

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Look on my works ye mighty...’: Iconoclasm, education and the fate of statues

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Abstract

In pursuit of an alternative perspective on the so-called ‘statues controversy’, this essay brings recent interpretations of the enduring ‘power’, ‘gaze’ and ‘magic’ of statues into alignment with critical histories of iconoclasm, sacred and secular, and New Materialist accounts of our multiple entanglements with the object histories of inherited monuments. Opening with a close reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s renowned 1818 sonnet, ‘Ozymandias’, the essay applies the resultant theoretical synthesis to argue for the general restraint of popular iconoclastic and demolitionary acts and largely to caution against the mimetic violence of statue removal in favour of fresh, educative and iconotropic ways of ‘making legible’, and ‘re-reading’, statues, pedestals, inscriptions and their diverse contexts past and present.

KEYWORDS

iconoclasm, museums, Ozymandias, statues

OZYMANDIAS

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1818 sonnet, ‘Ozymandias’—one of the most anthologised poems in the English language—captures in a single extraordinary tableau so much of the interconnected representational histories of monumental statues and our conflicted relationships to them. These histories range from the often forgotten and conjectured origins of a given statue’s creation and exhibition, through viewer speculations on its initial purpose and impact, to its subsequent modes of cross-generational reception and estimation—and on, even, to its eventual undoing before the unpredictable fortunes of time, circumstance and chance:

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I met a traveller from an antique land,
 Who said—'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

(Donovan & Duffy, 2016, p. 153)

As well as encoding in the distinctive sonnet textures of his poem these implied and ironising disjunctions between a statue's founding intention and its final end, bracketed in this instance over immense stretches of time, Shelley's reworking of the twin classical-biblical *topoi* of *ubi sunt* transience and *de casibus* admonition—'How are the mighty fallen?' (2 Samuel 1.19. KJV)—confronts directly the materiality of stone as resistance to both kinds of temporal lament. In short, concentrated attention on its object that results from this sustained scrutiny, 'Ozymandias' boldly inventories and interrogates many of the vital elements of historical statues and their optics that are the occasion of dispute today and which form much of the vocabulary of the current so-called 'statues controversy' on which educational institutions are increasingly expected to comment, adjudicate and sometimes even act. Underlining that this is more than mere opportunistic appropriation of a well-known poem to a contemporary debate, Donovan and Duffy (2016, p. 725) highlight the repeated alignment of 'Ozymandias' down the generations since its publication with the destruction of statues: perhaps most famously for modern tempers on the front page of *The Times* newspaper of 10 April 2003, beneath the photograph of a toppled statue of Saddam Hussein in conquered Baghdad.

In one of the strongest recent close readings of the poem, Logan (2016, pp. 9–31) discerns in the fabric of 'Ozymandias' a syntactical and figural struggle with its own ambivalent preoccupation with materiality and meaning. This begins and ends with the impact of the statue's ruined majesty on the registering consciousness of several tiers of 'viewer': the storytelling 'traveller', the listening first-person poet, the myriad readers of the resultant printed verse. At each level, the presumed permanence of stone is figuratively eroded by the distancing and framing effects of recount and report, each successive perceiver, as it were, in possession of more 'context' for interpreting accurately and truthfully the full resonance of what is beheld or communicated. Yet the originary pristine 'presence' of the statue (supposedly of the renowned Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses II, 1303–1213 BCE) is of such power as to captivate and guide the gaze of the onlooker even amidst these altered conditions of unforeseen physical ruin, narrative distance and increasingly democratic regard.

'Ozymandias' hence immediately and suddenly invokes in its first lines the grand dereliction of the statue to which it zealously attends, though whether this fate is the result of natural forces, human intervention or both is never fully determined. The initial metonymic centrepiece of its ruin is the 'trunkless legs', which form also the pedestal of the broken statue and to which—like the gaze of all spectators of statues—traveller, poet and reader will each obsessively return. However, it is in the observer's lingering movement from the base to the face of the statue that its true gothic shock will be first revealed: the 'shattered visage', 'half sunk' in the desert sands, of the Pharaoh's decapitated head.

