

MONUMENTAL DECADENCE: THE GREAT EXHIBITION AND THE ALBERT MEMORIAL

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A stounding claims punctuated accounts of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Organizers and commentators declared that the Crystal Palace's extravagant display of objects dignified work, proved English supremacy, and marked the triumph of rational recreation. Furthermore, these hyperbolic claims tended to break into narrative. Catalogues, newspapers, and periodicals plotted and replotted the Great Exhibition. For instance, one article in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* begins,

When, after the lapse of ages, the young student of history, perusing the annals of his country, glances at this memorable period of the nineteenth century, he will learn with astonishment and reverence what the resources, the ingenuity, and the perseverance of his ancestors accomplished [. . .] he will learn that, upon the suggestion of a well-intentioned and amiable prince [. . .] the creative armies of the nation dauntlessly challenged all the empires of the earth to a bloodless contest. ("Great Exhibition" 261)

This essay begins where the article in *Tait's* leaves off; that is to say, it acknowledges the stories the Great Exhibition generated and the sequels the "student of history" has written for them. Some scholars dwell on the 1854 reconstruction of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham. Others focus on the South Kensington museum complex, which was constructed with proceeds from the Great Exhibition and served as the crux of Albertopolis. This essay turns to another feature of Albertopolis – the National Memorial to the Prince Consort – to tell a different sequel for some of the Great Exhibition's most powerful narratives.

Albert died on December 14, 1861, and although memorials to him soon blanketed the nation, I single out the structure in Hyde Park because it commemorated the Great Exhibition at least as much as it glorified the Prince Consort.¹ By 1863, the architect, George Gilbert Scott, was supervising a large team of sculptors and other skilled workers in the erection of this Memorial, a statue of Prince Albert clutching the Great Exhibition catalogue, housed in an elaborately ornamented open Gothic revival shrine, surrounded by eight symmetrically arranged groups of allegorical statues, and supported by a base decorated with an alto-relievo frieze of 169 famous figures from the arts (fig. 1). The Memorial, its commemorative albums, and its

¹ This glut of memorials to Albert provoked Charles Dickens to write a friend with the entreaty, "If you should meet with an inaccessible cave anywhere, to which a hermit could retire from the memory of Prince Albert and testimonials to the same, pray let me know of it. We have nothing solitary and deep enough in this part of England" (qtd in Darby and Smith 102). Indeed, the Prince was, as Mark Stocker quips, "more famous for being dead than alive" ("Uncrowned" 650).



Fig. 1: The National Memorial to the Prince Consort in Hyde Park

official Victorian handbook are saturated with allusions to the Great Exhibition ranging from the obvious to the outrageous. Two references to the Memorial's sculpture of Asia will make my point (fig. 2). First, the obvious: according to Scott, the four sculptures constituting the lower groups (including *Asia*) represent "allegorically the quarters of the globe, with reference to the great International Exhibitions, which have done so much for practical art and manufactures [. . .] and which claim the Prince Consort as their great originator" (qtd in *Handbook* 16). As for the outrageous, the *Asia* sculpture is organized around a figure removing her veil and exposing her breasts, a gesture which the *Handbook* insists represents "an allusion to the important display of the products of Asia, which was made at the Great

Exhibition in 1851" (23).² In this way, the Memorial concretises and conflates narratives about Albert and the Exhibition in one structure.

