

## Reading Sculpture: The Remediation of Thorvaldsen's Sculptures in Literature

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The sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) was one of the most well-known sculptors of the nineteenth century. From his base in Rome, where he lived for over forty years (1797–1838), the Danish-born sculptor undertook commissions for public monuments in many of the urban centres of Europe. His sculptures, as well as his fame, even travelled beyond Europe and reproductions of his sculptures are to be found today as far afield as Central Park in New York, and Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore hardly surprising that the figure of Thorvaldsen and representations of his statues turn up in biographies, autobiographies, travelogues, letters, plays, and novels the world over: literature, with or without the support of illustrations, played and still plays a crucial role in spreading and understanding the impact that Thorvaldsen and his works had, on a macro scale on European culture, and on a micro scale on individual people and places.

The aim of this chapter is to focus, using Greenblatt's words, on four 'microhistories of displaced things and persons'.<sup>2</sup> By analysing four texts where Thorvaldsen and his sculptures are represented through words only, the objective is not necessarily to conclude whether these narratives reinforce or undermine the macro-narrative surrounding Thorvaldsen's celebrated life and achievements; but rather to examine how representations of these sculptural objects are instrumental to the narrative strategies employed in the texts.

Which sculptures play a central role in the selected literary works and what is their function

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<sup>1</sup> The reproductions I am referring to here are a life-sized bronze of *Bertel Thorvaldsen med Håbets gudinde* (1839, Bertel Thorvaldsen with the Statue of Hope) completed in 1894 and today located in New York's Central Park and the marble copy of Thorvaldsen's *Kristus* (1821, Christ) completed in 1965 for The North Visitors' Center in Temple Square, Salt Lake City.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Cultural Mobility: An Introduction', in *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 17.

in the narrative? What do the texts tell the reader about these objects and their context and *vice versa*? To what extent does literature ‘add something extra to the sculpture’?<sup>3</sup> Karin Sanders argues in her study of representations of sculptures in Danish Golden Age literature that plastic art and literature combined create a representation that is ‘complete’. Literature gives ‘a voice’ to the ‘dead material’ of which the sculpture is made. By moving sculptures to different temporal and spatial dimensions and/or by allowing them to interact with its characters, literature can give us an insight in the wide variety of meanings and functions attributed to the work of art in different contexts.

I will start with the representation of some of Thorvaldsen’s British commissions in Reverend Mordaunt Roger Barnard’s (1828–1906) *The Life of Thorvaldsen, Collated from the Danish of J. M. Thiele* (1865), an adaptation of Just Mathias Thiele’s *Thorvaldsens Biographie* (Thorvaldsen’s Biography), a four-volume biography published between 1851 and 1856. In which way does the selection of statues included in this biography affect the narrative construction of Thorvaldsen’s fame and achievements? I will then move on to two dramas: one by the Swedish August Strindberg, *I Rom* (1870, In Rome), where the statue of *Jason med det gyldne skind* (1803, Jason with the Golden Fleece) features prominently in the dialogue as well as on the stage; and one by the Dane Hjalmar Bergstrøm (1868–1914), *Det gyldne skind* (1908, The Golden Fleece), where the creative process behind *Jason* is at the centre of the plot. In which way is the statue of *Jason* itself, rather than Thorvaldsen’s British benefactor Thomas Hope (1769–1831), given the role of crafting Thorvaldsen’s success? Finally, I will analyse fragments of the Swedish writer Ivar Lo-Johansson’s (1901–90) autobiographical text *Asfalt* (1979, Asphalt), where a reference to a copy of Thorvaldsen’s *Kristus* (1821) in Rouen adds new layers to this narrative. In which way is the copy of *Kristus* unable to fulfil its function as icon for the newly built *Den Norske Sjømannskirken* (The

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<sup>3</sup> Karin Sanders, *Konturer: Skulptur- og dødsbilleder fra guldalderlitteraturen*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums forlag, 1997, pp. 23–4, 51, 248–9.

Norwegian Seamen's Church)? Through the four case studies examined in this chapter, I will discuss how the analysis of literary representations of Thorvaldsen's sculptures entails not only an examination of how the sculptural object is remediated through words but also of the local narrative context in which these representations are 'displayed'.