Now as we will see, from Ramesses II to Edward Colston, the actions of decapitation and 'de-facing' have been throughout history integral to the destruction of statues and the symbolic annulment of their power. Shelley riffs anachronistically on this idea by setting aside the knowledge well known even in his time that the many sculpted faces of Egyptian Pharaohs, then beginning to be excavated and inventoried in the wake of Napoleon's imperial incursions into North Africa, replicated everywhere in Egypt the same almost uniform divine features, chiselled consistently by their makers into heavenly indifference and sublime impassivity.

Favouring a retrojected Romantic artistic agency over such inconvenient archaeological facts, Shelley endows the toppled face of Ozymandias with the conventional character traits typical of a favourite target of his own radical-republican writing—the tyrant. 'The sneer of cold command' and other images of arbitrary autocracy 'survive' the passage of time, the sardonic manipulation of the anonymous sculptor and the inscrutable yet almost certainly despotic ambitions of the memorialised Pharaoh. The persistence of the face is in the structure of Shelley's poem a recapitulation of another primordial idea that we can observe recurring largely unacknowledged in the contest over statues today and that we will revisit next: that statues look at us as much as we look at them. Lest this convention be regarded as an outmoded leftover of magical thinking, of which the 21st century statues debate is mercifully free, it is intriguing to note that a solution to the Oriel College Cecil Rhodes problem, recently proposed by the renowned British sculptor Antony Gormley, is to turn the Rhodes statue to face the wall of the building on which it stands (Gayle, 2021). Shelley's preoccupation with the face is a tacit rejection of the traveller's assemblage of 'lifeless things'—those inert materials of art and monument-making. It instead implicitly and contrarily insists that the informing 'passions' of the statue's human-divine model, and (in this case) the subversive motivations of the cunning sculptor, invest the statue with a form of living power unintended by, and at moral variance with, its subject's tyrannical personality, yet at the same time eerily and providentially colluding with the ominous verdict of history upon all such vain signifiers of intimidating royal hubris. As McFarland (1981) was among the first to note, the Romantic attachment to ruins and ruined places reconciles two seemingly contradictory impulses: nostalgia for the beguiling aura of a half-forgotten premodern past and anxious reassurance that its archaic forms of power and domination are comprehensively neutralised.

'Ozymandias' can thus be seen by these literary critical lights as an experiment in 'statue reading' of a kind that has perhaps received less attention than it merits in the recent statue debates. The poem underlines its own radical pedagogy through its clever foregrounding of its own sonnet artifice and its reminder amidst such dense, ambiguous figurative patterning that the initial 'reader-writer' adumbrated in the text is not actually the poet-author but the ancient sculptor himself, who 'well those passions read...' which he then 'stamped on these lifeless things'. The artist is here, in classical Shelleyan style, the brave and insurgent poetic interpreter of his sinister monumental subject, equivocally and evasively etching in stone his secret moral reproach of the sovereign figure he has been commissioned to immortalise. This same prevarication culminates in the lines of the sonnet sestet, when the sculpture finally attains to the signifying condition of writing itself through the declaratory lithographic words engraved on its pedestal and held in poetic close-up by the same sonnet structure: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,/Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" The legend on the plinth, as Stewart (2020, pp. 257–260) argues, reminds us of two things: first, that even the regulatory properties of the imperative mood, here openly and coercively *instructing* us in how we are to 'look' and interpret the massive 'named' object of our gaze, cannot free themselves from a lapidary ambivalence beyond the full governance of human intent; secondly, that there exists always an integrated interdependence of statue and context. In this specific case, 'encountering a ruin, we are meeting a presence on its ways to being an absence', Stewart states (p. 260): a 'Wreck' cast up haphazardly and ingloriously in the empty 'desart' (*sic*) sands. Yet this longshot absence, diminishing the size and scale of the Pharaonic figure against the surrounding panorama, is not paradoxically the erasure or abolition of the statue, as fervent republicans and democrats like Shelley might dream, but rather another episode in its representational afterlife from which we can never be entirely free, whether we relocate it, relabel it or even perhaps hazard its complete destruction. In both dressed stone and carved legend, the statue showcased in Shelley's poem has become inescapably, in Robin Bernstein's terminology, a 'scriptive thing' (2009), performatively choreographing the behaviour of those around it and interpellating onlookers into ideologically regulated forms of subjectivity and volition that may be less autonomous or emancipatory than they first appear. Before the pitiless gaze of the statue, all

public demonstrations of either submission or repudiation reproduce the same inherent mimetic violence on which the statue's foundational power—in monarchical elevation or in posthumous dissolution—has forever depended.

