

'Vivid presentiments of action and character': Allan Cunningham's Anecdotes of British Sculptors

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Lively biographies of British artists, with material to instruct and entertain were – as Horace Walpole regretted in 1762 – difficult to construct from the limited materials available to biographers of British art.¹ By the first decades of the nineteenth century the situation had changed, as many anecdotes, often based on oral evidence but also utilising traditional European *topoi*, became both a functioning unit and a battleground in the histories that were being constructed of British art.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century the trickle of biographical accounts of British artists became a flood. Walpole, whose social class kept him distinct from the actual workshops of artists, was superseded by numerous writers, like James Northcote and JT Smith whose background in the studios and workshops furnished them with much more personal detail of the lives of artists.² It was Allan Cunningham's *Lives of the Most Eminent Artists* of 1828–31, however, that proved the most influential attempt to integrate detailed anecdotes of artists into a large-scale narrative of British art.³ Cunningham's background as a mason, and a Clerk of Works in Sir Francis Chantrey's workshop placed him a position to amass stories of the personalities of artists, especially sculptors, and he drew upon anecdotes that had circulated amongst the workshops.⁴

For Cunningham, however, the use of artists' anecdotes had a number of appended literary difficulties. In his introduction he speaks dismissively of 'anecdotes collected by lovers of gossip', as one of the untrustworthy sources of information that he intends to critique. However, the more elevated form of artist's anecdote – that which reactivated classical and renaissance *topoi* – was especially

¹ Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England (...)*, Strawberry Hill: Thomas Farmer, 1762–80, vol. 1, vii.

² The story of the emergence of artist's biography in Britain in the 1760 to 1810 period is told in Karen Junod's excellent *'Writing the Lives of Painters': Biography and Artistic Identity in Britain 1760-1810*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, see especially Junod's detailed account of the origins and use of anecdotes in art writing, 18–20. The present article is concerned with anecdotes specifically of *sculptors* in the later period, and the work of Allan Cunningham, which I hope will complement Junod's account.

³ Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, London: John Murray, 1829–33.

⁴ Rev David Hogg, *The Life of Allan Cunningham*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875 is the only full-length biography of Cunningham. For the mentions of oral stories collected in the *Lives* see below.

problematic within Cunningham's literary form, which he had developed over twenty years of writing poetry, plays, criticism and biography. Despite these issues Cunningham was well aware of the power of vivid stories to animate biography and reveal the character of an artist and their work. In the *Lives* he takes a critical stance on tropic anecdotes, whilst looking to relate biographical stories that appear unaffected, and illuminate character in a more direct, vernacular mode.

Cunningham was a polemical exponent of a species of Romanticism that looked to divest writing and art of conceits and classical references.⁵ The practice of consciously reactivating artistic tropes of supernatural childhood gifts, affinity with Nature, wayward genius and tricksiness in order to bestow greatness on a modern subject (and ennoble the writer), clearly fell within Cunningham's definition of bad literature.⁶ Indeed it was the opposite of the direct expressive truth that he praised in native poetry and sought in art writing. Worse still, those reactivated artists' anecdotes were being used by other authors to validate the work and character of artists who he regarded as lesser figures than his own master, Francis Chantrey, who he had memorably deified as the first great British artist, and who supplied the standard by which the art of all others is judged in the *Lives*.

Cunningham's anecdotal strategies are played out explicitly in the third volume of the *Lives*, which details the history of British sculpture, the area of art that the author knew best. Here he undermines tropic anecdotes of undeserving subjects, and transforms older anecdotes to fit his vision of the role of these artists in the history of British art. These can be contrasted with the un-ironic, and transparently tropic, accounts that he had earlier rendered of his own master – based, in part, on mythical origins that Chantrey had created for himself.

The anecdotal form

Britain came relatively late to the genre of artists' biography, and its establishment proved a halting process. In 1762 Horace Walpole laid some durable co-ordinates for British artists' biography when he praised Italian art and art-writing, but complained of the difficulties of emulating it in the British context. In Italy biographers 'treat of the works of Raphael and Correggio with as much importance as commentators speak of Horace or Virgil.' By contrast:

This country, which does not always err in vaunting its own productions, has not a single volume to show on the works of its painters.

⁵ See Matthew Greg Sullivan, 'Chantrey, Cunningham, and the British School of Sculpture', in Sarah Burnage and Jason Edwards, eds, *The British School of Sculpture*, London: Routledge, 2017, 210–33.

⁶ The identification of these *topoi* of artists' stories were, of course, most lucidly brought together in Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's 1934 work, *Die Legende vom Künstler. Ein Geschichtlicher Versuch*; my references are to the translation by Alastair Laing, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1979.

The problem, for Walpole, was that Britain had 'produced so few good artists'.⁷ *Anecdotes* therefore laid out an aspiration to write elevated biography, coupled with bashfulness about British achievement, and an apologetic sense of the inappropriateness of such writing to the subject. Insofar as Walpole uses anecdotes in their traditional role as connectors with the artistic past, and illuminators of special character and talent, they often appear with a localized specificity which is a little at odds with their tropic ancestors. In the life of Michael Rysbrack, for instance, he describes how the sculptor created a figure of *Hercules*, clearly evoking the ancient story of the painter Zeuxis composing his Helen of Troy from the finest attributes of five different models:

This athletic statue, for which [Rysbrack] borrowed the head of the Farnesian god, was compiled from various parts and limbs of seven or eight of the strongest and best made men in London, chiefly the bruisers and boxers of the then flourishing amphitheatre for boxing, the sculptor selecting the parts which were the most truly formed in each. The arms were Broughton's, the breast a celebrated coachman's, a bruiser, and the legs were those of Ellis the painter, a great frequenter of that gymnasium. As the games of that Olympic academy frequently terminated to its heroes at the gallows, it was soon after suppressed by act of parliament, so that in reality Rysbrack's Hercules is the monument of those gladiators.⁸

In this case, however, the creation of a perfect female statue is replaced by that of a composite contemporary hard man, and rather than conjuring timeless form it becomes a homage to popular sport.⁹ Elsewhere Walpole has clearly been furnished with material for classic artists' biography but chooses not to use it, perhaps believing it inappropriate to his prosaic subjects. The life of John Bushnell, for instance, was based upon George Vertue's personal knowledge of the sculptor, recorded in the manuscript notes on which Walpole based his book, and included details of the sculptor's sexual transgressions, international travel and ambitious schemes.¹⁰ An early episode in which Bushnell left his apprenticeship and the country to avoid marrying a maid who carried his child might have been the basis of a Fra Filippo Lippi-esque characterization of Bushnell as a priapic creative force, but is rather presented disapprovingly as a sordid episode in the life of a

⁷ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vi; for more on Walpole's *Anecdotes*, see Junod, 'Writing the Lives of Painters', 'Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762-1780)', 51-79.

⁸ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 4, 210-11.

⁹ Walpole explicitly refers to the Zeuxis story – recorded in Pliny and Cicero – in his poem *The Beauties: An Epistle to Mr Eckardt the Painter*, London: M. Cooper, 1746: 'Zeuxis' Composition Piece,/Where every Nymph that could at most/some single Grace or Feature boast,/Contribute her favourite charm/to perfect the Ideal Form'. Walpole praised the German portrait painter JB Eckardt for finding a truer beauty amongst Britain's society ladies.