*The Life of Thorvaldsen (1865): Re-writing Thorvaldsen's Sculpture for a British Reader*

In his essay 'The Fictions of Factual Representations', Hayden White states that:

Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional level of their texts.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, as in any of his works, White never disputes the existence of historical facts; he simply reminds us that chronicles and annals only provide the raw material for historians to work up into their stories and histories, and reminds us that the clear-cut distinction between history writing and fiction arose in fact at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> It is with this tension between historical and fictional discourse in mind that we should approach an analysis of Thorvaldsen's English biography collated by Rev. M. R. Barnard from Thiele's Danish four-volume work.

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', in Arnold Dana (ed.), *Reading Architectural History*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002 [1976], p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 25.

In his preface, Barnard explains that he took on the task of collating this English biography of Thorvaldsen, the first one to be published, on the assumption that ‘some account of the life and works of an artist’ held in intense respect, if not veneration, by the Danes *had to* be published.<sup>6</sup> Yet, how could Barnard make the life of this Danish artist interesting for the English readership? A comparative analysis of the Thiele’s Danish original and Barnard’s adaptation can cast light on the narrative strategy employed and on the rationale behind the selection of sculptures by Thorvaldsen included in this text.

Reverend Mordaunt Roger Barnard was British Chaplain in Christiania (Oslo), Norway, from 1858 to 1862, and became a translator from the Scandinavian languages into English. From 1862 onwards he translated a number of books on Nordic culture and literature and wrote two books on Norway (*Sport in Norway, and Where to Find it*, 1864; *Sketches of Life, Scenery, and Sport in Norway*, 1871). *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, which appeared in 1865, was therefore clearly a fitting addition to Barnard’s Nordic-themed authorship.

Barnard’s biography is divided into five chapters and does indeed cover all the key events of Thorvaldsen’s life and some of his major works in a way that mirrors the original work by Thiele. However, it is difficult to read this English adaptation of Thiele’s biography without noticing that there is a tendency to focus, in some sections more than in others, specifically on facts or sculptures that could somehow be connected to England and would therefore have been better known or appreciated by a British audience. This becomes particularly clear in the second part of Chapter I and in Chapter II, the section dedicated to Thorvaldsen’s long stay in Rome. Having already reiterated that Thiele’s extensive work had to be cut down in order not to become ‘tedious’ to the English reader, Barnard finally explains in greater detail the technique behind the composition of his discourse:

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. Mordaunt Roger Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen, collected from the Danish of J. M. Thiele*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1865, pp. 8–9.

It would be tedious and uninteresting to the English reader to give a detailed account of the manner in which Thorvaldsen passed his time. And while it has been the aim of the writer of these pages to pass over no circumstances which may be considered to form an epoch, or an important link in its history, many minor occurrences of little or no interest, except to some few of those more closely connected with him, have been purposely passed over in silence. Thus no further apology is needed for dropping the thread of the narrative for a time marked by nothing of any interest, to take it up again in the year 1812.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter II is then filled with references to Thorvaldsen's British commissions and encounters. While it may have stimulated the British reader's curiosity, this strategy also has a downside: the story of Thorvaldsen's British commissions is one of difficult journeys, delays and procrastination, which – to a certain extent – Barnard seems to resent. Barnard includes, for instance, in his biography the visit of and commission by the Duke of Bedford in 1815, who ordered a copy of *Achilleus og Briseis* (1803, Achilles and Briseis) and a statue of his daughter *Georgiana* (1815). When the Duke of Bedford wrote to Thorvaldsen in 1817 as he had not received his works, Thorvaldsen used this to postpone his imminent journey to Copenhagen:

Here then was an excuse; and, therefore, Thorvaldsen, in his letter to the Prince, alleges this as the reason for not leaving Rome, while not a word is spoken of the several and important orders he had just received from the Crown Prince of Bavaria, from the Ionian Isles, Prince Esterhazy, and for an equestrian statue in memory of Poniatowski, from Warsaw.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, p. 96.

It should be noted here that the reference to ‘the several and important orders’, and thus the emphasis on the fact that Thorvaldsen was only using the Duke of Bedford’s commission as an excuse to delay his journey to Copenhagen, is Barnard’s and not Thiele’s.

However, it was not only Thorvaldsen’s procrastination that hampered the delivery of his British commissions. As Barnard informs the British reader, the three copies of the statue of *Venus med æblet* (1813–16, Venus with the Apple) ordered by English patrons – ‘one for Lord Lucan, another for the Duchess of Devonshire, one for Sir H. Labouchere (Lord Taunton)’ – ‘encountered great perils before arriving to their respective destinations’.<sup>9</sup> This declaration is followed by a description, present also in Thiele’s original, of how all three statues were either damaged or lost but then eventually saved or repaired.