At the same time, should we conclude with many readers of the poem that this omniscient menace has in some lastingly ironic sense been truly and permanently thwarted in the concluding poetic spectacle of the desolation and undoing before us, thereby teaching us a vital ethical lesson, then 'Ozymandias' surely proposes that this overthrow is a fortuitous collaboration of art and time rather than an act of premeditated eradication. The result may then hold forth the possibility of an unexpected cancellation of the cycle of violence; but not by shared exaltation before the statue's fall, whether intentional or accidental—and still less by the celebration and endorsement of collective human action in realising that dramatic end—but in another well-recognised accompaniment to this kind of literary moral reckoning: that is, *laughter* (Conroy, 2004, pp. 77–109). Implicit in the sculptor's 'hand that mocked' those ostentatious imperial pretensions of Pharaoh Ramesses, and unintentionally amplified in the inadvertently equivocal wording on the plinth, and the visual topography of ruin, we are here located in the voluble heteroglossic terrain of McInnes' (2020) 'Romantic Ridiculous', mordantly reversing the commissioned intention of the statue and its inscription: a carnivalesque scorn of the inflated claims of absolutism and dominion brought low by inescapable forces each could at their inception barely comprehend and certainly not hope to master.

ICONOCLASM

The long-favoured framework for comprehending the destiny of controversial or vandalised statues and monuments has been that provided by the concept of *iconoclasm*; to such an extent that that the noun and its accompanying adjective—'iconoclastic'—have gone on to assume a broad-spectrum metaphoric association with a family of actions and attitudes associated with the radical or *avant-garde* rejection of tradition, convention or established orthodox norms in the realms of ideas, the arts and of course politics (Stapleton & Viselli, 2019, pp. 21–33). Clustered around the technical and historical use of 'iconoclasm' have accumulated related and partially homophonic terms such as iconophobia, iconophilia, iconolatry, iconomachy, aniconicism and, more recently, Latour's (2002) important construct, 'iconoclash'—intended to isolate the uncertainty and conflict occasioned when a previously treasured image or principle is suddenly smashed and disowned because of some cumulative or abrupt shift in surrounding attitudes and values.

Before disentangling this lexical set, in order better to understand the interactions of history and monumental public art, it is important to recognise that the classical object of iconoclastic destruction, past and present, the statue, has been traditionally targeted for particular reasons. Chief among these has been the pervasive assumption that statues are in possession of specific forms of signifiatory power reaching beyond the 'lifeless things' of which they are fashioned and into the symbolic—and indeed supernatural—orders of which they are a part. For 'Ozymandias', this relationship is obvious: Ramesses II was considered to be both a secular king and a sacred being destined for full divinisation after death, at which point he would complete his journey to the realm of the gods, while passing on his hallowed status and earthly duties to his son (Fletcher, 2016). His statue therefore not only celebrated and manifested his temporal authority, it also channelled his sacred influence and was by extension vested with those same royal properties that demanded veneration of his physical person. Kiernan (2020) points out that this was the norm for cult images of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world from the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity. Whether located in the home, in dedicated temples or in the outdoors, cult images were central to the commerce between the human and the divine, everywhere bestowing on idols ritual recognition and even social agency: 'That is to say their worshippers believed that the idols could both receive their petitions and act upon them' (pp. 4–5). This 'life' of statues was also an intersubjective one, with a whole diverse collection of statues spanning a huge range of cultic purposes and routinely seen as possessed of personality, intent, caprice and emotion; distributing both succour to their votaries and retribution to those who disrespected them. These attributes, and their implied networked entanglement with the social, applied regardless of who or what the statue represented: whether a living god-emperor or priest, a local household deity, or a member of an abstract celestial pantheon marshalling large numbers of followers. Occasionally