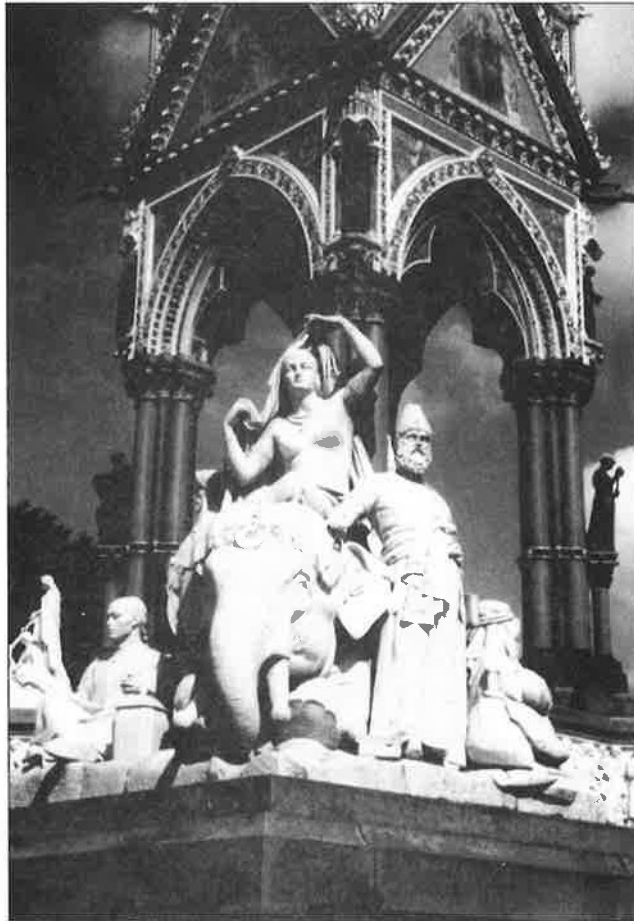


Fig. 2: *Asia*, J.H. Foley

Memorials honour their subjects, but they also presuppose death, loss, and discontinuity. Something must be gone or in decline before it can be mourned. Moreover, scholars have begun recently to complicate the very premise behind memorial structures or what Adrian Forty calls “the Western tradition of memory,”

² The *Saturday Review* was sceptical about this official reading of the *Asia* sculpture. According to the newspaper’s reviewer, Asia’s striptease “was more likely to suggest to the average spectator that the young lady was removing her dress for a dip in the Ganges” (qtd in Darby and Smith 54).

which assumes that memories can be preserved by giving them object form (2). In the first place, erecting a monument to commit someone or something to memory betrays the possibility that the person or thing is susceptible to oblivion. Or, to extend this notion, I would assert that memorials may even produce the amnesia that they are presumed to forestall. As James E. Young explains, “[O]nce we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember” (5). Secondly, as Young also notes, the past that memorials construct depends on “a variety of national myths, ideals, and political needs” (1). In other words, the historical narratives that memorials hypostatise and the national public memories that they instantiate are inflected by the requirements and motives of their originators. What both of these complications suggest is that memory is hopelessly allusive. According to Michel de Certeau, “Memory is a sort of an anti-museum: it is not localizable” (108), an idea Forty explicates this way: “when it [memory] ceases to be capable of [. . .] alteration, when it becomes fixed to particular objects, then it is in decay” (7). A memorial endows the subject it commemorates with a sense of belatedness. What I am arguing is that by fixing the Great Exhibition’s narratives of work, nation, and rational recreation in stone, the Albert Memorial signalled their decadence.³

The Exhibition and the Memorial tell many of the same narratives about work despite the fact that they occupy different historical moments (the Memorial was not finished until 1874). Both embrace an ethic of work for work’s sake. They romanticize work as evidence of individual moral worth and the source of British greatness. Likewise, both the Exhibition and the Memorial suppress inconvenient counter narratives about work, especially those describing the exploitation of the least powerful workers (starving needlewomen, overworked factory girls, and sweated tailors, for example). In part, then, the decadence of the Memorial’s narratives about work consists in their sheer exhaustion.

The Memorial makes its main statement about the importance of work in its statues of the “industrial arts” of *Agriculture*, *Manufactures*, *Commerce*, and *Engineering*. The workers in these statues are hale and heroic. Taken together, these four statuary groups bespeak the glories of science, steam power, and free trade. But whereas the Exhibition merely aestheticized work, the Memorial allegorises it, too. Consider *Manufactures* by Henry Weekes (fig. 3). Despite its many details, this group is more symbolic than realistic. What it depicts is not an actual scene of work – the workers are limited to displaying, Great Exhibition-like, the tools or commodities of their trades – but a fable about the composition of English industrial might. The labourers come from entirely different workplaces and serve as props in this fable. Each of the figures – a smith, a weaver, and a potter – embodies one sector of the English economy; so, for example, the *Handbook* explains that the smith “refers to the importance of the iron manufactures” in England (26). The three workers are assembled in one place to make a point about English economic domination.

³ I do not want to conjure up art for art’s sake connotations of decadence. The Albert Memorial certainly does not react against middle-class ideals. Rather, as will become apparent, I am using this word in a less historically precise, more multifaceted sense.



