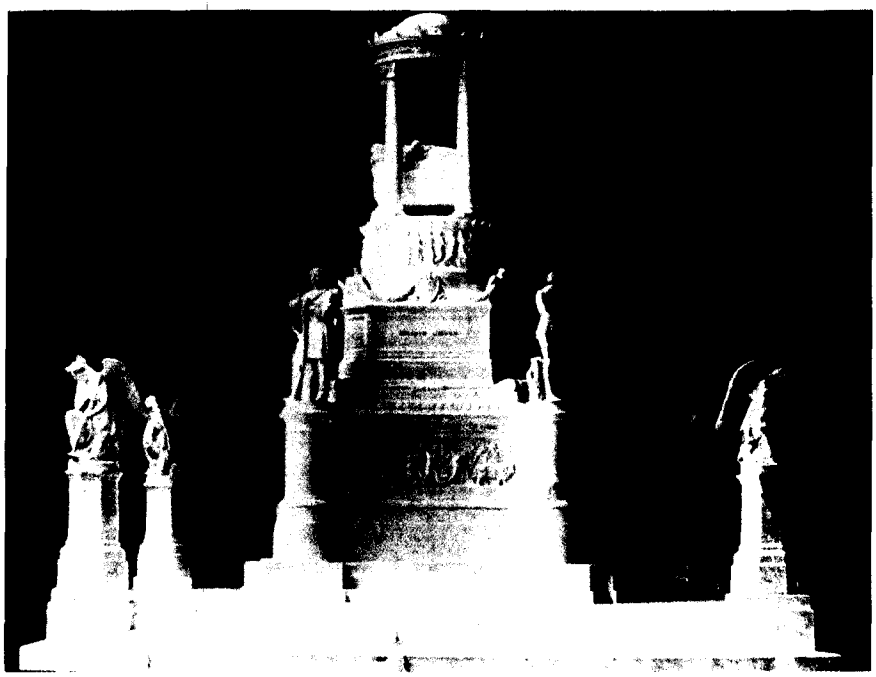
The structural division within the campaign between black donors and white organizers distinguished it from one other distinctively African American project for a national monument to Lincoln. This was the "Colored People's Educational Monument Association," led by Henry Highland Garnet, one of the nation's most famous black political activists. Garnet's group proposed to erect an alternative, utilitarian monument—a national school for freedmen in the name of Lincoln.[11] Though it enlisted contributions from everyone, black or white, the whole project was much more clearly embedded within the African American community, both in its institutional structure and in its goals and audience. But Douglass, longtime opponent of Garnet, still objected publicly. If African Americans wanted to build a monument to Lincoln to show the nation their gratitude, he argued in print, they shouldn't mix that civic project with their own pressing goal of self-education; it "*looks to me like an attempt to wash the black man's face in the nation's tears for Abraham Lincoln!*" [emphasis in original].[12] Douglass's opposition touched off a nasty exchange of letters between him and the monument managers printed in the *Anglo-African*. In that exchange Douglass broadened his

attack, condemning the very idea of enlisting the aid of whites for a separate "colored" monument. It smacked of officially sanctioned separatism, he suggested: "what new plan or scheme is brewing with a view to make separation a substitute for equality, a colored nationality a substitute for complete incorporation in the American body politic?"[13] The debate is important because it shows what was at stake for African Americans in the whole monument business—nothing less than the terms under which they would enter civic space and find representation there in the body politic. We do not know what impact the debate had on actual African American communities but it surely must have hurt Garnet's campaign, for the project disappeared soon after the dispute was aired.

In 1865 there was one other national monument organization that tried to raise money in African American communities. This was the National Lincoln Monument Association in Springfield, Illinois, a group of prominent Illinois politicians who proposed a monument where Lincoln was buried. The association targeted African Americans and many other different groups for fund raising, in an effort to make the enterprise a legitimately "national" undertaking. Once again black soldiers contributed liberally, but other African Americans expressed a wish to build a monument by themselves or to have some portion of the tomb structure designated as their particular contribution. For them the whole point was to make their donation publicly visible; otherwise the act was lost and made meaningless.[14]

This seemed to be exactly the selling point of the Freedmen's Memorial, except that the adoption of Hosmer's design forced an abrupt change in the sponsors' strategy. Needing another $100,000 or more to execute the design, the commission suddenly opened its appeal for funds to a much wider public. A circular of December 1866 asked the citizens of New England (where the commission had raised most of its funds for relief during the war) and most particularly "the women of America" to complete the work begun by Charlotte Scott and her African American compatriots.[15] Shifting from race to gender, the new fund-raising appeal no doubt hoped to trade on the historic role played by women in the abolitionist movement; the sponsors were also simply trying to capitalize on the unique circumstances of a female founder and a female artist. The *Freedmen's Record*, organ of the New-England Freedmen's Aid Society, offered to help, but the commission's change of course received some damaging commentary elsewhere in the press.[16] The new public that the commission envisaged—an alliance of freedmen and their white supporters—did not materialize.

