

## On the Lapidary Style

### *Defining the Lapidary*

*T*he relatively rare word *lapidary* may well puzzle a native English speaker. It can be a noun—a *lapidary* is someone who's a sort of jeweler, a worker with precious stones—or it can mean a book on such practical studies. It's more common in contemporary French; a *lapidaire* means a professional worker with gemstones, while a *dépôt lapidaire* is somewhere that stores fallen, often carved, chunks of masonry, the remains from ruined chapels or cathedrals. A *lapidaire* also names a medieval treatise on the curative properties of particular gemstones.

But it's as an adjective that I'll be concerned with it. So, to the dictionary definitions, which severally announce: the lapidary style is suitable for engraving in stone, and a lapidary inscription is one actually carved in stone, while a style of writing, especially in verse, is called lapidary if it has dignity and concision. The word comes from *lapis*, the Latin word for stone. It could apply to epitaphs on gravestones or to inscribed obelisks or monuments. More broadly, any writing that's extremely concise, and tersely expressive, may be described as lapidary.

So far I can't find any history of the "lapidary style" used as a literary-critical term. But then, there's surprisingly little by way of histories of literary criticism in general. Instead, here's an admirably pragmatic eighteenth-century explanation in "On Inscriptions and the Lapidary Style" by Vicesimus Knox, an English essayist and pacifist minister:

*As the space on monuments, columns, and sepulchres, which admits of inscription, is usually too little to contain many words; it is necessary that the words which its limits are capable of receiving should be expressive of as much meaning as words are able to convey, and be couched in a style as forcible as rhetoric can devise.*

*The smallness of the space devoted to the writing, and the trouble and difficulty of writing on stone, marble, and brass, were the reasons why abbreviations abounded on the ancient inscriptions, and, indeed, furnish the principle of that rule which prescribes for them a laconic brevity of style.*

*Indeed, if these causes for brevity had not existed, it would have been still very desirable, since inscriptions were to be read by the passenger as he journeyed on his way, to whom it might not be convenient to be detained [. . .].*

*But brevity alone would be a poor recommendation of the lapidary style. It admits of point, antithesis, harmony, and sublimity. It is a style, participating of prose and poetry; in a due mixture of which consists its peculiar character. The cold, the dull, the humble, and the mean, it rejects with contempt. Whatever is noble in sentiment, or forcible in expression, whatever is lively, animated, nervous, and emphatic, forms an essential ingredient in the lapidary style.*

*The churches, and church-yards of England, furnish many examples of sepulchral inscriptions, which would do honour to the best ages of antiquity. At the same time they exhibit others, which excite sentiments very unnatural in a church or church-yard; those arising from the absurd and the laughable.*  
(161–62)

It's this link between the functional and the expanded senses of the lapidary, and its style, that the following reflections have in view: the ways a literally material surface permits, or heavily influences, the style and then how that style profoundly inflects or dictates the meaning. Mainly I'll be referring to the "lapidary" as that which is cut in stone, where its habitual

use is in lettering. That the lapidary usually refers to the literal “letter,” or by derivation to a literary style, is itself striking; you might expect it to apply to any incised sculptural ornamentation. But no; it means more than even the finest striations and ribbings on the surface of stone of the kind found on early Ife sculptured heads from Nigeria.

The lapidary style holds a promise to be taut and incisive. But the dictionary also says that the word *lapidary* can refer to the “gem-like” itself, not just to the results of cutting a surface as if with a hard gemstone. There’s an oscillation of meaning here between the brilliant gem and the unbright solid stone. This is strange insofar as stone’s density is hugely different from the light-refracting and translucent properties of precious stones such as emeralds or sapphires—and is different again from the semiprecious and semiopaques like hematite, agate, malachite, opal, quartz, topaz, and moonstone (all of which carried their own connotations in some nineteenth-century novels, much like the “language of flowers”; there is indeed a literary gemology, including studies of how Victorian jewelry has cropped up in fiction [see Arnold]). And then lapis lazuli, that opaquely blue gemstone, comes from the rock called lazurite. In any event, there’s a curious indeterminacy as to what counts as lapidary: is it decided by the surface on which the style is inscribed (on stone or on gem, the stony so very far from the gem-like)? The wide spectrum of variation is striking: the light-refractive gem versus the densely unyielding stone.