Fig. 3: Steel engraving of Henry Weekes's *Manufacturers*, from Dafforne's *The Albert Memorial in Hyde Park*

Furthermore, at the centre of each of these groups is an allegorical woman figure, "the presiding genius" of the scene who "directs," and "encourages" (*Handbook* 26-27) the other figures and displays symbolic paraphernalia idealizing and, ironically enough, pastoralizing her industrial art. In *Manufactures*, the central woman figure holds an hour-glass in one hand "as indicative of the value of time, an essential element in all manufacturing operations," and she gestures with her other hand toward a beehive representing industry (*Handbook* 26). Victorian constructions of gender made the private feminine sphere of the home a foil for the masculine public sphere of the workplace; accordingly, by embodying the idea of work in a woman, *Manufactures*, like the other industrial arts groups, mythologizes and dehistoricizes it. The *Manufactures* group erases the issues of class conflict, the distinctions between masters and men or management and labour which might otherwise be evoked by the hour-glass symbol. After all, central to the many Factory Acts and other workplace reform bills of the Victorian period was the question of time or the number of hours that constituted a workday.⁴ By incarnating supervisory power in a female figure,

⁴ Much of this reform legislation gives the lie to the Great Exhibition's rhetoric equating industrialization with time-saving measures. The parliamentary investigations that inspired much of this legislation forced observers to ask whose time was really being saved when handicraft trades were mechanized.

Weekes renders its exercise benign. The beehive symbol further reinforces this message by identifying productivity with a feminised and fertile natural order, thus implying that English manufacturers create products through non-alienating processes.

The Albert Memorial also contains a condensed and highly stylised expression of the Great Exhibition's narratives of nation. To begin with, Victorian observers aspired to make the Memorial express Englishness. Even before a design had been selected, the *Edinburgh Review* warned that the nation's reputation would be at stake in the creation of the Memorial: "If it [a memorial] be erected at all, it is erected for all time, and it would be a just subject of recrimination and regret if it were not worthy of [...] the people by whom it is to be raised" ("Public" 566). And like the Exhibition, the Memorial delineates Englishness by juxtaposing it with other national identities. On a practical level, the Memorial uses the four sculptural groups of the continents (*Asia, Africa, America, and Europe*) to make this juxtaposition architectural. On a theoretical level, the sculptural groups – what Scott called the "continental sentiments" – reduce the rest of the world to nothing more than an additional series of abstract ideas to be mastered aesthetically. As Richard Stein astutely observes, the very organization of the Memorial suggests that the continents and the industrial arts are mere counterparts in a single comprehensive scheme dedicated to fuelling England's mighty economic machine: "Surrounding the prince are figures of industrial arts and territories, ranged in concentric circles that represent them as analogous sites of labour and production, sources of wealth and power" (243). The rest of the world (the continents) supplies raw materials and markets for the commodities (the industrial arts) English workers produce. In this way, the Memorial dramatizes the mid-century continuity between England's precocious industrialization and powerful imperialism.

Like the Exhibition, the Memorial purports to bring "all the world" to London (fig. 4). The Exhibition's narratives of nation characterized the Crystal Palace as a microcosm of the world, a festival of peace, and a prefiguration of shared prosperity. Similarly, the Memorial colonizes the rest of the world by symbolically importing it into its Hyde Park domain and then reconstructing it according to British interests. The Memorial uses a strategy of what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo terms "imperialist nostalgia" to conceal the real world complement to this symbolic domination. For Rosaldo, imperialist nostalgia is based on "mourning for what one has destroyed," and it functions according to a dialectic of progress and stasis:

Imperialist nostalgia occurs alongside a peculiar sense of mission, the white man's burden, where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones. In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity. "We" valorize innovation and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the confluences of the two. (108)

The sculptural group allegorising Africa, which includes imagery contrasting “European civilization” and “the uncivilized races of [Africa]” (*Handbook* 24), certainly fits this pattern, but John Foley’s sculptural group, *Asia*, constitutes the Memorial’s best example of imperialist nostalgia and its most explicit visual echo of the Great Exhibition’s narratives of nation.