Several other anecdotes on Thorvaldsen’s British commissions follow, including references to Thorvaldsen’s encounter with Byron and his work on the British poet’s bust (*George Gordon Byron*, 1817).<sup>10</sup> To strengthen the discourse of Thorvaldsen’s British connections, Barnard carefully frames the representations of these sculptural objects and their trajectories with details and events from Thorvaldsen’s biography that make his relationship to Britain more personal. Besides stressing the affection several English families demonstrated to the Danish sculptor during their visits to Rome<sup>11</sup>, Barnard recounts the story of the engagement between Thorvaldsen and the Scot Miss Mackenzie of Seaforth. Eight pages are dedicated to the story of their failed engagement and their final reconciliation. Where Thiele includes in his biography a letter from Thorvaldsen’s friends expressing their relief that the relationship between the two had come to an end<sup>12</sup>, Barnard praises Miss

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<sup>9</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, p. 96–8.

<sup>11</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, p. 105: ‘English families who visited him, and who seem to have become much attached to him during their usual short and flying visits to Rome, took a prominent part’. Note that this sentence is not included in Thiele’s biography.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Hun havde vel Dannelse og megen – maaskee fremmegen, Kundskab, men intet Naturel, ingen Blomst, ingen munter Meddelse; – hun havde ennyeret ham ihiel, Gud skee Lov! at hun er borte’ (Thiele 1851: 431; ‘She certainly had education

Mackenzie's honourable conduct, reassuring the British reader that, before her death, she had forgiven Thorvaldsen.<sup>13</sup>

Among this wealth of English relationships and connections, the most important British commission for Thorvaldsen remains the one that coincided with the start of the sculptor's successful career, namely *Jason med det gyldne skind*. Seven years after Thorvaldsen's arrival in Rome, Thomas Hope, a banker and one of the best known patrons of the time, ordered from Thorvaldsen a marble statue of his *Jason* in 1803 (Fig. 6.1). Hope's commission alleviated Thorvaldsen's difficult financial situation but, according to Kira Kofoed, worked also as a 'marketing tool', paving the way for other prestigious commissions.<sup>14</sup> Kofoed explains in her article that Thorvaldsen made the first model in clay already in 1801 and had to destroy it as he did not have the capital to have it cast in plaster. It was the second attempt, the plaster cast from 1802, which Hope saw and ordered in marble in 1803. Hope's order of the statue has always had a veil of legend; the order came just before Thorvaldsen was about to leave for Denmark as his stipend had come to an end. To emphasise the almost providential role of the Hope commission, Thiele made the date of the commission coincide with Thorvaldsen's 'Roman birthday', though it is today well known that this was not the case. Despite being the first of a long line of prestigious commissions, Hope's *Jason* was also the most delayed as it was completed in 1828, twenty-five years after Hope's order. Several were the reasons for the delay: Thorvaldsen's brief illness in 1803–06; problems with the marble dealer; the Napoleonic Wars and the difficulty of sending anything to Great Britain; Thorvaldsen's change of attitude towards the motif perceived too naïve; the constant flow of new orders; Jason's function as a means to attract other customers.<sup>15</sup>

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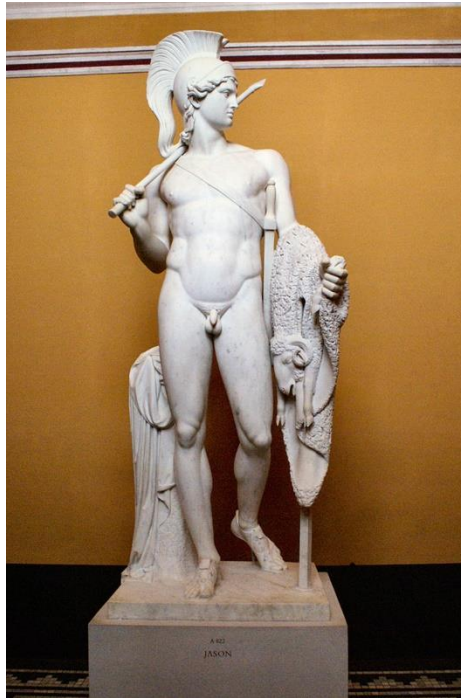
and a lot – maybe too much, knowledge, but no natural quality, she was no flower and had no cheerful disposition; – she would have bored him to death. Thank God she is gone').

<sup>13</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, pp. 119–20.

<sup>14</sup> Kira Kofoed, *History of the Archives*, in *The Thorvaldsens Museum Archives*, 2013, accessed 9 December 2014, <http://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/about/history-of-the-archives>.