Despite the vagaries of the commission's campaign, the design by Hosmer that emerged from it did depart radically from the formula estab-



4.2 Harriet Hosmer, model for Freedmen's Memorial to Lincoln, 1866, plaster (now lost).

lished by Brown, Rogers, and Ball. In the process, the design inspired at least some critics to think that it might be the one work that adequately responded to the challenge of representing the postabolition era. Hosmer's model fortunately survives in photographs and stereo form, and a revised version was later engraved and published in the London *Art-Journal*.[17] The original model, the one exhibited in Boston, is a multitiered affair topped by a recumbent effigy of Lincoln on a sarcophagus within an open, circular temple (fig. 4.2). Above the columns of the temple is inscribed an edited version of the final words of the Emancipation Proclamation, leaving out the reference to its military necessity and invoking only the nobler considerations of justice and God. The drum supporting the temple carries a frieze of thirty-six female allegories representing the states of the Union during Lincoln's presidency. Below the temple, in the middle of the main structure, is the monument's most unusual element: a sculptural cycle of African American history, featuring four standing black male figures, one at each corner. On the base below the black figures are four bas-reliefs illustrating events in the life and death of

Lincoln, and on the four outside corners of the monument are "mourning Victories" with trumpets reversed, which return the viewer to the theme of martyrdom highlighted by the temple at the top.

The African American cycle is made especially conspicuous by its position in the center of the monument. From the front, the viewer sees the first and last figures in the cycle as they frame the memorial structure. On the right is a seminude slave, with head downcast and wrists manacled together, "exposed for sale" as Hosmer explained; on the left is a fully clothed soldier gazing straight out and holding a bayonetted rifle, as if at picket duty. Here in effect are the two poles of masculinity, as measured on the axis of power. The first figure has been stripped of clothes and power, bound so that his hands are immobile; he drops his head in shame. The last figure, his hands freed, holds a gun and wears the uniform of national power; his gaze can now meet the world's from a position of strength. Behind these figures are the two intermediate figures in the cycle, the second being a field slave who rests on a hoe and drops his head, and the third being a "contraband" type, or, as Hosmer put, "a guide and assistant to our troops," who carries a basket of food in one arm. There are some interesting nuances in the treatment of these intermediary figures (see fig. 4.3, a second version of Hosmer's design, for a clearer view of these figures). The field slave holds the hoe in much the same way the soldier holds his gun, a compositional rhyme that serves to underscore the irony and injustice of expropriating the slave's labor. The basket of food carried by the third figure represents that historic moment when the fruits of the slave's agricultural labor are no longer expropriated but turned by him toward his own liberation.[18]

As a composition Hosmer turned the whole monument into a kind of spatial pyramid, insisting at each level on the four corners so that they made continuous lines sweeping upward and inward. Within the pyramid there was considerable freedom to interweave the themes of emancipation, martyrdom, and Union. Emancipation is represented in the uppermost inscription and the cycle in the middle, martyrdom in the dead figure of Lincoln up above and the mourning figures at the bottom, Union in the frieze of allegories below Lincoln and the eagles and shields just beneath. For clarity of outline and internal harmony Hosmer repeated the poses of her figures: all the mourning figures kneel, all the black figures stand. This decision had important consequences, for it forced an even more decisive break with the inconography of manumission. Though Lincoln is represented up above the black figures to maintain the hierarchy of heroism, he is in the horizontal position while they stand erect. His power and agency have been drained from him by death, as if to reemerge in the emancipated slaves beneath him. In Hosmer's design, Lincoln's act of emancipation is not illustrated in an invented interaction but recollected in his

words, chosen to resonate in the present. The viewer is, of course, supposed to grasp the interconnections between Lincoln's acts, the Union victory, and the slave's liberation, but the decision to represent the hero in his tragic end allows the narrative of liberation to stand more forcefully on its own, in its own space, propelled by its own internal logic.