¹⁰ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 3, 258-61.

capricious character.¹¹ Bushnell's abortive scheme to recreate the Trojan Horse on a London hill, full-size and in timber, with a head large enough to seat twelve men around a table, echoes the unfinished Leonardo Da Vinci projects. However, rather than evidence of an ambitious mind, in which 'desire outran the performance'¹² Walpole presents the scheme as a comical failure, and evidence of Bushnell's 'disordered brain'.¹³

Amongst sculptors Walpole did find two models of artistic genius that he could present in traditional moulds: Grinling Gibbons, whose work he owned and admired, and Anne Seymour Damer, his aristocratic niece. Accordingly, both get the Italianate treatment: Grinling Gibbons is 'an original genius, a citizen of nature' and his life is recounted via the already heavily tropic accounts of John Evelyn (who gave himself the Cimabue role - of the man who discovered Gibbons in a rustic setting).¹⁴ All the great tropes are here – Gibbons is untrained, he is discovered in a humble Deptford cottage by a passing connoisseur, his work at Petworth so closely resembles nature that it is indistinguishable.¹⁵ In an account of Damer, too, Walpole praises the subject as a 'genius,' a rival to Bernini, her works 'alive,' and her creations 'not inferior to the antique'.¹⁶

For Allan Cunningham the aspiration to Vasarian art history, and the imitation of the ancients, was not a priority. Indeed he is explicit in the *Lives* that he is interested rather in a 'clear and concise' account of British art, rather than providing another account that is 'overflowing and diffuse' and relays 'what ought to be, rather than delineating what is'.¹⁷ Cunningham's positioning of his art writing is entirely in keeping with his established aesthetics, developed since the early years of the century in his writings on native poetry and oral history.¹⁸ For Cunningham there was a consistent contrast in literature between what he saw as indirect expression - which operated via conceits, allusions and 'sallies of wit' - and the pure and direct expressions of emotion and place that appear in native song, chiefly that of his Scottish homeland. In his book of *Traditional Tales* he contrasted the history of written literature in English with true oral native poetry:

When our early written literature was filled with the thoughts, and the imagery, and the gods of the heathen, our oral or fire-side verse and prose was purely original and native, abounding with vivid presentiments of

¹¹ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 3, 258; Giorgio Vasari's 'Life of Fra Fillippo Lippi' in *Lives of the Artists*, translated by George Bull, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, 214–23.

¹² Vasari 'Leonardo da Vinci,' in Vasari, *Lives*, 264.

¹³ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 3, 260.

¹⁴ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 3, 148.

¹⁵ Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 3, 'Grinling Gibbons,' 148–55.

¹⁶ See the essay that prefaces Walpole's *Anecdotes*, third edition, vol. 4, London 1784, xi–ii. There are several more 'discovery' moments in Walpole's accounts of painters – Jan Griffiere, Godfrey Kneller - as detailed in Junod, 'Writing the Lives of Painters', 75–6.

¹⁷ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 1, 2.

¹⁸ For more on this see Sullivan, 'Chantrey, Cunningham, and the British School of Sculpture'.

action and character, an imagery fresh and green, and frequent glimpses of a sweet and a gentle fancy.¹⁹

Cunningham wrote polemically in his 1813 book of *Songs: Chiefly in the Rural Language of Scotland*, of deviations from poetic language that he applied also to art, and clearly applied too to art-writing. Metaphysical subtleties, conceits, 'quaint and remote allusions,' and especially the dead drudgery of classical references and allusions, all attracted Cunningham's ire. For Cunningham writers in this vein showed contempt for Britain, and saw everything that was of 'native growth' as vulgar. 'Those who keep themselves always within the trammels of classical imitation' he wrote, 'will ever succeed in signaling themselves for coldness of heart'.²⁰

In short, Cunningham was a nationalist, with a firm belief that there was a native, original genius in British creativity. In his essays on art, he explains that this genius appeared in degrees in the history of British art. It was, however, continually perverted by classical reference, pointless allusion, conceits and dishonesty. Cunningham's introduction to the *Lives* indicates that these strictures apply as much to art writing as to the art itself. Needless to say, the practice of reactivating Italian tropes, alluding to the classical world, or showing literary skill through repackaging other writers, was anathema to this notion of direct, truthful, national poetry.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Cunningham's use of anecdote in his *Lives* is considered, and critical. For although Cunningham frequently resists the reactivation of the *topoi* of Italian and classical precedents, he is concerned to use biographical stories to illuminate character, and give the 'vivid presentiments of action and character' that one can hear in oral and fire-side verse.²¹ How he negotiated the production of *native* anecdotes to replace the tired tropes of Walpole and other art writers can read in the *Lives* of Anne Seymour Damer, John Flaxman, John Bacon and Louis Francois-Roubiliac.

Anecdotes of the sculptor's childhood: Damer and Flaxman

The treatment of childhood is a key part of the established tropes of artistic genius, established in the earliest *Lives* of Vasari, where Cimabue recognizes the genius of Giotto when he happened to see the child scratching an image of a sheep with a pointed stone on a rock.²² Cunningham's response to one such story – that of the first appearance of the genius of Anne Damer – shows his literary strategies at work. Damer was an amateur sculptor from a rich and privileged family. The

¹⁹ Allan Cunningham, *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*, 2 vols, London: Taylor and Hessey, 1822, vol. 1, iii–iv.

²⁰ Allan Cunningham, *Songs: Chiefly in the Rural Language of Scotland*, London: Smith & Davy [etc.], 1813, vi.

²¹ Junod argues (not incompatibly) that Cunningham's approach to artist's 'lives' owed more to Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, London: J. Nichols, 1779–81, than to Vasari's *Lives*, 174.

²² 'Life of Giotto', Vasari, *Lives*, 57.

creation of a myth of her innate genius had begun when she was young, and was propagated by Walpole (her uncle), who recalled her modelling in candle wax at the age of 10,²³ and in 1780 in his *Anecdotes* accounted her a 'genius' whose works were 'not inferior to the antique'.²⁴ Damer's family and high-born friends published a steady stream of puffs about Damer, in which ever-increasing claims for her natural ability were constructed using classical references and easily-recognisable *topoi*. The *Public Characters* of 1806, spoke of how 'Apollo and the Nine seemed to preside at her birth', a fact seen by the perceptive Horace Walpole who was 'early struck with the dawning genius of Miss Conway'.²⁵ Another wrote of how 'This lady, from her earliest childhood, showed indications of the talents which have since distinguished her'.²⁶

An 1829 account of an event in Damer's childhood, published in the *Annual Biography*, follows a classic *topos*.²⁷ The narrative (which seems also to have originated with her family²⁸), has the child Damer meeting with the philosopher and historian David Hume, whilst he was in conversation with an itinerant Italian pedlar selling plaster reproductions of figures and vases.²⁹ She subsequently derided the talent by which such works were produced. Hume is said to have challenged her to be less critical, as she could not make such a thing herself. Damer responded by modelling her first work, a head in wax. Hume was surprised by the quality of the model, but commented that it was much easier to model than to carve. Damer then responded by carving a head in stone, to which Hume had no response but 'wonder and praise'.³⁰ The Damer anecdote follows a familiar pattern – the untrained artist with a natural drive, the challenge of one cultured person to another, and finally the breathless wonderment of a perceptive man at the evidence of a true talent.