assisted by claims of miraculous occurrences (of the kind still reported in, e.g. certain elements of Hindu and Christian popular piety), such as perambulating, weeping, bleeding and drinking, or the healing of the sick (Hersey, 2009, pp. 1–22), these dispositions highlighted in the symbolic economy of statue-making and devotion an enduring affirmation of the primacy of ‘matter’ within a discursive dynamics of materialisation—blurring corporeal life, affective investment, the immobile-automata boundary and the myriad social-symbolic functions of inorganic objects, technologies and processes. Reworking received conceptions of matter as a uniform, inert substance or a socially constructed fact, this revaluation of statues acknowledges their agentic thrust, processual impetus and self-organising capacities. In the human interaction with them, we recognise matter as an active force not only sculpted by, but also co-productive in conditioning and enabling, whole social-symbolic worlds and their frequently turbulent forms of cultural commitment and identity. We move in such an affordance beyond the constructivist-essentialist impasse, to a possible theoretical position on statues which rejects as incoherent the polarisation of a postmodernist constructivism and positivist scientific materialism, favouring instead, in Barad’s (2006) terms, the co-constitutive ‘intra-actions’ between meaning and matter, between persons and objects, which leaves neither materiality nor ideality unaltered when human communities and their statues are juxtaposed, interpreted and indeed messily cross-contaminated.

Embrace of the pervasive primordial ‘power’ and sanctity of statues in the historical-devotional record also then serves to underline the forbidden, even traumatic, character of the iconoclastic moment. For as Besançon (2000, pp. 115–131) observes, the iconoclast strikes down the statue she has come to assail not because she denies or rejects its accumulated symbolic presence and its incremental accrual of reverential attention and sacred affect, but precisely because she acknowledges the potency of both, but has come to see in each a misplaced, errorist or heretical misdirection of primary devotional energy, mistakenly trained on the wrong object and for the wrong reasons. This revelatory and self-confirmatory disclosure renders the perceived object of misguided and likely heterodox veneration fit for only one remedy—destruction. The scale and the performativity of this destruction then lends further testimony to what is at stake in the rival and irreconcilable object—relation narratives of the statue itself, whether it be defended as the cherished focus of pious preservation and loyalty or vilified as the epitome of idolatry and false belief.

Two key chapters in the history of ‘Western’ iconoclasm have come to dramatise these forces and underscore their affective potential and incendiary implications. Both may now at first glance feel distant and exotic to modern minds, with little to offer our contemporary conversations, but if the overarching hypothesis of this essay is correct, their legacy is a living genealogical one with important implications for the manner and methods through which we address contested public monuments today. The first of these episodes is the grievous ‘Iconoclast Crisis’ of the Byzantine Empire, which extended sporadically and intensively from c680 to 850CE across the Orthodox Christian world. The second is the violent surge of Protestant and anti-Catholic iconoclasm which accompanied in Western Europe the Puritan revolutionary phase of the 16th and 17th century Reformation and which, again in great waves, inflicted on a thousand years of material Catholic civilisation untold and irreversible material and institutional damage. Taken together, the two periods have come to typify for later ages an idea of cultural erasure: a transformative Year Zero public reset of religious dogma and socio-theological purpose in the name of a radical new doctrinal order of incalculable spiritual and material consequence.

The Byzantine crisis tends too often to be popularly contextualised through persistently Orientalist constructions of an alien and barbarous medieval Eastern Christianity mired in despotism, irrationalism, superstition and the feverish fetishisation of holy artefacts. This is a prejudice at least as old as Gibbon. However, as the period’s leading interpreters have repeatedly underscored, iconophile and iconoclast conflict across Byzantine society centred on profound philosophical and theological disagreements with august intellectual pedigrees in the ancient Platonism of which Greek Christians saw themselves chosen custodians as well as the scriptural hermeneutics of which they also saw themselves guardians (Brubaker & Haldron, 2011, pp. 135–156). Amplifying factors manifest also in Shelley’s sonnet, the major issue at stake in the Iconoclast Era was conflict over the extent to which images and statues could embody *presence* (Elsner, 2012) and whether the increasingly lavish public expression of such presence in the plethora of icons of Christ, the Apostles, the Saints, and even sanctified members of past imperial households, could be reconciled with the biblical prohibition on idols and idol worship: in other words, when in Orthodoxy did permissible iconophilia become

iconolatry? The underlying causes of the resultant conflict, over two separate phases of struggle, and an eventual qualified victory for the iconophile party (led mainly by the women of the metropolitan court in Constantinople) were complex: genuine theological disputation before supposed iconophilic excess and decadence; a series of natural disasters and plagues scarring the Empire; internal dynastic factionalism; the increasing military menace to Byzantium of the decidedly aniconic desert faith of Islam.