<sup>15</sup> Kofoed, *History of the Archives*.

Throughout Chapter III of Barnard's *The Life of Thorvaldsen* the wait Thomas Hope had to endure in order to obtain the statue he had ordered is given great emphasis by quoting the correspondence between the sculptor and his patron, including the apologetic note sent by Thorvaldsen to Hope when the statue was finally ready.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 6.1 Bertel Thorvaldsen, *Jason med det gyldne skind* (Jason with the Golden Fleece), 242 cm, marble, 1803, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen.**

A comparative analysis of Barnard's and Thiele's works can demonstrate how *The Life of Thorvaldsen* is a clear example of how 'cultural objects' are not only 'transferred' but also 'disguised by subtle adjustments of colour and form'.<sup>17</sup> While taking on the task of making this Danish sculptor known to British audiences, Barnard does not limit himself to translating Thiele's biography: he needs to shorten it and contextualise the works and achievements of this artist for a British audience. By simply selecting or omitting certain

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<sup>16</sup> Barnard, *The Life of Thorvaldsen*, pp. 162–4.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'A Mobility Studies Manifesto', in *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 250–51.



sculptures rather than others he creates a ‘new’ narrative, which – though related to the narrative of Thiele’s biography – tells the story of Thorvaldsen’s British connections, one that, with its delays and broken statues and broken promises, is not as glorifying as Thiele’s original.

### *I Rom (1870) and Det gyldne skind (1908): Jason’s Stage Performance*

While Barnard’s selection and omission process is an attempt to make Thorvaldsen’s life and work more interesting to a foreign public by emphasising the role English patrons played in supporting and promoting the success of the Danish sculptor, Strindberg’s and Bergstrøm’s creative changes to the story of *Jason med det gyldne skind* are instrumental in attributing the responsibility for Thorvaldsen’s success to the statue itself. Both dramas engage, in fact, with the creative process behind the statue of *Jason*. They also employ different strategies to make the statues come alive so that they can take an active part in the drama, thus also blurring the boundary between fixed prop and dramatic character.

Inspired by Strindberg’s visit to the Thorvaldsen Museum in 1869 and by the celebrations for the centenary of Thorvaldsen’s birth, *I Rom* deals with the sculptor’s personal struggle and with the events leading up to the Hope commission in 1803. When the drama starts, seven years have already passed from Thorvaldsen’s arrival in Rome and the Danish sculptor is about to follow his father’s suggestion, namely to give up sculpture and travel back to Denmark. However, by the end of the drama, Thorvaldsen is saved by an English benefactor, Thomas Hope, who commissions from him a marble version of *Jason med det gyldne skind*. In other words, the end of the drama coincides with the beginning of Thorvaldsen’s career.

There is no doubt that, as Margareta Wirmark has pointed out, there is a clear parallel in this play between *Jason med det gyldne skind* and the play itself; Strindberg chooses to represent Thorvaldsen's breakthrough with *Jason* in what he himself hoped would be his own breakthrough play.<sup>18</sup> The play was indeed fairly successful at the time: it was accepted by and performed ten times at the Royal Theatre in Stockholm (*Dramaten*) and once at the Opera House on the day of Thorvaldsen's jubilee. Although the play generally received positive reviews, Strindberg himself soon rejected it. For him *I Rom* was a weak and naive little play about a sculptor he soon stopped admiring.<sup>19</sup> The play remained a Swedish affair: it was performed only on two more occasions (in 1927 and in 1980) and would arguably have been entirely forgotten if it hadn't been written by Sweden's most famous playwright.

However, what is particularly interesting in this short drama is that the key scene that allows the narrative to progress is not the arrival of Thomas Hope in Thorvaldsen's studio, as Wirmark argues, but the scene between Thorvaldsen and *Jason* the statue, which is also present on the stage throughout the whole drama. In an emotional scene between the artist and his creation, Thorvaldsen is standing alone before the *Jason* expressing his despair. In a fit of rage he takes his hammer and is about to destroy the statue, but he hesitates. The statue is looking at him with sorrowful eyes; it is nodding at him with a friendly and wary expression. Thorvaldsen's hand is paralysed; Thorvaldsen cannot hit his own child:

Runs towards Jason to smash him, but he suddenly stops.

Why do you look at me with sorrowful eyes

And kindly warning me you nod towards me?