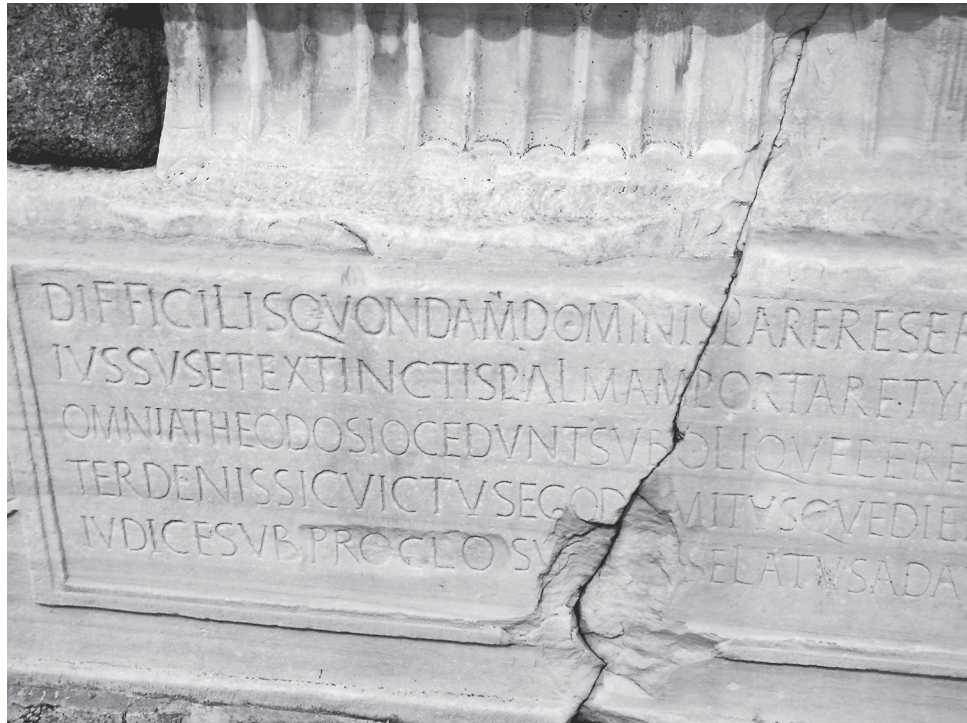
Applied to a style as “lapidary,” the term borrows the qualities of stone, or of gems, in a kind of metonymy. But the whole notion of any evident lapidary style will, on closer inspection, tend to slip into an indistinctiveness, only of interest to anyone driven to promote an aesthetics of blurriness. When we get to an end of seeking the nature of the lapidary style, a large blur is what we shall find. Then why ever pursue so hopelessly archaic a topic? But its interest includes this: it suggests that a literary style is bound in part to the controlling dispositions of the writer but bound in part, too, by the sway of its materials and by what will suit those restrictions. The so-called materiality of the word is here rendered almost literal. It is a grounded manner where its inescapable “materiality” isn’t a restriction, but an aesthetic virtue. Still, it turns out that material per se is only one aspect. Any weighting toward the material ground can sound old-fashioned, especially now, when the word is overwhelmingly digitalized, capable of being endlessly duplicated and dispersed online, and this flatness necessarily dominates. What has this ubiquitous digitalizing brought about for its viewers, now that any tactile or gestural presence of the word has largely gone? It’s without

tangibility, palpability. Incised lettering is limited to rarity, put only to exceptional uses. We're used to characterizations of the word as evanescent, marked by its aural and oral qualities, by its reception and its transmission as fleeting. Perhaps the thought of "traces" is better liked by today's readers than is permanence: lament, for instance, figured as a breath of wind among the leaves or the passage of language as only rustling, whereas the lapidary owns a violently different aesthetic—monumental, declarative, and admonitory. Its tone holds assertive fullness.