Recent assessments of the Iconoclast crisis in the Byzantine Empire have moderated and refined some of the confrontational dualisms in which its narrative was previously communicated (Brubaker, 2012; Karahan, 2014). Estimated levels of violence and destruction in the period have been scaled back, the managed co-existence of rival views has been recognised across the relevant centuries and regions, and more detailed attention has been given to the 'everyday lives' of icons and statues in Byzantine culture as the 'crisis' pendulum swung back and forth. This has highlighted variegation in both popular and clerical treatment of icons—ranging from sophisticated theological and Neoplatonic defences of iconic emanation championed in the major Orthodox monasteries, to grand demonstrations of public Christian worship before statues of saints and emperors, to intimate domestic prayer and private decoration where the nature of the icon was sometimes forgotten or barely understood and the threshold between icon and portrait often left an indeterminate one.

Similarly, iconoclastic actions have also been reinterpreted, to move away from an undue attention on sensational incidents of open destruction to more subtle revisions to the appearance, presentation and orientation of icons and statues—including both devotional repurposing and relocation, and even on occasion daring parody of the prior status and artistry of the icon (Kolrud & Prusac, 2014). Reinforcing the lessons from 'Ozymandias', the actions of defacing, removing eyes and decapitating have received greater weight than before, eclipsing in many instances the seemingly rarer practice of thoroughgoing elimination, and arguing overall for a more dynamic and heterogeneous interaction between icons, their makers and owners in shifting conditions both of defence and opposition. While the evidence for outright iconolatry in the period continues to be acknowledged as a dangerous devotional surplus provoking sometimes serious hostility across this volatile environment, what is more salient now is the idea, once again, of the icon or statue as a 'scriptive thing': mobile and protean in its symbolic movement around a society and a belief system, operative on a subtle hermeneutical spectrum from transcendent homage to abjection and obliteration, with many uncertain junctures and crossing points in between, each capable of supporting and negotiating complex and diverse readings and treatments.

The Puritan destruction of the iconic and sculpted fabric of Latin Christendom is of course as prey to oversimplification and stereotyping as its Byzantine forerunner, the expression of uncontrolled 'iconoclastic' Protestant enthusiasm frequently furnishing a ready portrait of easily ridiculed intolerance and extremist caricature. However, the differences between the two eras are as instructive as the parallels. While it is true that ardent Protestant apologists for the wholesale uprooting of the material fabric of European Catholic belief and popular piety frequently invoked and praised Byzantine precedent (Simpson, 2010, pp. 101–116)—gesturing also to the dire historical consequences for the Eastern Roman Empire of its return to iconophilic heresy—their rationale for statue destruction, and their contribution to an early modern imaginary of monument toppling and raising, of major historical significance in predominately Protestant nations such as Britain and Colonial America, remained highly distinctive (Spraggon, 2003).

Sauer (2014) and others have emphasised the drift away in early modern Christian theologies, both supportive and critical of devotional statues, from the atavistic sense of inherent *power* in hallowed objects to a more 'secular' appreciation of their various uses (both approved and condemned) within a broader pattern of piety and contemplation. This markedly less 'magical' vision of the statue in the godly society continued to ratify the devotional potency of the statue, but within a referential theological system which separated adoration (*latría*: reserved exclusively for the person of God) from veneration (*dulia*: due the saints and their visual-material portrayals). For Protestants, this separation, often seen as doctrinally unstable and vulnerable to error, nonetheless also opened up a space, of course, for a new kind of monumental public art given over to 'secular' personalities such as kings, princes, Church leaders (ordained and lay) and honoured civic figures of the Puritan polities such as magistrates and merchants. The public