Allan Cunningham says that it is 'worth telling' the story of Damer's conversion to sculpture, and indeed embellishes the tale with direct dialogue from

²³ Matthew Greg Sullivan, 'Anne Seymour Damer' in Ingrid Roscoe, Emma Hardy and Matthew Greg Sullivan, eds, *Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain 1660–1851*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, 333–7; the most recent and most fulsome account of Damer's life is Richard Webb, *Mrs D, The Life of Anne Damer (1748-1828)*, Studley, Warwickshire: Brewin Books, 2013.

²⁴ Walpole's account of Damer appeared in an essay prefacing the third edition of the *Anecdotes*, reproduced in Horace Walpole, George Vertue and James Dallaway, *Anecdotes of Painting in England with some Account of the Principal Artist... with considerable additions by the Rev James Dallaway*, Vol. 4, London: Shakspeare Press by W. Nicol, for John Major, 1827, xix–x.

²⁵ 'Mrs Damer,' *The Public Characters*, London, 1806, 34.

²⁶ *The Oriental Herald*, 10, 1826, 114.

²⁷ 'The Honourable Mrs Damer', *Annual Biography and Obituary for the Year 1829*, xiii, 1829, 125–36.

²⁸ The unnamed author cites 'Private Communications' as the principal source for the piece, which elsewhere relies on information from Damer's relative Sir Alexander Johnstone.

²⁹ Hume was in the service of Damer's father, Field-Marshal Henry Conway.

³⁰ *Annual Biography*, 126.

the two characters, and even inward motivations.³¹ Having drawn us in with the narrative Cunningham (in a strategy that recurs in the *Lives*) then questions the truth of the anecdote and undermines its power. For Cunningham the weak point is the presence of David Hume, whose role in the story was originally to give intellectual authority to the tale. Hume, says Cunningham, was 'no admirer of either poetry or sculpture' so 'I cannot receive without suspicion the statement of one of her biographers, that her early sculpture 'called forth his wonder and praise'.³² (Hume was notoriously uninterested in the visual arts, so it was an effective retort³³). Cunningham goes further: 'It may be unsafe to speak on the wonder of Hume or the commendations of Walpole', and states with narrative authority that 'Her progress, however, in spite of all her enthusiasm, was slow; and I suspect that her youth was not consumed, as has been said, in unremitting efforts to acquire the mastery over clay and marble, for we hear of no work of any note from her hand before the year 1774'.³⁴ Indeed, it is notable that Cunningham gives her age at the time of the story as 18 or 20, whereas the original anecdote gives no age, and implies she is much younger ('when yet very young'³⁵). Cunningham is at pains also to show that, far from possessing a native untrained mastery over marble, Mrs Damer *never* mastered marble carving, a fact he demonstrates by the amateurish and uneven carving of her later statue of *George III* in Edinburgh.³⁶

Undermining the claims of innate talent is one of the strategies through which Cunningham suggests that Damer is not what she pretends to be – the ultimate sin of character and art for Cunningham. As Alison Yarrington has detailed, Cunningham's Damer is a high-born actress playing the part of a sculptor. This he conveys in details that seem uncontrived, but are every bit as tropic as the stories he undermines: 'she wore a mob cap and apron to preserve her silk gown and embroidered slippers'.³⁷

In an 1820 essay on Francis Chantrey, Cunningham had made explicit his skepticism towards the trope of revelatory moments of genius in children:

Common wonder is fond of attributing the first visible impulse of any extraordinary mind to some singular circumstance.³⁸

In the *Life* of John Flaxman he addresses again the question of childhood precociousness, through collating and narrating the childhood of Flaxman, who

³¹ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 249.

³² Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 250–1.

³³ *Letters of David Hume*, ed. by JYT Grieg, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

³⁴ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 252.

³⁵ *Annual Biography*, 126.

³⁶ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 260.

³⁷ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 249; Alison Yarrington 'The Female Pygmalion: Anne Seymour Damer, Allan Cunningham and the Writing of a Women Sculptor's Life', *The Sculpture Journal*, 1, 1997, 32–44.

³⁸ Allan Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 37: 7, April 1820, 3.

was represented in recent accounts as being an infant prodigy, both in modelling and in his extensive learning.³⁹ The *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1827 wrote of young Flaxman 'The mind of the son, who was an excellent Greek and Latin scholar, seems to have been early imbued with that classic feeling and taste which it is essential an historical sculptor should possess, and in which his industry subsequently made him pre-eminent'.⁴⁰ The longest account that was written of Flaxman prior to Cunningham was a 'Brief Memoir', which seems to have been penned by Flaxman's sister-in-law Maria Denman, and was appended to the 1829 edition of the *Lectures* of Flaxman.⁴¹ In it the young Flaxman is presented as showing 'very early indications of the observation and love of art which distinguished him in later life'. Denman also presents Flaxman as untutored, and yet capable of modelling works in clay, wax and plaster that 'were certainly promises of that genius and talent which he faithfully kept in after-years'.⁴²

For Flaxman's supporters the sculptor was the most significant figure in establishing 'true taste' in Britain, that is, to achieve greatness through 'the unerring principles of the best models of antiquity, the only legitimate road by which it could be attained', in the words of Richard Westmacott.⁴³ Accordingly Flaxman could have no predecessor in the British art world, and his schooling needed to be through direct communion with the ancients. For Cunningham this view of Flaxman had no function within his narrative, as the classical taste was one of the perversities that his own master, Chantrey, had managed to overcome. What follows in his *Life* of Flaxman is a series of anecdotes and re-tellings that move the reader towards a less celebratory view of the artist.

Whilst accepting that Flaxman was 'no common child' Cunningham does much to undermine the idea of Flaxman as an auto-didact: notably by drawing attention to the fact that Flaxman was the son of a plaster-cast dealer, and hence effectively grew up in an 'academy'.⁴⁴ He also presents Flaxman's childish efforts to learn Latin to be misguided until the boy's reading received direction from the Rev AS Mathew ('what book is that?' He raised himself on his crutches, bowed and said 'Sir it is a Latin book, and I am trying to learn it'. 'Aye indeed? I answered, 'you are a fine boy; but this is not the proper book – I'll bring you a right one tomorrow'⁴⁵).

Cunningham also retells a story he heard that the sculptor Louis-Francois Roubiliac had seen drawings by the talented young Flaxman but saw 'saw nothing

³⁹ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 274–8.

⁴⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1827, 273.

⁴¹ 'Brief Memoir of John Flaxman', published in *Lectures on Sculpture by John Flaxman*, London: John Murray, 1829, x–xxvii. There is a rough draft of the essay, apparently in Maria Denman's hand, in the Flaxman Papers in the British Library, see GE Bentley, 'The Mathews as Patrons', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 46: 2, Fall 2012, fn3.

⁴² *Brief Memoir*, x–xi.

