

NOTE: A painter of extraordinary ambition whose work was generally devoted to the depiction of momentous historical scenes, Benjamin Robert Haydon (born in 1786) was a close associate of many of the most celebrated English Romantics, including Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Hazlitt, and Lamb. The passages which follow are taken from his remarkable *Autobiography*, first published posthumously in 1853; they represent his account of the moment in 1808 when, in the company of his friend the Scottish painter David Wilkie, Haydon first visited the home of the Earl of Elgin in Park Lane in London to see the unparalleled collection of sculpture (now housed in the British Museum) which Lord Elgin had brought back to England from the Parthenon. As these paragraphs make clear, Haydon associated these commanding works with the sense of unlimited energy and promise which characterized an early period of his own life—a life which ended when, in 1846, after decades of frustration and physical debility (including failing eyesight), standing before a large, unfinished canvas, the artist shot himself.

## *Benjamin Robert Haydon*

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### First Encounters with the Elgin Marbles

. . . Wilkie proposed that we should go and see the Elgin Marbles . . . I agreed, dressed, and away we went to Park Lane. I had no more notion of what I was to see than of anything I had never heard of, and walked in with the utmost nonchalance.

This period of our lives was one of great happiness. Painting all day; then dining at the Old Slaughter Chop House; then going to the Academy until eight to fill up the evening; then going home to tea—that blessing of a studious man—talking over our respective exploits, what he had been doing, and what I had done, and then, frequently, to relieve our minds fatigued by their eight and twelve hours' work, giving vent to the most extraordinary absurdities. Often have we made rhymes on odd names, and shouted with laughter at each new line that was added. Sometimes, lazily inclined after a good dinner, we have lounged about near Drury Lane or Covent Garden, hesitating whether to go in, and often have I (knowing first that there was nothing I wished to see) assumed a virtue I did not possess, and pretending moral superiority, preached to Wilkie on the weakness of not resisting such temptations for the sake of our art and our duty, and marched him off to his studies when he was longing to see *Mother Goose*.

One night when *I* was dying to go in, he dragged *me* away to the Academy and insisted on my working, to which I agreed on the promise of a stroll afterwards. As soon as we had finished, out we went, and in passing a penny show in the piazza, we fired up and determined to go in. We entered and slunk away in a corner; while waiting for the commencement of the show, in came all our student friends, one after the

other. We shouted out at each one as he arrived, and then popped our heads down in our corner again, much to the indignation of the chimney-sweeps and vegetable boys who composed the audience, but at last we were discovered, and then we all joined in applauding the entertainment of *Pull Devil, Pull Baker*, and at the end raised such a storm of applause, clapping our hands, stamping our feet, and shouting with all the power of a dozen pair of lungs, that to save our heads from the fury of the sweeps we had to run downstairs as if the devil indeed was trying to catch us. After this boisterous amusement, we retired to my rooms and drank tea, talking away on art, starting principles, arguing long and fiercely, and at midnight separating, to rest, rise, and work again until the hour of dinner brought us once more together, again to draw, argue or laugh.

Young, strong, and enthusiastic, with no sickness, no debilities, full of hope, believing all the world as honorable as ourselves, wishing harm to no one, and incredulous of any wishing harm to us, we streamed on in a perpetual round of innocent enjoyment, and I look back on these hours as the most uninterrupted by envy, the least harassed by anxiety, and the fullest of unalloyed pleasure, of all that have crossed the path of my life.

Such being the condition of our minds, no opportunity for improvement was ever granted to the one which he did not directly share with the other; and naturally when Wilkie got this order for the marbles his first thought was that I would like to go.

To Park Lane then we went, and after passing through the hall and thence into an open yard, entered a damp, dirty pent-house where lay the marbles ranged within sight and reach. The first thing I fixed my eyes on was the wrist of a figure in one of the female groups, in which were visible, though in a feminine form, the radius and ulna. I was astonished, for I had never seen them hinted at in any female wrist in the antique. I darted my eye to the elbow, and saw the outer condyle visibly affecting the shape as in nature. I saw that the arm was in repose and the soft parts in relaxation. That combination of nature and idea which I had felt was so much wanting for high art was here displayed to mid-day conviction. My heart beat! If I had seen nothing else I had beheld sufficient to keep me to nature for the rest of my life. But when I turned to the Theseus and saw that every form was altered by action or repose,—when I saw that the two sides of his back varied, one side stretched from the shoulder-blade being pulled forward, and the other side compressed from the shoulder-blade being pushed close to the spine as he rested on his elbow, with the belly flat because the bowels fell into the pelvis as he sat,—and when, turning to the Ilissus, I saw the belly protruded, from the figure lying on its side,—and again, when in the figure of the fighting metope I saw the muscle shown under the one arm-pit in that instantaneous action of darting out, and left out in the other arm-pits because not wanted—when I saw, in fact, the most heroic style of art combined with all the essential detail of actual life, the thing was done at once and for ever. . . . I felt the future, I foretold that they would prove themselves the finest things on earth, that they would overturn the false beau-ideal, where nature was nothing, and would establish the true beau-ideal, of which nature alone is the basis.