Protestant iconologies of reformed cities such as Geneva and Antwerp matched their violent eradication of late medieval Catholic material culture with a corresponding explosion of statuary dedicated in verisimilitude to Calvinist and Lutheran preachers, princes, theologians and martyrs. The shift in emphasis to a statuary of real historical and contemporary figures reflected, in Braudelian terms, an emergent modern perception of the human body and of the individual person accurately modelled in metal or stone. Correspondingly, attacks on the supposedly sacrilegious monumental sculpture of rival confessions often included injuries inflicted on the obscene objects of devotion—ranging from laceration to ‘hanging’, mutilation and decapitation—that imitated the capital and corporal punishment of heretical or deviant bodies under changing regimes of individualised criminal justice and legal retribution. We have here a perception formed from interchange as much as representation: the statue becoming more humanised, in honour or disgrace, and the recalcitrant body becoming more ‘iconic’ (Graves, 2008).

These conflicts did undoubtedly raise the iconoclastic stakes in many European towns and cities between the 1550s and the 1690s. Widespread ‘hammer and sledge’ vandalism aimed at smashing utterly the allegedly blasphemous Catholic heritage gave rise to new styles of organised violence prone to human as well as marmoreal casualties. Attacks on the contents of churches, especially, assumed characteristics destined to become emblematic of iconophobic assault down the subsequent centuries: on the one hand, mass spectacles seemingly centrally planned by a shadowy sectarian leadership; on the other, uncontrolled, spontaneous riots culminating in outbreaks of frenzied disorder and affray razing and despoiling the built environment and its monumental contents. It has been argued that these attacks represented a disruption of the ancient ‘devotional economy of images’, which began to sever wholesale the connection of statues with a sense of the immutable cosmic order with which human beings might bargain and trade (Hunter, 2007, p. 67).

As the contents of sacred buildings were both mutilated and plundered, the redirected energy of images inclined in two divergent yet strangely complementary directions. Moshenska (2019) has recently and daringly described the tendency of Protestant iconoclasts to repurpose the detritus of iconophobic destruction as nothing less than children’s toys: as if, echoing the closing comic-ironic vision of Shelley’s ruined and diminished Pharaoh, the trivialising registers of children’s ‘play’ might complete the drainage of imaginary sacred meaning and elevated representation from defiled objects, initially overthrown by the carnivalesque enthusiasm of celebratory crowds. As toys and cast-off objects fit only for the hands of children, the glittering fragments of a once dominant Catholic culture complete their Reformation journey to abjection and oblivion.

A contrasting yet oddly comparable fate is documented by cultural historians from Isar (2004) to Simpson (2010), who follow the secularising vector within Reformation iconoclasm to an obvious if startling conclusion: that in the ransacking, pillage and rehousing of the remains of the shattered inheritance they had brought down, the Puritan iconoclasts laid out the coordinates of a new cultural and symbolic geography called *art*. Several commentators point to the complicity of early collectors and conservators, through their founding of what were in effect proto-museums, with what Rambelli and Reinders’ (2007) term *hieroclasm*: ‘the destruction or denial of sacred meaning’ (p. 172) in the transfer of salvaged auratic objects to ‘secular’ locations expressly designed to deprive them of their originary symbolic force. At these new sites, fresh styles of viewing, evaluating and appreciating were deliberately and painstakingly cultivated. Here the language of taste and connoisseurship began to form the bedrock of the cultural capital that would eventually be seen as vital to social reproduction and the identity and status of social elites in possession of both the disembedded objects themselves and the calibration of their ‘artistic’ merit. This of course subsequently burdens the institution of the museum, often still today an exhibition space and warehouse of extractive iconoclasm, with a serious problem of ownership and meaning-making equally as grave as the issue of illicitly acquired imperial loot (Cane & Ashley-Smith, 2013). Isar goes still further, in arguing that the transgressive iconoclastic ‘disintegration’ of material objects gives birth in Western aesthetics and literature to the cult of ‘the image’. From the gilt frames of pictures imitating the mandorla of ancient holy objects or personalities, to the endless pursuit of the fragmented ‘imagery’ of imaginative writing, from Romanticism to Modernism, the memory of iconoclasm conditions in its cultural trauma and violent ‘cuttings and severings’ the meaning and satisfactions of ‘art’ as recompense for loss and desecration.