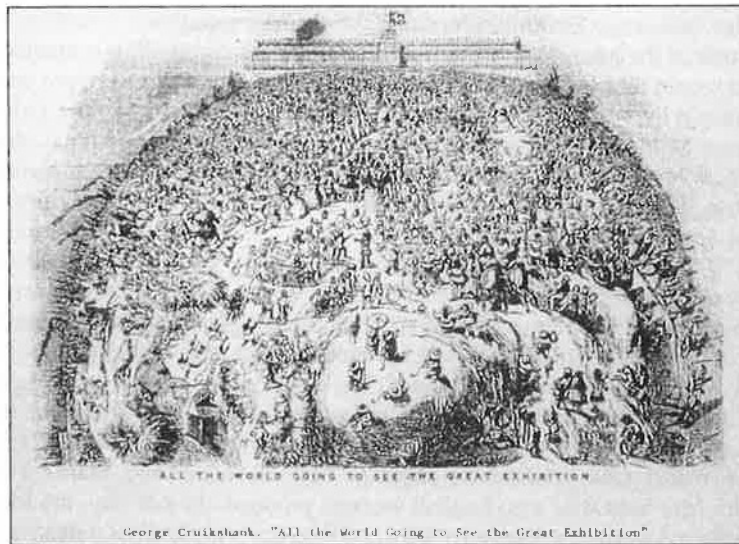


Fig. 4: George Cruikshank. “All the World Going to See the Great Exhibition”

To understand how the *Asia* sculptural group embodies imperialist nostalgia, it is, however, useful to begin with the sculptural group of *Europe* (fig. 5). In *Europe*, the central allegorical figure holds an orb and sceptre betokening, in the words of the *Handbook*, “the influence which Europe has exercised over the other continents” (22). These two symbols are repeated at the top of the shrine in the form of a globe and cross. The Memorial’s Wilberforcian translation of sceptre into cross is significant because Christianity functioned as the rationalization for much of the imperial power England and other European nations exerted throughout the nineteenth century.

In the *Asia* group, a potter, a warrior, a poet, and a merchant surround a partially disrobed woman figure seated on an elephant. The Memorial uses this vignette to establish the other half of the familiar Victorian contrast between (Western) progress and (Eastern) stasis. According to the *Handbook*, *Asia* is, in fact, stasis personified: “The general feeling of repose which pervades this group is [. . .] characteristic of a great continent over which the tide of civilisation has flowed ages ago, and of which the renown of the individual countries rests more on the acts and life of former times than on any present action or movement” (23). What the *Handbook* fancies a general feeling of repose derives primarily from the kind of post-coital languor of the group’s central allegorical figure. Furthermore as Stein points out, in this figure especially,



Fig. 5: *Europe*, Patrick MacDowell

the Memorial eroticises imperial power itself: “In effect, the continent – ‘unveiling India,’ as the figure became known – puts herself on display as a tempting consumable delicacy. Subjection is willing, it seems” (244). Asia was a part of the world that had recently enough proved itself troublesome. Not only did India stage a mutiny in 1857 and 1858, but China had engaged England in the Second Opium War from 1857 to 1860. India and China were, then, newly suppressed, not unlike the “prostrated” elephant at the centre of *Asia*, which the *Handbook* remarks “is intended to typify the subjection of brute force to human intelligence” (23). What *Asia* signifies, therefore, is England’s nostalgia for an earlier time, before the Indian Mutiny and the Opium Wars, a time when subjection seemed willing and coercion was not required because “influence” sufficed.⁵

⁵ In *The Lion’s Share*, Bernard Potter traces British imperialism from 1850 to 1983. He characterizes mid-century England as devoted to the ideals of free trade and cautious about expanding overseas political responsibilities. According to him, “responsibilities [. . .] towards the security of the nation and her trade, and towards her subject races [. . .] frequently made the accepted ideal of political abstinence impossible to maintain. In the long run perhaps the chief effect of ‘anti-imperialist’

Ultimately, though, the Albert Memorial is world-engulfing in more than one way. Besides its statues to industry and the continents, its complicated iconographic program also embraces references to “the whole range of science and of practical art and industry” (*Handbook* 17), including astronomy, chemistry, geology, geometry, rhetoric, medicine, philosophy, and physiology; allegorical and historical representations of painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, and poets; and images of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, and humility and the moral virtues of fortitude, prudence, justice, and temperance. As Prince Charles claims in his letter introducing one of the most recent guidebooks to the Memorial, “George Gilbert Scott designed [the Memorial] not only to celebrate the Prince Consort’s life, but also to explain the ideals and aspirations of the whole Victorian age” (Chris Brooks, n. pag.).⁶ The Memorial is, as Stein points out, one of the best examples of the Victorian urge to erect “monuments to monumentality itself” (241). In this respect, it is not only an exercise in national aggrandizement, but also a taxonomic *tour de force* and a sculptural “key to all mythologies.”