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<sup>18</sup> Margrethe Wirmark, 'Strindberg in Rome', in Goran Rossholm, Barbro Ståhle Sjönell and Boel Westin (eds.), *Strindberg and Fiction*, trans. Eivor Martinus, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell Intl., 2001, pp. 116–26.

<sup>19</sup> As Ollén points out, Strindberg the idealist became the realist and in 1880 he distanced himself from 'den äckliga Thorvaldsen' (that disgusting Thorvaldsen), who had wasted his time creating 'nakna kvinnor och påklädda officerare' (naked women and clothed officers). See Gunnar Ollén, 'I Rom (1870)', in *Strindbergs dramatik*, Kristianstad: Sveriges Radios Förlag, 1982, p. 17.

My hand is paralysed. – He throws the hammer away

No! I cannot hit

My own child, because this is still what you are.<sup>20</sup>

The presence of the statue on the stage creates a tension between stillness and movement, non-dramatic and dramatic. While the human characters move, *Jason* is always fixed and immovable – or at least as far as the reader/spectator is concerned. But to Thorvaldsen alone the statue becomes alive. In what is a deviation from history – since, as mentioned above, Thorvaldsen did destroy the first version of *Jason*, though not just before Hope's arrival – *Jason* is spared: its 'sorrowful eyes' save it from the hammer. Only a few minutes later Thomas Hope enters Thorvaldsen's studio by chance. Thanks to Jason's presence Thorvaldsen's career is saved and he can still hope to become a famous sculptor.

In this drama the statue becomes an autonomous character able to intervene and play an active part in shaping its creator's success. Although the categories of stillness and movement are not visibly subverted, a 'fantasy' still takes place, a fantasy according to which the statue is animated and the human being immobile in his inability to act and take control of his destiny.<sup>21</sup> In *I Rom* history is changed creatively and the attempted destruction of the statue becomes an opportunity for the statue to come alive and to give greater power to the work of art itself.

Compared to *I Rom*, Hjalmar Bergström's four-act drama *Det gyldne skind* represents the events prior to Thorvaldsen's encounter with Hope in much more detail. This play opens

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<sup>20</sup> August Strindberg, 'I Rom', in *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk. Ungdomsdramer II*, Norstedts: Stockholm, 1991, pp. 29–30: 'Springer mot Jason för att krossa honom, men stannar plötsligen. / Vi ser du på mig så med sorgsna blickar / Och vänligt varnande emot mig nickar? / Min hand förlamas. – Han kastar bort hammaren / Nej! Jag kan ej slå / Mitt eget barn, ty så du är ändå'.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 16. Please note that a more in-depth analysis of this play can be found in Elettra Carbone, 'The Artist's Search for the Golden Fleece: The Significance of the Italian Setting and of the Statue of Jason in Strindberg's *I Rom*', in Agata Lubowicka et al. (eds.), *Nordisk drama. Fornyelser og transgressioner / Nordic Drama. Renewal and Transgression*, Gdansk: Fundacja Rozwoju Uniwersytetu Gdanskiego, 2010, pp. 477–83.

with Thorvaldsen's departure from Copenhagen to Rome in 1796 and concludes with the Hope commission in 1803. Although the statue of *Jason* is central to the development of the plot, it remains only a 'concept' in the characters' and readers'/spectators' minds until the beginning of Act III, when two clay models of the statue finally appear on the stage. In the course of the play, the reader/spectator is encouraged to follow the creative process of the work of art from idea to sculptural object together with Thorvaldsen.

The first time *Jason* is mentioned is in a dialogue between Thorvaldsen and Ulstrup, Thorvaldsen's goldsmith friend, in Act I. In the attempt to convince Thorvaldsen to leave for Rome, Ulstrup reminds him of how the story of Jason, part of their studies in mythology at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, had inspired them both.<sup>22</sup> Besides drawing a clear parallel between the aspiring artist, Thorvaldsen, and the heroic figure of Jason, Ulstrup establishes that the source of the motif is a narrative one. However, it becomes soon clear in the drama that the 'idea' of the sculpture is not enough to form the sculptural object. Discussing the sculpture together with other Scandinavian artists in Rome in Act II, Thorvaldsen demonstrates that, despite being aware of the narrative behind the motif, he still cannot 'feel' the posture of his Jason:

THORVALDSEN

(partially to himself)

Jason was a free-born man. A king's son, who had accomplished his deed and returned home with the world's richest reward. Jason took, he conquered, he was born for that.

BUNK

Yes, but then you certainly know what you want.

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<sup>22</sup> Hjalmar Bergström, *Det gyldne skind*, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1908, p. 28.