EDUCATION

An obvious and much rehearsed rejoinder to the key narratives offered so far in this essay is to point sceptically to their dependence on *religion* and on what Durkheim named 'the torments of faith' (Pickering, 1994, p. 125). This dissent further posits and underlines the rise in early modern mercantile societies of a public monumental art increasingly free of the shadows of the strife-torn gods and their iconomachic followers; an art responsive instead to secular-civic achievements of the city and the nation, centred on actual historical and fully human figures and their popular renown. The recent fortunes of many civically endowed post-Reformation or 'subscription' statues in the towns and cities of e.g. Britain and America will of course have demonstrated the instability of this 'Enlightenment' assessment of municipal progress, pointing to expressions of controversy and division centred on the lives and actions of many local and national historical figures enshrined approvingly by their contemporaries or successors in bronze and stone. Moreover, if the analysis of statues offered in this essay has overall traction on current and past events, then the New Materialist understanding of statues with which it has experimented questions searchingly any such secular-religious distinction, whether the public monument be of a Catholic saint, a slave-owning philanthropist, an Enlightenment philosopher or a once celebrated imperial commander. The main point here may be to recognise that in the refractory and often difficult 'reading' of statues advocated and preferred in this analysis, the all too inviting contrast between bigoted religious ignorance and tolerant public rationality may prove ultimately to be an unsustainable one. As Morgan (2003, pp. 171, 175) subtly reminds us:

Idolatry and its extirpation are rooted in the history of religion, but they extend beyond strictly sectarian experience. In the modern West, often characterized as a secular culture, as the offspring of the Enlightenment quest for liberation from oppressive institutions such as the Church, idolatry and iconoclasm have remained vital categories of cultural criticism... In the lexicon of the Enlightenment, superstition is another word for idolatry... science and philosophy are the instruments of iconoclastic enlightenment. Reason is the tool that will smash their hold on the human mind.

Building on these same misgivings, leading historians of later iconoclasm, and resurgent general discord over statues, have also underlined continuity as well as change in the periods following the great Wars of Religion. Doubtful of an Enlightenment watershed of toleration and free thinking, they highlight instead an historical process where older ideas and biases simply adapt and evolve to the political and cultural ecosystems of modernity (Craske, 2021). The 'charismatic' iconoclasm of the high Reformation, often led by dynamic individuals and demagogues, mutate into organised movements conferring ideological unity and identity on violent mobs and their socio-religious grievances. It should be noticed that the most serious outbreak of civic despoliation seen in the United Kingdom since the Civil Wars remains the 1780 anti-Catholic Gordon Riots, led by the populist aristocrat Lord George Gordon, which took place in cities up and down the British Isles often closely identified with Enlightenment culture, and bringing more costly destruction to London than the 1793 riots brought to Paris (Haywood & Seed, 2012). But the most powerful unifying influences of the era under scrutiny are of course the forces of state construction at local and national levels and it is here that the expression of post-Reformation iconoclasm becomes caught up in the modern complicity of national progress with the state's enforced monopoly of violence. Noyes (2013) documents absorbingly the combined atrocity and negligence at work in these later state-sponsored iconoclasm, from the French Revolution, through the industrial 'modernisation' of many of Europe's great conurbations, to the conflagrations of 19th and 20th century warfare. For Noyes, indeed, it is revolutionary France that is modernity's paradigmatic iconoclastic state. The conclusion here is a stark one: repeated Enlightenment mythmaking camouflages the fundamental ontology of violence from out of which the modern version of the secular, masquerading routinely as its perfection, is fashioned and maintained (Pabst, 2019). The multiple practices central to the making of the liberal secular state, it transpires, are much closer to those involved in the smashing of sacred images than our culture has been taught to acknowledge.