The Memorial is literally fraught with symbolism. To wit, the *Times* counselled visitors about the importance of consulting the seventy-nine page *Handbook* to decode its concentrated iconography: “The handbook is a very necessary aid to those who would [. . .] read the meaning and learn the lesson of the work before him” (“Albert” 3). And there is no denying that, for example, John Bell’s sculpture of *America* is a veritable bricolage of symbolic detail. Everything tells. Note the detail with which the *Handbook* explicates the central figure in Bell’s group:

In her right hand is a stone-pointed feathered lance, with Indian “totems” of the grey squirrel and humming-bird; and on her left arm she bears a shield with blazons of the principal divisions of the hemisphere – the eagle for the States, the beaver for Canada, the one star for Chile, the volcanoes for Mexico; the alpaca for Peru, and the southern cross for Brazil. (24-25)⁷

sentiment on practical policy in the 1860s and ‘70s was to inculcate a general feeling of resentment against those unco-operative peoples whose recalcitrance had forced Britain to take them over (as it seemed) against her will” (50). The point I am making here is that by embodying *Asia* in a sexualised figure of a woman unveiling herself, the Memorial projects a tractability onto an area of the world that had recently displayed a spirit of independence at odds with English economic and political goals.

⁶ Of course, the Memorial’s ambitious symbolic program has not always inspired this kind of easy admiration. A reviewer for the *Athenaeum* objected to the Memorial’s emphasis on the ideal at the expense of the real: “When we miss those effigies of the dead, if not of the living [Albert’s advisors] and find statues of Europe, Asia, Africa, America, to say nothing of Engineering, Manufactures, and what not besides Astronomy, Navigation, Therapeutics, Toxicology, and, for what we know, Taxidermy, accompanied by Shakespeare, Josquin des Pres, Rameau, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Vanbrugh, and some scores more [. . .] the notion is almost irresistible, that to these even more than to the Prince Consort has this Memorial been erected” (“National” 633).

⁷ Each of Bell’s other three figures is equally burdened with symbolic baggage. In fact, Bell was so concerned that viewers might misread the battery of symbolic details in his statuary group that he lobbied (unsuccessfully) to have explanatory inscriptions added to his section of the Memorial.

In fact, much of the writing about the Memorial has been devoted to teasing out interpretations of its allegories, deciphering its symbols, and elucidating the significance of the many historical figures who ring the base of its structure. As my own readings of the statuary demonstrate, the Memorial positions the viewer in exactly this way.

I construe the interpretive activity prompted by this dense symbolism as a component of the Memorial's ambition to be a site for rational recreation. By mid-century, rational recreation had achieved an authority which was practically uncontested. It embodied a utilitarian fantasy that entertainment might be rendered educational, that exhibition-going, for instance, might present opportunities for self-improvement. It also grew out of a drive to expand the public sphere to encompass some leisure sites. Be that as it may, rational recreation was thoroughly enmeshed in class politics. On the one hand, calls for "useful" leisure attractions served as an implicit critique of aristocratic exclusivism and idleness and a corresponding assertion of middle-class moral superiority. On the other hand, rational recreation derived from a middle-class apprehension that working-class forms of amusement (invariably metonymically linked with drinking) might wreak havoc with public order. Above all, therefore, rational recreationists promoted theories of class mixing and emulation. Rational recreation was a curious blend of wishful thinking and civic duty, class aspirations and social anxieties, a tendency toward humorlessness and other more generous impulses.⁸ But where the organizers of the Exhibition exhorted visitors to acts of rational recreation, the Memorial aspired to enforce rational recreation by its very design. As the *Handbook* claims, "[T]his form of Memorial becomes not only an illustration of, but also practically realises, many of those objects which the Prince kept constantly in view" (3). Visiting the Memorial was not merely an act of allegiance to the widowed Queen or a sightseeing excursion; it was educational and it invited emulation. In this respect, the Memorial conformed to what was emerging as one of the standard objectives for public art.⁹

Pursuing this line of thought, I want to suggest that the Memorial's overdetermined iconography and precious architectural vocabulary are also an expression of its decadence. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argues that the overwrought style characteristic of decadence (its "extravagances and crudities") signifies a temporary historical

⁸ For an excellent account of the rise and fall of rational recreation see Richard Altick's *The Shows of London*.