Nevertheless, an intelligible phrase that has been carefully incised in stone is not neutrally impersonal, nor is it some warm track of a human gesture. It is far from handwriting, but it is not calligraphy. It aims at legibility, yet it's not mere legibility, but carries with it a certain authoritative overlay. The silent address of such inscriptions is taken up by the reader's work of retracing the engraved word. This action can multiply the qualities of the "read voice"—that reanimation, inside its reader, of what he or she hears as the voice of the text, so to speak. Even the painted lapidary can carry a sonorous import on its face. Nicolas Poussin made two paintings, both titled *Et in Arcadia ego* (in 1627 and again in 1637–38), in which shepherds and maidens gather around an inscribed tomb or stone, pointing closely to its lettering as if following it by hand. "Vision is a palpation with the look" (134), writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and here the pastoral touch traces out the sentiment of mortality, even in rural contentment. There's another *Et in Arcadia ego* by Guercino, painted earlier, between 1618 and 1622, in which a skull sits emphatically on an incised stone plinth. These works have accrued their densely rich interpretations by Erwin Panofsky and other art historians. It's notable that these are also speaking inscriptions, whichever iconographic interpretation you favor: "I, too, am here in Arcadia"—the speaking voice of death itself—or, in a more human rendering, "I, too, who am now dead, lived in Arcadia." In this most celebrated of lapidary admonitions, "Et in Arcadia ego," what, or who, calls out to the passerby? It is death's vivid and admonitory presence. This is the darker cousin of *carpe diem*. Many instances of the lapidary style exhibit this same tendency to function as knowing, if quiet, speakers engaged in mutely addressing their onlookers. On the other hand, here is another talkative stone: the Obelisk of Emperor Theodosius in Istanbul (see fig. 1). It's a relic of the last ruler of the eastern and western Roman empires and was itself an ancient Egyptian monument. Its base declares, "All things yield to Theodosius and to his everlasting descendants. This is true of me, too; I was mastered and overcome in three

**Figure 1**  
Obelisk of Theodosius I. Istanbul,  
Turkey

Photograph by  
Denise Riley (2010)



times ten days and raised toward the upper air, under Governor Proculus.” It’s another inscription that is directly speaking out toward its reader, the casual passerby. While evocative, it lacks the terseness of “Et in Arcadia ego”; long winded, it would never make a candidate for the lapidary style.

Once it’s allied to the terse, the magisterial sentiment can become fully declarative. There may be overlaps between the laconic, the epigrammatic, and the lapidary, but the ideal of the lapidary is anchored in the notably concrete and decisive utterance. Let’s take a promising candidate: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1). This enigmatic and alluring pronouncement has that concentrated quality of the true lapidary. As for the lapidary style’s commitment to brevity, we’ll often find it runs very close to the laconic. This is exemplified in the punch line of the tale of Philip II of Macedon who, intent on capturing Sparta, sent this message to its leaders: “If I win this war, you will be slaves forever. You are advised to submit without further delay, for if I bring my army into your land, I will destroy your farms, slay your people, and raze your city.” To which the Spartans replied in one word: “If” (Plutarch 446).

This ideal of a brevity that steers clear of any tinge of bathos recurs in “On Conciseness of Style in Writing and Conversation,” when Vicesimus Knox elaborates:

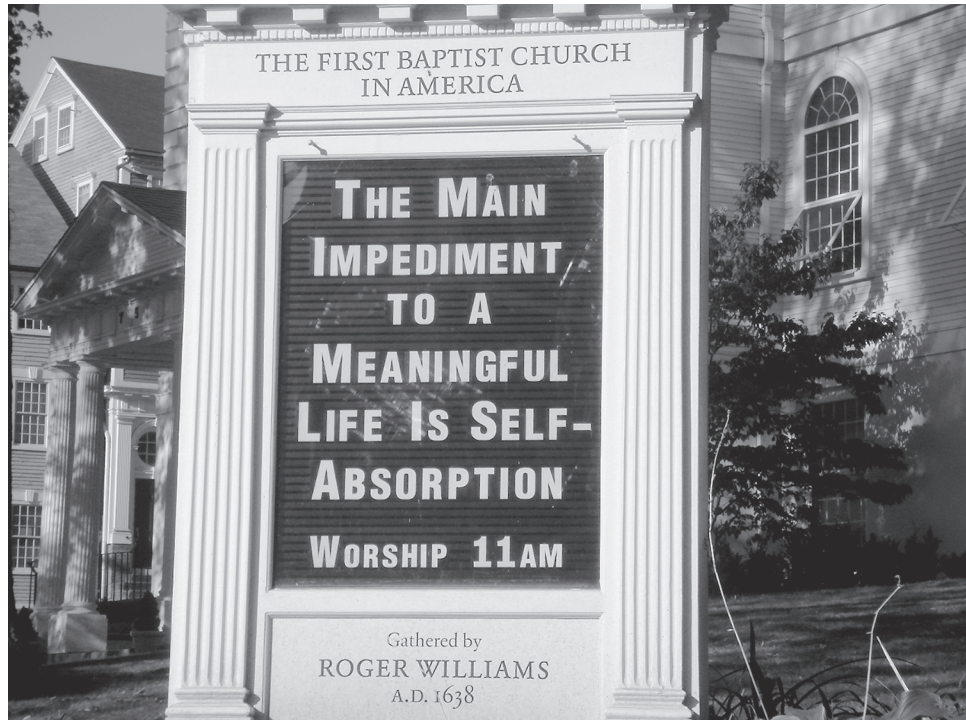
*A celebrated French writer, remarkable for conciseness of style, in a letter to a friend which he had made rather longer than usual, apologizes for its prolixity, by saying, that he had not time to write a shorter. [ . . . ] Brevity of expression is sometimes the mark of conscious dignity and virtue. It was manliness of sentiment and haughtiness of soul which gave rise to the laconic style. [ . . . ] Military harangues derive their chief beauty from expressive brevity. [ . . . ] But ancient history scarcely affords any instance more striking than that of a French king, who thus addressed his men immediately before an attack—“I am your General—you are Frenchmen—there are the enemy.” (48)<sup>1</sup>*

Any candidate for the lapidary’s terse brevity needs to be capable of being inscribed within a small compass, and so to be tightly composed, for instance, “Quod scripsi, scripsi,” Pontius Pilate’s taut insistence that “what I have written, I have written” (John 19.22). (His retort concerned Christ’s standing as “the King of the Jews.”) Thinking of the lapidary as embodying an aesthetics of incision can conjure up an ideal of elegant lettering, and then there’s a risk of slippage from an assumed standard of taste into a dubious “tastefulness.” But the lapidary style carries an aesthetic that merges into a virtue; it encompasses a notion of a sharpness of thought and an economy of expression as together enabling clarity. That’s the argument of George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” essay of 1946. A neat example of the contemporary lapidary as political wit is the coinage of “Bliar” for the surname of Tony Blair. Such brilliantly sardonic concision could lend itself easily to being engraved in stone.

On the other hand, brevity—per se—does not guarantee incisiveness. It can be infantile, as with the current vogue for contracted words, such as the recent use of “poo” for shampoo in the “No-Poo Movement.” As if our time’s too short to allow us to use a two-syllable word. Nor will admonition alone suffice to constitute the lapidary, however delightful to passersby an announcement may be (see fig. 2).

**Figure 2**  
 First Baptist Church  
 of Providence, Rhode  
 Island

Photograph by  
 Denise Riley (2009)



### *The Lapidary in Practice*

The stony aspect of the lapidary emphasizes its desired overtones of dignity, gravitas, reliability, and endurance. Its gemlike aspect, however, emphasizes, in its faceted nature, the lighter worth of some highly wrought artifice. (If these aspects are applied to the imagined writing of a poem, both the chiseling of verses and a longing for the enduring, hard, jewel-like quality in them are found sanctified in Walter Pater’s lapidary aesthetic, where to burn with a “hard gem-like flame” is his ideal of an ecstatically lived life [152].) Age-defying artifice triumphs in W. B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” where the declarative poet announces his longing to pass “out of nature,” to become a decoration, an artificial bird set on a bough:

*Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling*

The life of a professional lapidary works, however, not with such precious metals but with precious stones—distinctive because they admit light. To

read the manuals of a modern lapidary introduces us to a whole new vocabulary: of faceting technique, refractive index, dispersion, pleochroism. The work of cutting has to maximize each gemstone's color, brilliance, fire, and scintillation. Light travels inside a stone, but the optical characteristics of each kind of stone will differ, so each needs its particular mode of fashioning, whether of sawing, shaping, facet grinding, or polishing (see Kunz).