⁴³ Richard Westmacott, 'Address on the Death of John Flaxman'. Westmacott succeeded Flaxman as Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy, and spoke about Flaxman in the first lecture in 1827, see *Lectures of John Flaxman*, second edition, London: Bohn, 1838, iv–v.

⁴⁴ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 275, 280.

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 277.

in them'. It is one of the oddities of the British historiography of art that the stories of childhood genius often feature the *failure* of older, established figures to recognize the genius of a child, rather than the awestruck recognition of genius by Hume for Damer, or Evelyn for Gibbons. The story was clearly a symbolic one, as Roubiliac was the great sculptor of a previous generation, whose theatrical Baroque was – for Flaxman and his supporters – the dark taste that had been superseded by the 'true' taste for the classical world.⁴⁶ Cunningham, however, points out that as Roubiliac died in 1763, Flaxman cannot have been more than seven at the time and 'it is idle to speculate on the works of a child of seven years old; what could they be but crude feeble scratches?'⁴⁷ Suggesting not only that this particular story is meaningless, but also, more broadly, that all such attempts to see the auguries of future genius in a child's works is idle.

Another of Cunningham's tales of childhood is both borrowed and adapted from the 1829 *Brief Memoir*. In the original story the author explains that Flaxman was an auto-didact because he had experienced two lessons of instruction that were extremely disappointing. He had been instructed, in the traditional teaching method, to copy a drawing of a pair of eyes. When he did so his drawing was seen by John Hamilton Mortimer who asked 'if they were flounders?'⁴⁸ This hurt Flaxman very deeply and he asked his father if he might follow his own course of study instead. Cunningham's version, although it is from the same source, is different: it has young Flaxman not copying a drawing according to stale tradition, but making a drawing of a human eye that is clearly not terribly good, which he confidently showed to Mortimer, who replied 'is it an oyster?' The story, rather, becomes part of Cunningham's revised narrative of young Flaxman as a less gifted child than tradition was presenting.⁴⁹

Denman annotated her copy of Cunningham's *Life*, and her responses were later collated by Peter Cunningham (the authors' son) and published in 1863.⁵⁰ It is striking evidence of the battlefield that anecdote had become in elucidating the character of artists. One of her most angry comments is reserved for Allan Cunningham's descriptions of the young Flaxman as a boy deformed by illness, and unable to walk. The *Brief Memoir* had referenced a period of illness in Flaxman's young life when he was in a 'very delicate precarious state of health,'

⁴⁶ For more on the perception that Flaxman had brought about a 'revolution' in art see Matthew Craske, 'Reviving the 'School of Phidias': The Invention of a National 'School of Sculpture' in Britain (1780-1830)', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 7: 2, 2006, 28–9.

⁴⁷ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 276.

⁴⁸ *Brief Memoir*, xii.

⁴⁹ Maria Denman also had a third version of the story, recorded in her annotations to Cunningham: 'This story of Mortimer's is wrongly told. Young Flaxman was receiving lessons in drawing at school. One evening, a friend coming in, the lad showed him a copy of an eye he had been making from a drawing by his master, when this friend asked him "if it was a flat-fish?" This jest gave the youth so mean an opinion of his master's abilities, that he could not be prevailed upon to take any more lessons. Nor do I think Mortimer was the friend'. Peter Cunningham, 'New Materials for the Life of John Flaxman', *The Builder*, 21, 24 January 1863, 60.

⁵⁰ Cunningham, 'New Materials for the Life of John Flaxman'.

and added in a footnote that 'a very short time previous to this, he had been so ill, that he was supposed dead, and was laid out under that impression'.⁵¹

Cunningham's Flaxman, however, is weakly throughout his childhood, slightly deformed, home-bound and 'unable to move without crutches'.⁵² Cunningham references the crutches on several further occasions. Denman blasted in her notes 'I believe the story about the crutches to be an entire fabrication: he was always reckoned a delicate and weak child, but not *infirm*'.⁵³

Cunningham's reiteration of Flaxman's exaggerated illness seems rather to have narrative purpose, as he writes that 'the child is the mental as well as the bodily image of the man'.⁵⁴ In other words, he changes the thrust of the childhood narrative to suggest that in addition to Flaxman's intellectual childhood containing the seeds of his future excellence (as outlined in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and in the *Brief Memoir*), the body of the deformed child carried some trace of itself into the mature Flaxman. In another anecdote, this time taken from an unnamed 'noble lord', Cunningham draws a direct contrast between the classical perfection for which Flaxman strove, with his physical shortcomings. In the anecdote the sculptor was enthusiastically explaining to a patron the pose of a classical statue famous for its perfect proportions. 'Wishing to give a clear idea of it' he 'put himself in the position of the figure holding up his hand and extending his right arm said 'Look my lord at me' The diminutive stature and disproportioned body of the great sculptor supply the ludicrous of a tale which more will laugh at than fully believe'.⁵⁵

Underpinning the telling of this story is Cunningham's recurring refrain of the falseness of classical taste. For Cunningham the imitation of the antique, as he states frequently elsewhere in relation to Canova and others, has a ludicrous nature – the revival of dead gods and goddesses that mean nothing to modern times and the emotions of living beings. Here the contrast between the exaggerated deformity of Flaxman's body and the classical perfection that he admired also points to the weakness of the aesthetic.

Denman, again, felt the sting and said that whoever told the story 'lacks both sense and good feeling' and 'shows the narrowness of his own mind by endeavouring to turn into ridicule this high-minded and talented man, whom he found so much his superior, and whose worth he could not understand.... Mr Flaxman was as free from personal vanity as any man living'.⁵⁶

John Bacon: artist as Christian exemplar

One of the least flattering lives in Cunningham's tome is that of John Bacon RA (d.1799), one of the most successful sculptors in the generation before Chantrey.⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Brief Memoir*, x.

⁵² Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 278.

⁵³ *Brief Memoir*, 277.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 277.

⁵⁵ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 279.

⁵⁶ Cunningham, 'New Materials for the Live of John Flaxman', 60.

⁵⁷ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 200–46.

There was much at stake in Cunningham's account of Bacon, because the older man had been the subject of what seems to be the first full-length biography of a British sculptor: Richard Cecil's 1801 *Memoirs of John Bacon*.⁵⁸ In Cecil's work a consistent claim is made for Bacon's position as the first truly British sculptor, a man whose career showed that 'true genius is the growth of the British Isles and can be ripened in it, unassisted by foreign aid'.⁵⁹ Cunningham's problem was that this exact role - that of the first great British sculptor - he had assigned to Francis Chantrey in a pair of essays written in 1820 and 1826.⁶⁰ Bacon's clear importance as a technical pioneer (inventing a version of the modern pointing machine, and reinventing bronze sculpture) also occupied turf that Cunningham now assigned to his master.



Figure 1 John Bacon, *Monument to William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, 1778-82. London: Guildhall. Photo author.