In choosing to juxtapose the figure of the slave and that of the soldier, Hosmer was embodying a trope by then quite familiar in the rhetoric of emancipation. During the war, when the Union command recognized the military advantage of arming slaves, blacks and whites immediately sensed that military service would profoundly change the social construction of black masculinity. "The black man is henceforth to assume a new *status* among us," one senator asserted in 1864.[19] To be a soldier in battle was the ultimate test of manhood, because men battled men and battled to the death. For the male slave the test was even more profound since his masculinity had been denied from the outset. "If slaves will make good soldiers," one Confederate general declared, "our whole theory of slavery is wrong."[20] As we have seen, in the representations of the dominant culture, the male slave could demonstrate his manhood only insofar as he resisted or escaped slavery. To become a Union soldier, then, was not only to acquire conventional trappings of masculinity but to resist the very institution that suppressed his masculinity in the first place. As one slave turned soldier commented in 1863: "Now we sogers are men—men de first time in our lives. Now we can look our masters in de face. They used to sell and whip us, and we did not dare say one word. Now we ain't afraid, if they meet us, to run the bayonet through them."[21] Remarkably, Hosmer's cycle seizes on many of the same elements in this juxtaposition—the alteration in the black man's gaze, the helpless exposure to violence transformed into power to return violence with violence, even the image of the bayonet as symbolic of that new power.

Wearing a uniform and carrying a gun did in fact give the former slave a sense of power and respect unimaginable under slavery. The annals of the war and its aftermath are full of anecdotes of former slaves, now soldiers, refusing to show deference to whites and sometimes even witnessing the spectacle of a former master crouching before them.[22] The "before-and-after" images that became popular during the war made the change visible on the body itself by deliberately contrasting the slovenly dress and posture of the slave (often, it seems, posed as such in a studio) with the crisp uniform and erect stance of the slave-turned-soldier (see fig. 3.3).[23] The new black man in this pair embodied the stunning optimism of his era: in one simple change of outfit, he stepped out of one entrenched tradition of popular representation—the ragged, feeble, pathetic "darky" familiar from minstrelsy and caricature—and into a brave new world of civic display.

The dramatic transformation of the slave into the soldier served as a kind of visual rebuttal to the argument, sometimes heard, that the habits of obedience and subordination inculcated under slavery actually prepared slaves for life as soldiers. The image of self-transformation completed the work that officers like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of the first white commanders of black troops during the war, initiated. "The more strongly we marked the difference between the slave and the soldier," he recalled later, "the better for the regiment. One half of military duty lies in obedience, the other half in self-respect. A soldier without self-respect is worthless." The image of the slave-turned-soldier made that self-respect palpable in the trappings of the body itself.[24]

In embodying this opposition of slave and soldier in a sculptural cycle, Hosmer claimed to be representing no more than "the condition of the negro as it actually existed at different periods of the President's four years of office."[25] This formulation reduces the cycle to a properly commemorative image, illustrating the history of Lincoln's era. Yet the figures could not help but read as a statement about the future, about the promise of emancipation. By the end of the cycle the black figure is not trapped in an everlasting posture of debasement, as the freed slaves are in the manumission imagery. He is erect, intact, unwounded, alert but not rigid. He has acquired manhood (the level gaze), power (the gun), and legitimacy (the uniform)—all three reinforcing and requiring one another. His "elevation" is already complete. If Ward's *Freedman* posed a question about the black man's fate, Hosmer's narrative supplies an answer by giving the black man a clear social identity, the image of the citizen-soldier keeping vigil. This was the very image that would become the accepted icon of manhood in the white soldier monuments erected over the next several decades.

The implications of Hosmer's narrative are clear enough, especially so in 1865–66 when the political struggle over the legacy of the war was turning increasingly on the definition of the rights of the freedmen. In her cycle the figure of the black man has done everything he can to make his body and his action conform to the standards of citizenship. He has labored, even without reward; helped the Union when opportunity arose; become a model soldier himself. If his emancipation remains incomplete, it is only because white culture refuses to grant it, refuses to acknowledge the "progress" defined by and in Hosmer's sculpture. Hosmer's design envisions not only a new African American man, but a new American society in which he can find acceptance.

Hosmer's decision to install this imagery at the heart of her memorial structure—the black figures occupy the center of the imaginary pyramid of space—was a radical proposal for it insisted on the centrality of the African American subject, when only a short time before that subject was,