I shall never forget the horses' heads—the feet in the metopes! I felt as if a divine

truth had blazed inwardly upon my mind and I knew that they would at last rouse the art of Europe from its slumber in the darkness.

I do not say this *now*, when all the world acknowledges it, but I said it then, *when no one would believe me*. I went home in perfect excitement, Wilkie trying to moderate my enthusiasm with his national caution.

Utterly disgusted at my wretched attempt at the heroic in the form and action of my [painting of the assassination of] Dentatus, I dashed out the abominable mass and breathed as if relieved of a nuisance. I passed the evening in a mixture of torture and hope; all night I dozed and dreamed of the marbles. I rose at five in a fever of excitement, tried to sketch the Theseus from memory, did so, and saw that I comprehended it. I worked that day and another and another, fearing that I was deluded. At last I got an order for myself; I rushed away to Park Lane; the impression was more vivid than before. I drove off to [the home of the Swiss painter Henry] Fuseli, and fired him to such a degree that he ran upstairs, put on his coat and away we sallied. I remember that first a coal-cart with eight horses stopped us as it struggled up one of the lanes of the Strand; then a flock of sheep blocked us up; Fuseli, in a fury of haste and rage, burst into the middle of them, and they got between his little legs and jostled him so much that I screamed with laughter in spite of my excitement. He swore all along the Strand like a little fury. At last we came to Park Lane. Never shall I forget his uncompromising enthusiasm. He strode about saying, "De Greeks were godes! de Greeks were godes!" We went back to his house, where I dined with him, and we passed the evening in looking over Quintilian and Pliny. Immortal period of my sanguine life! To look back on those hours has been my solace in the bitterest afflictions. . . .

I expressed myself warmly to Lord Mulgrave and asked him if he thought he could get me leave to draw from the marbles. He spoke to Lord Elgin, and on the condition that my drawings were not to be engraved permission was granted to me. Conscious I had the power, like a puppy I did not go for some days, and when I went was told that Lord Elgin had changed his mind. The pain I felt at the loss of such an opportunity taught me a lesson for life; for never again did I lose one moment in seeking the attainment of an object when an opportunity offered. However, I applied again to Lord Mulgrave and he in time induced Lord Elgin to admit me. For three months I drew until I had mastered the forms of these divine works and brought my hand and mind into subjection.

I saw that the essential was selected in them and the superfluous rejected; that first, all the causes of action were known and then all of those causes wanted for any particular action were selected; that then skin covered the whole and the effect of the action, relaxation, purpose, or gravitation was shown on the skin. This appeared, as far as I could see *then*, to be the principle.

. . . I drew at the marbles ten, fourteen, and fifteen hours at a time; staying often till twelve at night, holding a candle and my board in one hand and drawing with the other; and so I should have stayed till morning had not the sleepy porter come yawning in to tell me it was twelve o'clock, and then often have I gone home, cold, benumbed and damp, my clothes steaming up as I dried them; and so, spreading my drawings on the floor and putting a candle on the ground, I have drank my tea at one in the morning

with ecstasy as its warmth trickled through my frame, and looked at my picture and dwelt on my drawings, and pondered on the change of empires and thought that I had been contemplating what Socrates looked at and Plato saw—and then, lifted up with my own high urgings of soul, I have prayed God to enlighten my mind to discover the principles of those divine things—and then I have had inward assurances of future glory, and almost fancying divine influence in my room have lingered to my mattress bed and soon dozed into a rich, balmy slumber. Oh, those were days of luxury and rapture and uncontaminated purity of mind! No sickness, no debility, no fatal, fatal weakness of sight. I arose with the sun and opened my eyes to its light only to be conscious of my high pursuit; I sprang from my bed, dressed as if possessed, and passed the day, the noon, and the night in the same dream of abstracted enthusiasm; secluded from the world, regardless of its feelings, unimpregnable to disease, insensible to contempt, a being of elevated passions. . . .