If there were political reasons for facing down Bacon, there were also artistic issues for Cunningham, as Bacon - both as an artist and a man - spoke in allegories, symbols and conceits. The stylistic elements of his sculpture that combined classical motifs with embodied virtues and symbols (witness the profusion of symbol on the monument to the Earl of Chatham in the Guildhall, [fig. 1]) were a red rag to the Cunningham bull. Cecil also depicts him as wont to be obscure in personal conversation, using symbols and analogies to make his

⁵⁸ Richard Cecil, ed., *Memoirs of John Bacon, Esq. RA with Reflections drawn from a Review of his moral and religious Character*, London: Printed for L. B. Seeley, Fleet-Street; and Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, Paternoster-Row. By J. Seeley, Buckingham, 1822, 101.

⁵⁹ Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 17.

⁶⁰ Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey'; Allan Cunningham, 'Review Art VI – Memoirs of Antonio Canova, with a critical Analysis of his Works, and an historical View of modern sculpture. By S Memes', *Quarterly Review*, 34, June and September 1826, 110–136.

points.⁶¹ None of this appealed to Cunningham. At the same time, however, Cunningham as a writer relied on the Cecil biography for a good deal of his information about Bacon's life, and what followed was a subtle picking away at Cecil's construction of a Christian artist's life, whilst utilizing the same material to present something much less celebratory.

Cecil's biography of Bacon was itself an innovative intervention in the form of artist's biography. Cecil was an Evangelical Minister and his close friendship with Bacon came about through their shared faith. Cecil's aim in the text was not only to supply a life of the artist but to show how 'the high cause of religion and morality may be served by the knowledge and remembrance of such a character'.⁶² The aim was a Christian artist's biography, an exemplar of how to live a good Protestant, evangelical, life. One of the most striking illustrations is an anecdote which incorporates a classical artist's anecdote: at the time that Bacon was working on his greatest commission, the monument to Chatham in Westminster Abbey, a minister tapped him on the shoulder and said: 'take care what you are about – you work for eternity (alluding to the story of Zeuxis)'.⁶³ The reference was to the much-repeated story of Zeuxis, related in Plutarch, who said that the reason his works took such a long time to complete was because they needed to last a long time. However, the anecdote is developed further:

The next morning Bacon happened to see the man deliver a discourse in the pulpit, followed him to the vestry, tapped him on the shoulder and said 'take care what you are about – *you* work for eternity'⁶⁴

In this remarkable passage Bacon is seen to demonstrate a superior insight, stressing that what he does as a sculptor might last a long time, but the eternal life in Jesus Christ is the only true eternity. Indeed Bacon carved something similar on his own tombstone, when he wrote that his life as an artist meant nothing when compared to his faith in Jesus Christ.⁶⁵ Bacon is also stressing the superior importance of the one true book over the niceties of classical literature. Despite the apparent inversion of a classical artist's anecdote, however, the message of traditional artist's anecdote is reinstated: Bacon is quicker, wittier and wiser than any dilettante who parrots classical wisdom.

Cunningham upends this anecdote by re-categorising it as one of many examples of Bacon's 'affected humbleness'.⁶⁶ That is, a type of dishonest piety. For Cunningham, unaffected direct emotion is the key to both character and to great art. Deviants from this essential quality, like Anne Seymour Damer and John

⁶¹ Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 22.

⁶² Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 1.

⁶³ Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 48–9.

⁶⁴ Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 49.

⁶⁵ 'What I was as an artist,/Seemed to me of some importance while I lived;/But/What I really was as a believer/in Christ Jesus,/Is the only thing of importance/to me now'. Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 21.

⁶⁶ Cunningham, *Lives*, 243.

Bacon, are presented with fraudulent character traits that are also found in their art, which mimicked the ancients or employed the dark conceit of allegory.

The war of anecdotes persists throughout Cunningham: Cecil utilized stories, usually art-writers' tropes, to illustrate Bacon's brilliance, and comments upon the sculptor's Christian goodness. Cunningham takes the stories and retells them, subtly changing the context, and undermining the myths. Cecil, for instance, recounts two incidents from Bacon's childhood that suggest he was touched by Divine Providence: at the age of five, Bacon

fell into the pit of a soap-boiler, and would have perished, if a man, who then entered the yard, had not discovered the top of his head, and immediately drawn him out. About the same time he fell before a cart, the wheel of which went over his right hand, and must have crushed it, had it not fallen between two projecting stones.⁶⁷

For Cecil these two stories are a prelude to a disquisition about how we should all give thanks and duty to God for moments when we are preserved from danger. The fact of preserving Bacon's hands (those of the great craftsman) clearly has a special significance. Cunningham's account of Bacon's childhood and early training, although it utilizes the same stories, has a different narrative drive. Cunningham's pithy description of the same accidents, the second of which he calls 'almost miraculous', come at the start of an account of a life of populism and bogus religious sentiment, and are thus denuded of their narrative context – the account of the soap-boiler, indeed, appears parodic.⁶⁸

Cecil's narrative of Bacon's youthful period invokes many traditional *topoi*: he suggests that Bacon was forced to take a 'humble' station as a modeler in Crispe's porcelain works, until he had a revelatory moment when, for the first time, he saw the models of true sculptors (that had been brought to the kilns to be fired). He then proceeded to study, to advance quickly, and to be 'discovered' at the Royal Academy exhibition by no less a judge than the RA President, Benjamin West, who said of his model of *Mars* (supposedly Bacon's first statue) 'If this is his first essay, what will this man attain to when he arrives at maturity?'⁶⁹

Cunningham disrupts this traditional artists' narrative in several places: the period at the ceramics works, he suggests, was not the humble beginning that Bacon overcame, but rather the formative period of his style:

The school in which Bacon was educated, namely the pottery, and the artificial stone manufactory, had made him acquainted with public feeling – had revealed to him the important art of addressing his productions to the grosser faculties of the people at large.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 2.

⁶⁸ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 200.

⁶⁹ Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon*, 4–9.

⁷⁰ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 218.

The model of *Mars* (which stunned the public in Cecil's telling) is recast as a technical failure, undermined by Bacon's lack of skill in working the clay, making it look more like an Adonis than a Mars. We may now, Cunningham sniffs, 'be surprised at the admiration it wrought'.⁷¹

The anecdotes that are illustrative of Bacon's exemplarity as a good Christian receive a similar inversion. Cecil tells the story of how Bacon was a humble man and would always consider the criticisms of others, however ignorant. Cecil tells how the sculptor seriously considered Cecil's own uninformed criticisms of the proportions of a statue. Cunningham, however, uses the story to reinforce the notion of Bacon as a populist, who appealed to the grosser faculties: 'by this kind of courtesy [Bacon] won upon the vanity of human nature'⁷² As in his art, where he appealed to public taste by accessible imagery, facile classicism and easy-to-follow allegories, Bacon's life-story, initially written to illustrate artistic achievement and Christian goodness, becomes a portrait of a hypocrite, and an artist of little genius.

Roubiliac's nature and nation

Cunningham's *Life* of Louis-Francois Roubiliac, the French sculptor who transformed British sculpture in the eighteenth century, is one of the most anecdote-rich in the text.⁷³ It is also, however, one of the most vital *Lives* in establishing Cunningham's theory of art, and as a result the stories told of Roubiliac are laden with meaning.