This recognition also posits particular challenges for education, especially for those models of education which root it fully in a modernising Enlightenment project of liberation from those older forms of fear and prejudice. For in those models, mass education is not in essence a reflection or an effect of post-religious disenchantment, but a key driver of it: an integral means by which the destructive irrationalism of the past and its rival forms of incorporation are to be finally extinguished. Those, indeed, were among the major justifications for supporting the extension of popular schooling on the part of leading British Enlighteners such as Ricardo, Hume, Smith and Owen (Davis, 2003): educate the general populace to minimal levels of literacy and docility and it will eschew anarchic 'enthusiasm' and faction and the wanton profanation of monuments—acquiescing cooperatively in the state's legitimacy and authority and its exclusive use of force. Conceivably, of course, an education system alert to its own involuntary annexation by these interests and reconnected to the multiple histories recorded and interrogated throughout this analysis might be enabled to revisit the experience of iconoclasm with its eyes wide open. What could this mean for its disposition towards the 'statues question' in 2021 and beyond?

A more culturally and educationally literate awareness of the place of statues in our troubled local and national narratives would possess, it must be stressed, no panacea solutions for the destiny of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel, Edward Colston at Bristol or Frederick Roberts at Glasgow: perhaps because none exists and the 'scriptive things' versioning of each requires a measured and judicious individual close reading of their provenance, their genealogy as public monuments and their plinths and pedestals and inscriptions, before any actions are taken. This approach is largely consistent with the procedure proposed by Enslin (2020) for dealing with the imposing equestrian statue in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow, of the hugely controversial and disturbing figure of Earl Roberts, General and imperialist: that is, make it an object of *learning* rather than captive to a polarised, paralysing conflict, the outcome of which is to be decided by who can bring the sharpest and most intense public pressure to bear on the site and its contents. Perhaps the conclusion of such a studied attentiveness to what is to be *learned* would indeed be agreement to the removal or transfer of specific monuments to locations more fitted to the consensus judgements of history upon them. Perhaps it would entail fresh and far-reaching in situ recontextualisation of their histories, responsive to the perspectives and the testimonies of those hitherto unjustly excluded for the courts of public and educational opinion. Perhaps it might be an opening on to the creation of additional and more diverse public monuments and precincts (Hall, 2021).

However we are to take these deliberations forward, our practices of inclusive civic literacy in schools, universities and beyond, richly meshed with an informed understanding of the past and its unacknowledged, and unexpected, continuities with the present, ought surely to warn us of the perils of interventions which reprise the symbolic violence of both the sponsors and celebrants of problematic statues and the continuum of iconoclasts whose single solution to that triumphalism seems to be to tear the same statues down. Mimetic reproduction of an older inchoate violence cannot erase the reasons controversial statues were erected in the first place, or the distant lives and motivations of the often very ordinary citizens who commissioned and paid for them. Neither can arbitrarily disposing of these items to museums or other public repositories be said to be authentically educational if we have not first historicised museums and understood sensitively their own ambiguous relation to image recycling and extractive iconoclasm (Boldrick, 2020). Otherwise, we risk making them accomplices to our own indecision and the places for depositing our own nameless, many-headed guilt.

In June 2021, the toppled statue of Edward Colston, cast a year before into Bristol Harbour by a crowd angered by its subject's egregious and largely hidden associations with Atlantic slavery, was retrieved from the water as a hazard to local maritime traffic (BBC, 2021). Since resurfacing, the badly damaged and vandalised statue has been installed, reclining, as a temporary exhibit in the city's M Shed Museum, where it is 'intended to be a departure point for continuing conversations about our shared history'. This latest development in the Colston statue's tempestuous story rehearses many of the educational tensions with which the explorations here have been concerned. Actions which underline the scriptive possibilities of the offending object may represent Colston's humiliating 'Ozymandias' moment, with a final legend still to be etched upon it by the people of Bristol. Alternatively, they may simply serve to commemorate and extend the cycle of iconoclastic vindictiveness, perversely occluding Colston's crimes by rendering his statue another victim of iconoclasm unleashed, with all that implies for the orchestration of violence by vested and concealed

interests. Bristol's heritage leaders, from one of Britain's many cities now tortured by their historic compacts with the slave trade, seem to have invited education to their 'conversation' in hope rather than expectation, but if so, we can surely demonstrate that such hope for the possibilities of reading, re-reading, meaning-making and collective learning need not be wholly misplaced.

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