Lapidary manuals deal in alluring terms like *chatoyancy* (the cat's-eye effect) and *asterism* (as seen in a star sapphire), both related to the play of color in the dispersion of light—how it may split inside the gemstone and be affected by its pavilion angles. So beryl, corundum, and tourmaline crystals will splinter light into two rays at right angles: the quality named *birefringence*. And *pleochroism* means the differentiated colors in these split rays, as happens in the gemstones andalusite, axinite, corundum, iolite, spodumene, tourmaline, and tanzanite. The professional lapidary will cut each stone accordingly to get its most productive faceting. Dark garnets, for instance, will need only a shallow cut for the best dispersion of their limited internal light. But the differing properties of gemstones mean that only certain types can be faceted, whereas the *cabochon* cut is a smoothing, domed style that suits amber, cornelian, and onyx, for instance.

It's needless to labor the parallels between the activities of the professional lapidary, described in technical textbooks, and those of the poet; enough to say that the writing of poetry can demand extreme compression and the dispersal of as much internal light as possible. It can be experienced as a working technique of chipping verbal matter into shape. An aesthetics of translucency may be invoked:

TRANSPARENCY  
IS THE GAUGE  
OF ALL VALUE  
WHEN CUTTING  
WHEN WRITING (78)

So writes Christian Bök in his chapbook, *Crystallography*. Yet, what is really “transparent” about an intaglio mark, which is an incision into a surface, as in etching or engraving? How is it that the exactness of some fine cutting comes to be associated with being admirably see-through? There's a curious sort of synesthesia here. What, then, could count as a modern “lapidary verse”? Perhaps Marianne Moore's “The Fish”: “wade / through black jade.” Or Lorine Niedecker's “A monster owl.” Or some of George Oppen's or Louis Zukofsky's writings. Only occasionally, though, will Imagism itself



fit the specifications of the lapidary, as in some fragments by HD. But James Schuyler's ultra-lucid hospital poems, not composed under the banner of any movement, almost do.

We might anticipate that some twentieth-century art forms would have investigated this question of concentratedness and of "implication" (to use Moore's term) in relation to the physicality of words. The artist Cy Twombly was deeply susceptible to the charms of ancient graffiti. And he often painted the proper names of classical figures in trailing brushstrokes, like handwriting in veined marble. But an antiquarian "content" alone does nothing to guarantee a truly lapidary style. Then, is the lapidary in practice particular to Roman lettering? The Roman script is, though, hardly universal. How would some very different system of lettering be sensed by those who grew up inside its own physical shapes? For instance, Arabic, Laotian, Cambodian, Japanese, and Vietnamese engraved characters all possess their varied effects that, while differently alluring to this Western eye, feel very different from reading the Roman script. This isn't a matter of comprehension alone. What is found to be "numinous" or "authoritative" must depend on a known language incarnate in a known script, one that you can recognize to be weighty. So the notion of a "pan-linguistic lapidary style" would seem implausible.

Although the choice of typography isn't the only determinant of the lapidary, it's clear that within twentieth-century art, Bruce Nauman's work, which can involve the prominent exhibition of terse phrases or single words as signs, wouldn't conceivably count as lapidary. The medium of light in his neon signs is far removed from that quality of chaste excision on a hard ground but is usually mobile, brilliantly colored, satirical, bossy, and parodic. But the work of the late Scots artist Ian Hamilton Finlay could. He's exemplary among those who've developed a contemporary lapidary style. This includes his displayed fragments of stone incised with Roman capitals, bearing legends such as "THE WORLD HAS BEEN EMPTY SINCE THE ROMANS." Or with engraved quotations from Saint-Just. Or a medal engraved with one bisected word: VIR||TUE. The split between the two syllables makes evident both the "vir" as the Latin word *vir*, or man, and the "tue" as in the French "he kills," or *il tue*. Indeed, the other side of that same coin, literally, is the word *terror*, where the image is of a guillotine bisecting the word. Do we call this "concrete poetry"? But that seems an inept term for the work of Hamilton Finlay, an admirer of the stony aesthetics of the severest French revolutionary. His production has the authority of the hard line that stands over and above the semantic content to exploit its components. It uses the lines' incisions, not just the Roman capitals' angularity.