## THORVALDSEN

Yes, but I cannot do it. I cannot feel the king's son, the free-born one, in me – I cannot *feel* the posture!<sup>23</sup>

Only towards the end of Act II does the posture finally come to life and Thorvaldsen is able to complete his model of *Jason*. As he is sitting in the inn a country boy comes in and assumes the posture later imitated by the statue of Jason as he 'carries a long stick over his right shoulder and a sheep's skin on his left arm' with a 'fearless and proud' attitude.<sup>24</sup> The combination of Greek mythology and humanity which Bergstrøm builds up with these anecdotes culminates with Thorvaldsen's final revelation: the statue of *Jason med det gyldne skind* does not represent Jason at all but simply 'a proper citizen':

It represents a proper citizen, who has gone to the forest on a Sunday afternoon. The walk had made him warm. Therefore he has his coat on his arm, you see. He is glad and carefree. Therefore he has his hat pulled down his neck and his stick over his shoulder. That is what it represents. I call him Jason for fun.<sup>25</sup>

By revealing Jason's real identity, Thorvaldsen comments also on his role as sculptor, namely that of creating his own works of art inspired not by Greek mythology but by real life. The coming to life of the statue in this case involves two intertwined aspects. On the one hand the country boy gives Thorvaldsen's statue the 'life' and 'animation' it required. On the

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<sup>23</sup> Bergstrøm, *Det gyldne skind*, p. 72: 'THORVALDSEN (halvt for sig selv): Jason var en fribaaren Mand. En Kongesøn, der havde fuldbragt en Daad og vendte hjem med Verdens rigeste Bytte. Jason tog, han erobrede, han var født til det. / BUNK: Ja, men saa ved du jo, hvad du vil. / THORVALDSEN: Ja, men jeg kan ikke gøre det. Jeg kan ikke føle Kongesønnen, den fribaarne, inden i mig – jeg kan ikke føle Stillingen!' (author's translation).

<sup>24</sup> Bergstrøm, *Det gyldne skind*, p. 94: '[Han] bærer en lang Stav over højre Skulder og en Faareskindspels over ventre Arm. Hans Holdning er rank og stolt'.

<sup>25</sup> Bergstrøm, *Det gyldne skind*, p. 114: 'Den forestiller en skikkelig Borger, der er taget i Skoven en Søndag Eftermiddag. Han er blevet varm af at gaa. Derfor har han Frakken paa Armen, ser De. Han er glad og forsoren. Derfor har han Hatten lidt bag ad Nakken og Stokken over Skulderen. Det er, Hvad den forestiller. For Løjers Skyld kalder jeg den Jason.'

other hand, the sculptural object itself petrifies his vitality, making it possible for the viewer to associate the motif not with a real-life character, but with the representation of heroic figures from Greek mythology, which patrons like Hope scouted for.<sup>26</sup> By focusing on the representation of Jason's creative process, Bergstrøm seems to challenge the otherwise established reception of the statue. As David Bindman argues in his *Warm Flesh, Cold Marble*, Jason was perceived by Thorvaldsen's contemporaries as a figure representing 'youth' and 'the virtues of the primitive' inspired by the heroic figures of authentic Greek art.<sup>27</sup> Through the metaphor of the moving statues, both Bergstrøm's and Strindberg's dramas give life to a statue that, since its very creation, had remained otherwise fossilised in its neoclassical interpretation.

#### *Asfalt: The Copy that was More than a Copy*

While in Strindberg's *I Rom* and Bergstrøm's *Det gyldne skind* the main role is given to one of Thorvaldsen's original sculptures, in Ivar Lo-Johansson's *Asfalt* the attention falls on a Thorvaldsen-replica that, despite its poor appearance, has an important task, namely that of strengthening the ties between members of the same community. Even when this statue itself is declared 'unfit' for this purpose, it can still stimulate another artist's creativity.

Among Ivar Lo-Johansson's most important contributions, we find a long series of autobiographical works, including travel accounts from his journeys, an eight-volume autobiography (1951–60), and four volumes of memoirs (1978–81). And it is in one of Lo-Johansson's travel accounts *Vagabondliv i Frankrike* (1927), his very first published work, that we encounter Thorvaldsen for the first time.

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<sup>26</sup> Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, pp. 113–24.

<sup>27</sup> David Bindman, *Warm Flesh, Cold Marble: Canova, Thorvaldsen and their Critics*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 43–4.