Anecdotes of Roubiliac, his good character, and his wayward and eccentric genius began to be told during his lifetime, and multiplied in the years after his death in 1763.⁷⁴ These stories, however, were not just textual but passed on by other sculptors. As Cunningham puts it:

Much traditional matter concerning Roubiliac still lingers about our London studios; but all stories of that class require to be received with caution; and in interweaving oral information with the anecdotes of Walpole, I shall keep this rule before me.⁷⁵

In his *Life* Cunningham utilizes these oral tales extensively not only to create vivid presentiments of character, but also to ally Roubiliac's *character* with Cunningham's own view of Roubiliac's *art*. More specifically, to suggest a

⁷¹ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 206.

⁷² Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 222.

⁷³ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 31–67.

⁷⁴ For authoritative accounts of Roubiliac, as well as discussions of his contemporary reputation, see Malcolm Baker and David Bindman, *Roubiliac and the Eighteenth-Century Monument*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, and Malcolm Baker, *The Marble Index: Roubiliac and Sculptural Portraiture in Eighteenth Century Britain*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, *passim*.

⁷⁵ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 32.

character that had similar failings to his art, about which Cunningham was scathingly critical.

Cunningham, in his typical method, questions some anecdotes (where they do not suit his narrative), alters others, and relates fresh and vivid accounts where they function most effectively in the narrative and scheme. It is those anecdotes that come closest to the traditional mythic structures that receive the most sceptical treatment. A story of Roubiliac's discovery by an English traveller in Lyon, who saw the 'clay-sketches of a poetic nature in the humble studio of a young and nameless artist' is compared to a more prosaic account of Roubiliac coming to England because of a growing demand for continental workmen. The magical 'discovery' of Roubiliac is questioned and then incorporated into a more complex set of circumstances in which Roubiliac worked as a journeyman on a number of projects.⁷⁶

Similarly, a story that began circulating in the 1760s - which was regarded as an illustration of Roubiliac's gentlemanly nature - received sceptical treatment from Cunningham. In 1765 it was reported in the *London Evening Post* that Roubiliac once found a parcel of banknotes worth £7000 and belonging to a man from Yorkshire. The sculptor returned them without claiming the £500 reward. The man was so charmed that he gave him a set of plate and remembered Roubiliac in his will, sadly proved after the sculptor's death.⁷⁷ This story was considered so remarkable it was repeated in the press numerous times over the following twenty years.⁷⁸ However, the story was later related by James Northcote in a different iteration that transformed the episode into a vital moment in the artist's career. In this telling the Yorkshireman became Edward Walpole, a future patron of Roubiliac. He rewarded the sculptor not with a gift of plate but with a 'fat buck' for his table every year.⁷⁹ Cunningham takes the opportunity to question the verity of this anecdote, noting that Horace Walpole didn't mention this family story in his sketch of Roubiliac.⁸⁰ What is lost in this mangling and taking apart of the anecdote is its original purpose - the establishment of Roubiliac's honest goodness. This was, presumably, deliberate, as Cunningham's characterization hinges on broader concerns than tropic anecdotes. Cunningham's account can be summarized in his phrase on Roubiliac: 'By Nation and by Nature he was evidently a lively bustling man.'⁸¹

At the heart of Cunningham's theory of art were Nature and Nation, and a firm belief that human creativity exists to articulate our emotions towards where we come from.⁸² Cunningham makes frequent references to Roubiliac's Frenchness

⁷⁶ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 32–3.

⁷⁷ *London Evening Post*, May 11, 1765.

⁷⁸ *St James Chronicle*, May 11, 1765; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, May 13, 1765; *The Oracle*, September 27, 1792.

⁷⁹ James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London: Printed for H. Colburn, 1818, 49–50.

⁸⁰ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 34.

⁸¹ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 62.

⁸² For more on this see Sullivan, 'Chantrey, Cunningham, and the British School of Sculpture'.

– his origins, his strong French accent, his poetry in French - and it is evident that Cunningham is keen to supply an image of someone or something out of place, with a character and concerns removed from ordinary British life. He also employs anecdotes to illustrate Roubiliac's manic character, something he casts not as creative genius, but as a failure of art.

Cunningham begins with a deceptively gentle, non-judgmental account of Roubiliac's contribution to art. He says the sculptor

was a reformer, who gave powerful assistance in abolishing the literal fidelity of sculpture, and establishing in its stead the poetic personifications of sentiment and feeling.⁸³

This was a summary of a much more strongly-expressed diatribe against Roubiliac's works, earlier published by Cunningham. In those articles Cunningham wrote that British sculpture had been perverted and infected by Roubiliac's work, which had replaced the calm monumental culture of England with allegorical vignettes, mixed registers, and conceits, and attempted to show dramatic movement in an art form that should only convey more profound and reflective emotions (fig. 2).⁸⁴ However, in the *Lives*, rather than a theoretical tract, Cunningham needed to use biography to assess Roubiliac's achievement: 'How he succeeded on his part, the narrative of his life will show'.⁸⁵



Figure 2 Louis-François, Roubiliac
Monument to Mary Myddelton, (†1747).
Wrexham, Denbighshire: St Giles Parish
Church. Photo author.

Roubiliac's character had long been presented by his admirers as that of a passionate and expressive genius – a time-honoured form of the artist, whose creativity is seen to push their bodies into expressions and activities that sit

⁸³ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 41.

⁸⁴ Cunningham, 'Review Art VI', 124–5; and Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', 4.

⁸⁵ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 41.

outside common behaviour.⁸⁶ Cunningham, however, with his scepticism of traditional artist's tropes, and disapproval of Roubiliac's work, recasts the behaviour as a kind of amplified Frenchness:

To the usual bustle and liveliness of his national temperament, he added in his personal demeanour, a peculiar abundance of the ecstatic; he would drop his knife and fork – fall back in his chair – roll his eyes, writhe his face, clasp his hands in joy, and, springing from the table, hurry into his studio, to grapple at once with the design, which had been so ungracious as to appear to his fancy at meal-time. These fits, which oftener imply weakness than strength, were regarded by the world as signs that a true poetic spirit had made its appearance in sculpture.⁸⁷

These outward amplifications of interior emotion are also regarded by Cunningham as one of the principal weaknesses of Roubiliac's sculpture – where active bodies throw darts, write epitaphs, or lift busts – which have defaced the quiet nobility of church sculpture. The description of the sculptor's monuments echoes the description of the person, they were 'all action and flutter – the postures generally violent, and the expression strained'.⁸⁸ Gothic monuments may have been a little bleak but what replaced them was worse, 'much too lively and spirited – they were overinformed with motion – the men seemed all resolved to speak, and the women to dance'.⁸⁹

Cunningham suggests that these outward contortions are anathema to a true understanding of creativity, he says of the Roubiliac monument of the musician GF Handel that his 'gladness of face and agitation of body tell us, that the sculptor imagined Handel's finest strains to have been conceived amidst contortions worthy of the Cumean Sibyl... the clothes are infected with the agitation of the man, and are in staring disorder. They seem to have been thrown on to meet the sudden exigency of some random fit of inspiration...' What Roubiliac's monuments required, according to Cunningham was more 'sobriety',⁹⁰ one of several associations Cunningham made between Roubiliac and drunkenness. Roubiliac's favourite pastime, we are told, was to visit the tavern.