For lettering in relief alone doesn't carry the same affect as that which is incised. The letter that stands proud, or is embossed, isn't nearly so impressive despite its theatricality or clamor. Superscription has a very different tone from inscription, or gouged-out work. As, of course, does font. Let's think back for a moment to Poussin's painting. Could we imagine its injunction, "Et in Arcadia ego," set in a sinuous copperplate? Its affect would be quite different. For as it stands, what, or who, speaks to the passerby? It is an announcement of death's presence: "I am here, too." This inscription, on the tomb, is itself the subject of the painting. Yet it's not only what the lettering alludes to. It is also the uttering spirit of these admonishing letters. And it's this spirit that seems central to the attraction of the lapidary.

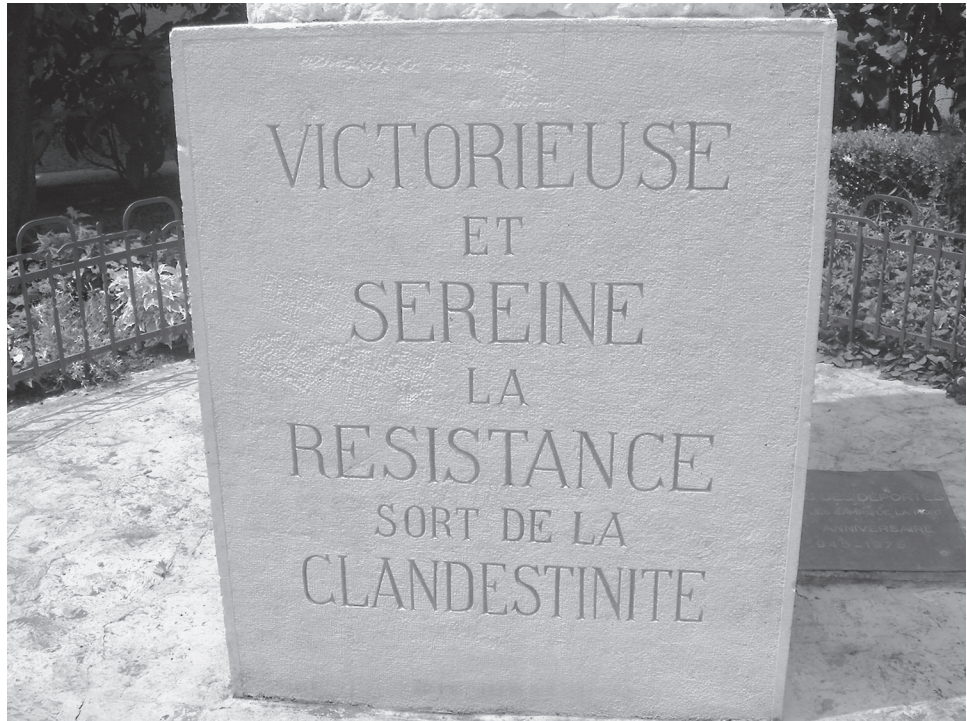
Why is this, though? I'm inclined to think there's something highly specific about the letter that's incised: if so, what is it? Perhaps it is its invitation to belief or consent through its call to follow the lines. There's almost a lure to the spectator to trace out what's incised, as if to demonstrate this power of the tangible—to involve a fingertip or a hand's touch, as in Christ's instruction to his skeptical apostle "Doubting Thomas" after the resurrection: "Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust *it* into my side: and be not faithless, but believing" (John 20.27). Thomas was only ready to be convinced via this demonstration. To run over the chiseled letter with the fingertips enacts a similar tracing in order to establish its truth: touching the hollow of the letter, as if an open wound in the flesh.

This hollowing out of the letter into the stone is like a literalization of that much-invoked phrase, the "materiality of language." The incised shape is a scooped-out letter, standing in for its full form. Its outline offers the petrified memory of an act of carving. A V-shaped incision casts an elegant and clean shadow in the middle of the Roman letter, in effect bisecting it. And yet, even when we speak of incised Roman capitals on stone, we find we need to specify the font. The inscribed slab shown in figure 3, cut at the base of a stone female figure of the rising spirit of the resistance, stands as a war memorial in a public garden in Menton in the South of France. But, stony as it is, its curly serifs let down its candidacy for the lapidary style.