Lo-Johansson tells that during his stay in Rouen he was part of a bigger Scandinavian community of sailors, who were stationed in this French town. Due to the presence of this community, *Den Norske Sjømannskirken* (The Norwegian Seamen's Church) established a base there in 1889 and in 1926 completed the construction of a church named after St Olav. The church was closed down in 1954 and sold in 2004. Ivar Lo-Johansson was one of the workers who took part in the construction of this church in the 1920s. As Lo-Johansson relates in his diary, the church was of modest appearance and a copy of Thorvaldsen's *Kristus* in grey plaster was one of the very few decorative elements alongside some candlesticks and flowers.<sup>28</sup>

That this church in Rouen was equipped with a copy of Thorvaldsen's *Kristus* is far from surprising. It is in fact well known that copies of Thorvaldsen's *Kristus* in different sizes and materials were mass fabricated already in 1833 and popular both in the Nordic countries and beyond (Fig. 6.2). As far as Norway is concerned, replicas were for instance present in Trondheim and in Stavanger.<sup>29</sup>



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<sup>28</sup> Ivar Lo-Johansson, *Dagbok från 20-talet: Vagabondliv i Frankrike, Nederstigen i dödsriket, Kolet i våld, Mina städers ansikten*, Stockholm: Liber förlag, 1982, p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> Anne-Mette Gravgaard and Eva Henschen, *On the statue of Christ by Thorvaldsen*, Copenhagen: The Thorvaldsen Museum, 1997, pp. 65–6.

**Figure 6.2** *Kristus* figurine, porcelain, based on Bertel Thorvaldsen's statue of *Kristus*, ca. 1879, Gustavsberg, Sweden.

*Source: Hallwyl Museum*

What is however peculiar about the Rouen replica is its representation in Lo-Johansson's works and its presumed incapability of fulfilling its very function of Christ icon for this Scandinavian church. In *Asfalt* (1979), the second volume of his memoirs, Lo-Johansson represents the arrival of the statue, which is parcelled up in a box from Copenhagen.<sup>30</sup>

In the following passages the statue is represented as a fairly unhappy character, hardly appreciated by its addressees. The statue is referred to as 'a corpse in its coffin'<sup>31</sup> and is defined by the architect as 'a commercial Christ'.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, its hands and arms – the very part that Thorvaldsen himself struggled to create in the attempt to find the perfect position – were crushed during transportation. Lo-Johansson attempts to repair this injured sculpture, trying to reconstruct its hands, the position of which he claims to know by heart. But even if the result of these repairs is satisfactory, the church still needs an original Christ and not a replica, and Lo-Johansson himself has to sculpt this from stone (Fig. 6.3). While in the text everything about the Thorvaldsen's plaster cast can be associated with dead material, the stone for Lo-Johansson's new Christ is 'living material'. Just like Thorvaldsen once struggled to create the desired expression and posture for his Christ, trying to represent him not as suffering – an image he associated with a Catholic and not a Protestant Christ – but as welcoming and yet towering and triumphant, Lo-Johansson fights with his stone, in the attempt to create a suffering Christ. Yet, as by intervention of Thorvaldsen himself, his

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<sup>30</sup> Ivar Lo-Johansson, *Asfalt*, Stockholm: Bonniers, 1979, p. 363.

<sup>31</sup> Lo-Johansson, *Asfalt*, p. 364: 'en lik i sin kista'.

<sup>32</sup> Lo-Johansson, *Asfalt*, p. 366: 'en Köpekristus'.



attempts are vain; everyone can see the image laughing and there is nothing he can do to remove this laughter from the stone:

I tried to convince both the others and myself that the laughter was not a laughter, but an expression of sovereignty in the pain. It didn't help. [...] The snickering expression was fixed in the stone itself.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 6.3** Ivar Lo-Johansson, *Kristus*, granite, 1926, previously in *Den Norske Sjømannskirken*, Rouen, current whereabouts unknown.

*Source:* Ivar Lo-Museet

Alongside his *Kristus*, Lo-Johansson also completed a baptismal font. As a proletarian artist, in literature as well as in sculpture, Lo-Johansson was against the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’, professing that art was meant to be ‘dynamic and functional’.<sup>34</sup> As Philippe Bouquet points out, Lo-Johansson believed that great art was supposed to be ‘local’ and should turn to

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<sup>33</sup> Lo-Johansson, *Asfalt*, p. 369: ‘Jag försökte övertyga både de andra och mig själv om at skattet inte var ett skrott, utan ett uttryck för suveränitet inför lidandet. Det hjälpte inte. Det småsmysande uttrycket satt fast i själva stenen’.