In one telling anecdote we find Roubiliac drunk, and inviting a locked-out drinking companion to stay in the spare room at his home. He takes the friend to the bedroom and wishes him goodnight. The guest stripped and climbed into bed, and found to his horror that the bed was already occupied by a corpse.

"Roubiliac" he shouted, till the whole house echoed – "Roubiliac, come here!" The sculptor burst into the chamber, exclaiming "Mon Dieu! What is de matter?" "the matter!" said his friend – "look there!" "Oh dear oh dear!" said the artist; affected, it is said to tears – "it is poor negro Mary, my

⁸⁶ See Baker, *The Marble Index*, 180; and Bindman and Baker, *Roubiliac*, 77.

⁸⁷ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 43.

⁸⁸ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 43.

⁸⁹ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 43.

⁹⁰ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 43.

housemaid. She died yesterday, and they have laid her out here. Poor Mary! Oh dear me! – Come, I shall find you another bed".⁹¹

Cunningham doesn't comment on the anecdote further, but it illustrates his view of Roubiliac's engagement with death: drunken, dramatic, overblown and emotional. There is inappropriateness present in all of Cunningham's anecdotes of the man. In another Anglicised version of the Zeuxis myth of the body composed of disparate excellencies, Cunningham relates that Roubiliac composed his figures from different parts of different workmen, but also from respectable women, who reeled under his inappropriate attentions:

If he happened to be in company with a lady whose hands were beautiful, or whose ears were small and finely shaped, he would gaze wistfully at her, and has been known to startle sensitive spinsters with apprehensions of matrimony, seizing them suddenly by the wrist, and crying rapturously – "Madam, I must have your hand – madam, I shall have your ear!"⁹²

The most heavily symbolic of the anecdotes takes place in a church, suitable to the Life of the man who 'reformed' church sculpture, and again elides the person of Roubiliac with his aesthetic. In it the Westminster Abbey mason, Thomas Gayfere, finds Roubiliac taking time from the installation of the Nightingale monument to admire the ancient tomb of Sir Francis Vere d.1609⁹³ - an admirable work, Cunningham says, which tells its story simply and effectually. Roubiliac put his hand on Gayfere's arm, pointed and said 'Hush! He will speak soon'.⁹⁴ This theatrical response, coupled with the belief in the impossible, as well as its childishness, is clearly meant to represent Roubiliac's ethos toward death and the monument. The age of stillness and simplicity, embodied in a recumbent monument had been reformed in Westminster Abbey by Roubiliac's introduction of complex, overblown and supernatural allegories.

What is notable in the story, however, is that Cunningham has adapted an earlier anecdote by JT Smith, and altered it to increase the symbolism.⁹⁵ In Smith Roubiliac is looking at the monument to Henry, Lord Norris (1601)⁹⁶ which also incorporates a recumbent figure, but is a much busier affair with multiple complex elements, and contains more movement than the De Vere monument. Furthermore, Roubiliac is whispering, much more respectfully.

In Roubiliac's *Life*, then, we see Cunningham's anecdotal strategies, both at a creative and a critical level: He takes issue with the very notion that an artist should be gripped by a creative force that renders them socially unusual, and instead suggests that such eccentricities betray a base belief in outward show, and

⁹¹ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 64.

⁹² Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 63.

⁹³ For images and a catalogue description of this monument see 'Sir Francis Vere', westminster-abbey.org, accessed 24 September 2019.

⁹⁴ Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 61.

⁹⁵ John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and his Times*, London: H. Colburn, 1828, vol. 2, 90.

⁹⁶ 'Henry Lord Norris', westminster-abbey.org, accessed 24 September 2019.

over-dramatic gesture. Cunningham's anecdotes dealing with Roubiliac's treatment of death and the supernatural have an immediacy consistent with Cunningham's method, but are also symbolic of Cunningham's view of the Frenchman's work, and the perversions that it introduced into the National art.

'Chantrey's Trumpeter'

The obscure sculptor Henry Sibson (b.1795) gave a very striking account of Allan Cunningham long after the poet's death. Sibson had unsuccessfully attempted to secure a position in Chantrey's workshop in c. 1814, and with some enmity later recalled 'Allan Cunningham the mason, and Scotch poet – and Trumpeter for his employee'.

I think I see him now, a stalwart figure, with a long, full grey-morning coat, a large low-crowned hat, with broad brim, so unusual in that day, with a real hard Scotch face when he told me "there are very, very few persons who know what sculpture is" (intended for me no doubt).⁹⁷

Cunningham's role as strident aesthete and 'Chantrey's trumpeter' became established in 1820 and 1826, with his two poetic accounts of Chantrey's genius, and its role in the history of British sculpture.⁹⁸ In these he developed his original vision of 'what sculpture is'. Cunningham's use of anecdote in these hagiographies of his employer, however, reveals several cracks in his aesthetic of direct, natural expression, which he was to employ to notable effect in the *Lives*. In the 1820 piece in *Blackwood's Magazine* he un-ironically uses many of the most familiar ancient tropes of artistic genius to describe Chantrey.

In the 1820 *Blackwood's* account almost all of the fundamental elements identified by Kris and Kurz are used to establish Chantrey's exceptionalism.⁹⁹ Chantrey is depicted as a self-taught farm hand, who 'amused himself by making resemblances of various objects in clay' having no idea at the time that it was 'the path which nature had prepared for his fame'. Cunningham's Chantrey 'always preferred copying nature. He had no other idea of style but that with which nature supplied him'.¹⁰⁰ Although Cunningham would never interrupt his sophisticated narrative by directly referencing other writers, Chantrey is clearly placed in a line of artists dating back to the Sicyonian painter Eupompos, who copied no-one but nature (*Naturam ipsam imitandam esse, non artificem*), and supplies the model for all subsequent genius.¹⁰¹ Even Chantrey's decision to become an artist in Sheffield appears as a revelatory moment, as he was waiting to begin his first day of work as an apprentice at a solicitors' office:

⁹⁷ 'Henry Sibson's Autobiography', Tate Archive and Library, MS 9919.1-7, vol. 3, 1869.

⁹⁸ Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey'; and Cunningham 'Review Art VI'. Cunningham was also responsible for numerous letters to newspapers and journals about Chantrey.

⁹⁹ Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic*, passim.

¹⁰⁰ Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', 3.

¹⁰¹ Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic*, 15.