⁹ According to Elisabeth Darby and Nicola Smith, "[The] conviction that images of good men could inspire others, particularly of the working classes, undoubtedly lay behind [. . .] the erection [. . .] of increasing numbers of public statues of national and local worthies" (59). Darby and Smith go on to note that "[a]fter his death the Prince Consort joined this pantheon of national heroes, and memorials incorporating an image of him were erected with this didactic function in mind" (59). And the *Handbook* to the Memorial confirms this interpretation: "[S]uch memorials serve as an example to future generations, encouraging them to emulate the same virtues and good qualities which were possessed by him whose memory is thus recorded" (3).

disjunction between the effects to which an art form aspires and the technical idiom available for producing those effects. For him, decadent excess connotes an art form's "richest historical energies" (237). He asserts that the decadence of Dadaism – its provocative defiance of aura – helped create a demand for the kind of pleasures, based on distraction, which film offered. Likewise, I am contending that behind the Albert Memorial's surfeit of symbolism was an aspiration to render rational recreation performative, an aspiration which was, in one important respect, at least, more fully realized in what Eric Hobsbawm characterizes as the ritualised open public spaces of Edwardian London. While symbol-laden statuary might educate viewers, the public spaces Hobsbawm describes were better equipped to promote the class mixing central to the larger ideal of rational recreation.

In "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," Hobsbawm traces the fate of hyper-symbolic nineteenth-century English statuary, like the Memorial, "capable of being 'read' in the manner of a strip cartoon" ("Mass" 305). He maintains that the prestige and popularity of this allegorical statuary disappeared suddenly only to be replaced by the "construction of formal ritual spaces" where "the movements of the actors themselves" take on primary importance: "The mania for statuary [. . .] was destined to decline with dramatic suddenness [. . .] in line with the exhaustion of the old language of public symbolism, the new settings for such public ritual were to stress simplicity and monumentality" (304-05).¹⁰ And although Hobsbawm refuses to speculate about the "social requirements [which] gave rise" to the nineteenth-century passion for allegorical statuary ("Mass" 304), he does propose that the co-mingling of actors and public institutionalised in the new simpler, more open urban spaces connoted "the decline of old traditions and the democratisation of politics" ("Mass" 305).¹¹

Some of the rhetoric inspired by the Albert Memorial conveys the degree to which influential observers did conceive of the structure in terms of the kind of democratisation that Hobsbawm identifies with open, unadorned, monumental models of public space. For James Dafforne, author of the 1878 commemorative album, *The Albert Memorial, Hyde Park*, the Memorial constituted an example of "good art" not only because it exerted a socializing force, but also because it theoretically functioned as a kind of levelling influence. As Dafforne writes, "Every means should be employed by a powerful and wealthy nation like ourselves to enlist [. . .] good art as contributive to the building up of an orderly, civilised and religious people," a generalization he corroborates by quoting from a pamphlet by British Museum librarian Edward Edwards:

¹⁰ Michael North describes this same historic shift, in terms of what he labels "the whole turn from sculpture-as-object to public-as-sculpture": "As the aesthetic focus shifts from the object to the experience it provokes, the relationship of the two goes beyond mere implication: the public *becomes* the sculpture" (862, 868).

¹¹ Of course, as the Hyde Park Riots of 1867 show, the open public spaces described by Hobsbawm did not always translate into the class mixing endorsed by nineteenth-century rational recreationists.

In glancing for a moment at one of the gravest characteristics of our existing state of society – the enormous disparity of conditions, and all that such disparity involves – we therein perceive another powerful reason why the arts should be employed for purposes of public and general enjoyment and magnificence in which even the poorest should have their right of property. (7-8)

So in Benjamin's terms, we might say that the Albert Memorial attempted to create – by way of its iconographically charged surface – the democratisation, class mixing, and “general enjoyment” more constructively accomplished in twentieth-century London's less embellished and more expansive formal public spaces. Consequently, the Memorial, with all of its symbolic ornamentation and pretensions to provide education and produce emulation, exposed a strain in nineteenth-century formulations of rational recreation. That is to say, what the Memorial really demonstrated was how little rational recreation's educational and social engineering goals had to do with each other.

What is, nevertheless, striking about Dafforne's defence of the Albert Memorial is the way it so entirely reverses the logic of early nineteenth-century exclusivism. While the ideology of social exclusivism relied on art to enforce social distinctions, Dafforne defines “good art” as moral art enlisted in the service of nation. He champions art for its capacity to compensate for class differences and economic inequalities. Ultimately, the Albert Memorial's decadence is multivalenced. Some of its narratives refer back to the Great Exhibition. Their decadence consists in what Forty characterizes as memory petrified. Other narratives gesture toward the twentieth century. These narratives – expressed as they are in the Memorial's “extravagances and crudities” – connote a kind of decadence in keeping with Benjamin's theories of art and social change. They adumbrate a new relationship between cultural display and democracy.

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