Such practicalities of the lapidary style are those of epigraphy in general. Epigraphy, the study of inscriptions, is often considered a thoroughly antiquarian knowledge, though it's still, of course, practiced. Indeed, its resources have been revitalized by new online archives of inscriptions, including the Cornell Greek Epigraphy project. While digital lettering doesn't require a capacity to bite deep into the surface that bears it, epigraphy

**Figure 3**  
Resistance  
Memorial. Menton,  
France

Photograph by  
Denise Riley (2009)



must always consider the actual material, the stone or marble, and its historical production. The Greek prefix *epi* means “upon,” which immediately asserts it as a kind of “writing on.” (An *epitaph* is, literally, “a writing upon a tomb”—while the Greek *epigramma* is an inscription or a “writing into.” Hence our word “epigram.”) So the etymology of epigraphy announces its own physicality. It is writing on a ground.

This phrase “the materiality of language,” would customarily imply that language owns its histories of force. It has political effects as it carries its own affect. But for epigraphy in general, and for the lapidary inscription in particular, the literal ground on which it’s inscribed is crucial. That ground must be receptive to being incised, but it mustn’t tear, sag, or splinter under the physical pressure of the inscription. And its material also enables—or hinders—what can be said. This statement is from the stone letterer Fergus Wessel: “In many ways, with lettering in stone there is more flexibility than in type, where one is restricted by the piece of type. Again it depends on the material; a coarse and open limestone only really lends itself to big, bold lettering. Slate, on the other hand, is very fine to cut and one has complete control over the material—one’s chisel being like an extension of the hand.”

These technical constraints include the font that can be used, which will be limited because physically constrained by the ground. For example, a modern roman font like Perpetua, designed by Eric Gill, might lend itself especially well to slate carving. And while you couldn't really carve a sinuous copperplate into wood or stone, on metal it is feasible. This is shown by examples of Arabic calligraphy. The word *calligraphy* means, literally, "beautiful writing"; it is an art determined not only by the styles of its lettering but by its reception on a particular material ground.

*Whence did the wond'rous mystic art arise,  
Of painting SPEECH and speaking to the eyes?  
That we by tracing magic lines are taught,  
How to embody, and to colour THOUGHT? (3)*

That's William Massey, the eighteenth-century author of "Calligraphic Exercises." But because Arabic is a cursive script, it was hard to adapt to the invention of the printing press. So the Arab world continued, for some centuries after Gutenberg, to rely on handwriting for making books and legal documents. The art of calligraphy was more than just retained; it flourished.

### *The Staged Lapidary*

Inscriptions, as the vehicles for theological precepts or exhortations, are such ordinary sights that John Ruskin, in his "The Stones of Venice," wrote about inscribed churches: "Our eyes are now familiar and wearied with writing; and if an inscription is put upon a building, unless it be large and clear, it is ten to one whether we ever trouble ourselves to decipher it. But the old architect was sure of readers. He knew that everyone would be glad to decipher all he wrote" (123). When we turn his remark on the instance of the cathedral at Pisa, then instead we'll find surprises. These inscribed slabs are certainly "large and clear," prominent on the outside walls, but the lettering is upside down or sideways (see figs. 4 and 5).

There's been intense speculation as to why these letters are displayed askew. Some argue that a desired air of gravity was bestowed on the walls, whichever way up the early masons had laid the slabs. Montaigne commented in his journals that these were fragments taken from an old site of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, as they are still thought to be. ("Borrowing the spoils of the ancients" became a trope for an embellished literary style.) Others have interpreted the scenario as a deliberate demonstration of Christianity's conquest of, and indifference to, the declarations of the

**Figure 4**  
Inscription. Pisa  
Duomo, Italy

Photograph by  
Denise Riley (2012)



**Figure 5**  
Pisa Duomo, Italy

Photograph by  
Denise Riley (2012)



old Roman political world. Others have put it down to the simple illiteracy of the stonemasons (but that interpretation's been found unconvincing by other historians). It's been discovered that Pisa imported such stones in great quantities from Ostia and Rome, so it was not simply an action dictated by what happened to lie handily around on the spot. So, what kind of lapidary gesture was being enacted at Pisa through these mislaid stones? No one account seems exhaustive. It's as if these inscribed slabs embody a gesture of authority that's in part a travesty or a parody, in part rendered more powerfully mysterious.