On his first day he arrived an hour early in eagerness but as he walked up and down the street his attention was attracted by some figures in the window of one Ramsay, a carver and gilder. He stopped to examine them, and was not without those emotions which original minds feel in seeing something congenial. He resolved at once to become an artist; and perhaps, even then, associated his determination with those ideas and creations of beauty from which his name is now inseparable.¹⁰²

Cunningham is aware that his story is tropic, but fends off reproach by insisting that unlike most stories of this type, it is actually true:

Common wonder is fond of attributing the first visible impulse of any extraordinary mind to some singular circumstance, but nothing can be better authenticated than the fact which decided the destiny of his talents.¹⁰³

For Cunningham, however, there is no Cimabue moment, in which another genius recognizes Chantrey's ability. Indeed, we have quite the opposite - that much-used British trope of the recurring failure of others to recognize talent - which inscribes more forcibly the notion of Chantrey as an auto-didact, and as the one true Nature-child. In the next part of the story, Chantrey had resolved to take an apprenticeship with Ramsay, but the younger man's innate ideas of art and excellence grated with those of the older man. Ramsay even defaced Chantrey's work,

and ordered all such labours to be discontinued in future. For this conduct, it is difficult to find either an excuse or a parallel. But true genius, no power on earth can keep back - it will work its way to distinction through all the obstructions of folly or envy. It loves to expatiate in secrecy over its future plans - it contemplates its growing powers with silent joy, and prepares to come forth on the world, in the fullness of might and the freshness of beauty.¹⁰⁴

In an anti-Vasarian theme to which Cunningham, as we have seen, returns in the *Lives*, he muses that 'judicious counsellors seldom fall to the lot of early genius'.¹⁰⁵ Later in the *Blackwood's* piece Cunningham also berates a sculpture committee who failed to award a contract to Chantrey, and the Royal Academy for its failure to appreciate Chantrey until relatively recently. These examples of misguided authority fit closely with Cunningham's narrative of an art world that struggled to rid itself of the infection of foreign style, and bad art, until Chantrey came to return British art to itself.

¹⁰² Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', 3.

¹⁰³ Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', 3.

¹⁰⁴ Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', 4.

¹⁰⁵ Cunningham, 'Francis Chantrey', 4.

If Cunningham was prone to suspend his resistance to classical and renaissance *topoi* when it came to describing Chantrey, it seems that Chantrey himself was actually an enthusiastic inhabitant of the artist's persona, and its mythic structures. Indeed, Chantrey was the originator of several of the most tropic of the tales of his childhood. John Barrow, who knew Chantrey through the Royal Society, recalled – in a little known account of the sculptor – that Chantrey had told him a number of amusing tales of his childhood at a Royal Society dinner. Chantrey, he said, told him that he had come from a 'humble' background, and used to carry milk for the farm on which he lived. He began by making 'grotesque figures' out of the local 'yellow clay'. The significance of Chantrey's account of himself as a milk-boy becomes clearer as the sculptor also describes how he used to churn the milk by day and model using the butter afterwards. Barrow recorded Chantrey at another dinner telling him another well-rehearsed anecdote of his origins when an ornamented pie came to the dining table:

This same pie brings forcibly to my recollection my having moulded, at the request of a good old dame, for the ornament of her Christmas pie-crust, a sow and pig, taken from the life in her farm-yard: I was then but a boy, but modeling in clay was a passion which daily increased.¹⁰⁶

Chantrey's own table-talk account of his training diverges from Cunningham's. Two Sheffield men act as the discoverers of his talent in Chantrey's account – the engraver JR Smith, and an unnamed statuary who taught him stone-carving. He also credited Joseph Nollekens with giving him his first spot at the Royal Academy.¹⁰⁷ All are removed from Cunningham's early accounts, where the sculptor is presented, rather, as untrained and unsupported except by his driving natural genius.¹⁰⁸

Other stories of Chantrey pressed the sculptor even further into the realm of tropic myth, and these stories may too have also emanated from the man himself. An 1842 account in the *Times* described Chantrey's first work as a portrait of his headmaster 'Old Fox' carved with a penknife on a stick. The headmaster bought the portrait from him ('What effect the incident may have had on his future destiny, let the philosophic or learned in such matters decide'¹⁰⁹). In another, mind-boggling counterfactual, account after Chantrey's death in 1841 a writer argued that it would not be possible for another sculptor to complete Chantrey's

¹⁰⁶ John Barrow, *Sketches of the Royal Society and Royal Society Club by Sir John Barrow, Bart, FRS*, London: John Murray, 1849, 175. For more on Chantrey anecdotes involving food, and his construction as a 'John Bull' character, see Amy Harris, *Forming a national Collection: Sculpture in the Chantrey Bequest, 1875 – 1917*, PhD thesis, University of York, Chapter One, 14–16.

¹⁰⁷ Barrow, *Sketches of the Royal Society*, 176, 181.

¹⁰⁸ Although Cunningham does mention Nollekens' kindness to Chantrey in his 'Life of Joseph Nollekens', Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 190.

¹⁰⁹ *The Times*, 4 March 1842, 5.

unfinished works, as the sculptor employed a direct carving technique similar to Michelangelo:

Chantrey's mode of execution had in it a peculiarity that will of necessity tend to embarrass any other artist who may be charged with the completion of his designs. Sir Francis Chantrey very rarely adhered to the style of configuration which he might have previously contemplated. He wrought more from mind than models. When the subject pleased him he went on *con amore*, and with extraordinary rapidity; when that was not the case he never persisted in following out his first-formed conception.¹¹⁰

This bizarre account ignored the numerous accounts of Chantrey's highly-streamlined workshop process, which involved very little carving on Chantrey's part after the initial clay model had been completed and saved in plaster: the vast majority of Chantrey's 180 surviving models have almost no variations when they were carved by the workshop in marble.¹¹¹ Cunningham had, indeed, sought to divest the public of their faith in direct, inspired carving, by suggesting in the *Lives* that Chantrey's considered and precise use of models was far preferable to that of Michelangelo, for whom he had very little admiration:

It is true that Michelangelo grappled at once with the marble block, and shaping the figure in imagination before him, hewed it boldly out, and derided those who went the roundabout way of models. But this was a wild waste of time; had he modeled his statue in clay, cast it in plaster, and got it rough-hewn by some ordinary hand, he might have made three where he made one, and at the same time avoided those mistakes in proportion of which he was accused.¹¹²

It fell to a later biographer, John Holland, to interrogate the verity of the proliferating anecdotes of Chantrey as an untrained and maligned farm boy, milk-boy, or donkey-boy, possessed of an untrained genius, and who worked '*con amore*'.¹¹³ Holland, indeed, carried out on Chantrey the kind of critical approach that Cunningham practiced on all the other subjects in the *Lives*, but never practiced on his own master.

In the accounts of Francis Chantrey, then, we see the full range of traditional artists' anecdotes, from the plainly tropic, in which facts take second-place to the joy of reactivating ancient *topoi*, to Chantrey's own, and only just credible, depiction of his own childhood in nature. For Allan Cunningham the mission to problematize traditional anecdotal structures, and dispel the tropic language of greatness, was substantially compromised where he attempted to

¹¹⁰ 'The late Sir Francis Chantrey', *The Times*, 1 December 1841, 6.

¹¹¹ The surviving models are in the Ashmolean Museum.

¹¹² Cunningham, *Lives*, vol. 3, 348.

¹¹³ See John Holland, *Memorials of Sir Francis Chantrey, RA, Sculptor, in Hallamshire and Elsewhere*, Sheffield: J. Pearce, 1851, *passim*, and 'Chantrey and Norton', *The Reliquary Quarterly Journal and Review*, 3, 1862-3, 19-25.

Matthew Greg Sullivan 'Vivid presentiments of action and character': Allan
Cunningham's Anecdotes of British Sculptors

bestow greatness on his hero. Here alone he struggled to replace the tired *topoi* of tradition with fresh, green presentiments of character.

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