<sup>34</sup> William E. Ottercrans, ‘To a writer – Ivar lo-Johansson’s last font’, *Swedish Book Review*, Supplement, 1991, pp. 25–6.

‘things that are most individual, most distinctive, the lowest common divisors’, and then raise them ‘to the level of types by letting them appear as representatives of a whole group or class’.<sup>35</sup> Both the *Kristus* and the font are an expression of this. Not only were both works of art created for a specific place, but they were also individual and original pieces created for a specific purpose and a specific community.

The presence of the Thorvaldsen Christ replica in the text informs the narrative of Lo-Johansson’s Christ creation, adding new layers to the story of the laughing sculpture. The ‘two Christs’ end up coexisting in the church and become symbols for the Scandinavian community in Rouen: on the one hand the Thorvaldsen *Kristus* represents the Scandinavian protestant Christ *par excellence*; on the other hand Lo-Johansson’s *Kristus*, an original, stands for the separate and distinctive identity of this little community.

### *The Narrative Network of Thorvaldsen’s Sculptures*

With these four case studies of literary representations of Thorvaldsen’s sculptures, I aimed to give clear examples of what Greenblatt refers to – using de Montaigne’s words – as the greatest challenge of cultural mobility, namely ‘the impossibility of keeping your subject still’.<sup>36</sup>

These four texts are the result of crossings between the circulation of nineteenth-century Thorvaldsen stories, the physical movement of his sculptures or replicas of his sculptures (both in the nineteenth century and in modern times) and the specific contexts from which these texts originate. Thorvaldsen’s sculptural objects – and for that matter the story of his life and achievements – are appropriated, adapted and transformed before they are placed in new ‘local’ contexts – and the word context is here used in the broadest possible

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<sup>35</sup> Philippe Bouquet, ‘Ivar Lo and Swedish working-class literature’, trans. Peter Graves, *Swedish Book Review*, Supplement, 1991, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Greenblatt, ‘Cultural Mobility: An Introduction’, p. 16.

sense. In Barnard's case, where the selection of sculptures and facts is dictated by the interest of local British audiences, the 'local' context is defined geographically as well as culturally. In Strindberg's and Bergstrøm's case, where the statue of *Jason* and the story around its creation is adapted for the benefit of dramatic effect, context should be defined as literary genre. In Lo-Johansson's case, where the old and the new Christ figures coexist in order to represent the Scandinavian community in Rouen, context is synonymous with local community.

The result of these transformations is a blend of 'contingency', 'licence' and 'constraint', all factors that play a crucial role in the 'displacement' of things and people.<sup>37</sup> The choice of the Thorvaldsen motif is, to a certain extent, dictated by accidental 'connections of times and places'.<sup>38</sup> Barnard's decision to introduce Thorvaldsen and his works to British audiences may have developed out of his interest in all things Scandinavian. Strindberg's choice of the Thorvaldsen motif was initially inspired by the centenary celebrations of Thorvaldsen's birthday, Bergstrøm's by the popularity of Thorvaldsen within the Danish context. Lo-Johansson's encounter with Thorvaldsen's *Kristus* appears to be entirely fortuitous as the statue is delivered to Rouen.

In all four texts the encounter with Thorvaldsen and his works is determined by contingency, but the narrative process is not. The representations of Thorvaldsen's works are woven into a narrative pattern that is carefully constructed and that takes into account artistic licence and narrative constraints. In Barnard's, Strindberg's and Bergstrøm's texts Thorvaldsen's statues are introduced in the narrative in order to highlight the function that these played in the sculptor's career. While in *The Life of Thorvaldsen* the focus on British commissions goes hand in hand with Barnard's attempt to define Thorvaldsen's status within a British context, in *I Rom* and *Det gyldne skind* the focus on *Jason* leads to a broader

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<sup>37</sup> Greenblatt, 'Cultural Mobility: An Introduction', p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Greenblatt, 'Cultural Mobility: An Introduction', p. 17.

discussion on the role of the artist and the creative process involved in the making of a work of art. Within the context of Lo-Johansson's biography, the encounter with the copy of *Kristus* is the basis for a reflection on the afterlife of Thorvaldsen's sculptures. While their status may have changed, they still have the power to inspire the creative process of another artist.

By following the trail of literary representations of Thorvaldsen's sculptures we can certainly find out more about these objects and their trajectories, but we can also examine them in contexts, places and communities to which they have travelled, not necessarily by undertaking perilous journeys that could damage them irreparably, but by being sculpted through words.

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