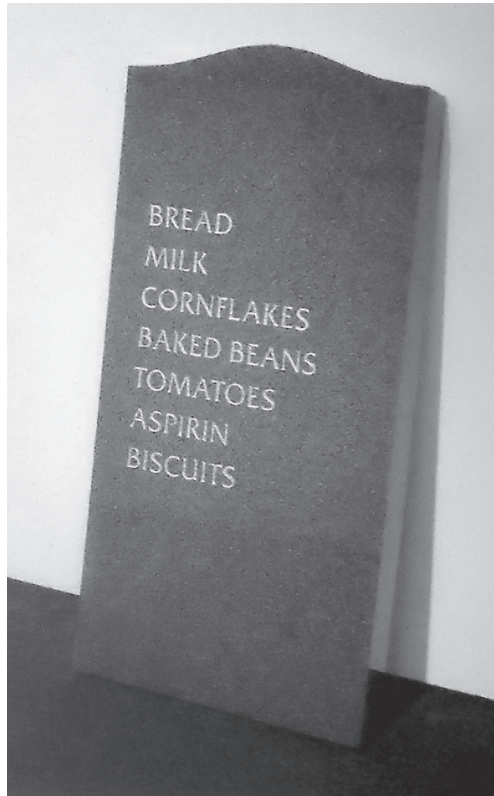
The nonironic lapidary can incarnate the most well known of admonitions, as in the scriptural tale of "the writing on the wall." At his drunken feast, the Babylonian King Belshazzar had used looted holy vessels to praise "the gods of gold and silver, brass, iron, wood, and stone." Soon afterward, disembodied fingers appeared to write on the wall of the royal palace these words: "Mene, Mene, Tekel uPharsin." They were decrypted by Daniel to signify "numbered, weighed, divided" (Daniel 5.25–28). Interpreted, the writing on the wall announced: "[Y]ou've been weighed in the balance and found wanting." On that very night Belshazzar was killed. There's a well-known Rembrandt painting of this episode, in which the painter has mistranscribed one of the characters and arranged them in columns, rather than from right to left as Hebrew is written. So, rather like the cathedral at Pisa, the announcement is not right. It's another miswriting, in what's no doubt a venerable history of error. But what's universally comprehended is the inscribed admonition's gravity, drawing attention to its declarative self.

The stiff immobility of the carved letters throws the word into relief, so to speak. It's this very petrification—a literal "turning to stone"—that lets any aspect of irony come to the fore. Irony will establish itself in the self-noticing word, the word made prominent as such. There's a delightful granite tombstone by the British artist David Shrigley; carved with Roman letters in gold leaf, it's actually an imagined and determinedly dull shopping list: "BREAD / MILK / CORNFLAKES / BAKED BEANS / TOMATOES / ASPIRIN / BISCUITS" (see fig. 6). The effect is both comical and grave: it's the banality of daily consumption that will see you out eventually. Its dark wit turns completely on the incision of this cheerily plain content in the monumental stone. It gives to the plainest shopping the *sub specie aeternitatis* weighting of the lapidary.

This "feeling of the lapidary" is a sensation for which maybe only that great elaborator of ambiguity, William James, could supply an apt

**Figure 6**  
 David Shrigley.  
*Gravestone*, 2008.  
 Gold leaf on granite

Stephen Friedman  
 Gallery, London



term. It wouldn't be a purely psychological characterization, although the lapidary does radiate a kind of feeling: an aesthetic emotion of its own, a sort of indication or a pointing toward. To return to Vicesimus Knox, who finds the elusive and the allusive to be the keys to concision's attraction:

*Were the causes of the pleasing and powerful effects of conciseness to be investigated, one of them might perhaps be found to be the pleasure which a reader, or spectator, takes in having something left for his own sagacity to discover. The mind greedily snatches at a hint, and delights to enlarge upon it; but frigid is the employment of attending to those productions, the authors of which have laboured every thing into such perspicuity, that the observer has nothing to do but barely to look on. ("On Conciseness" 51)*

There's an intimacy between the lapidary and the ironic, which lies partly in their common capacity to "stage" the word as such. Mere display can expose an ironic undertone. The repetition of a word will make its thinghood prominent, often to comical effect. But sometimes an intended and

controlled irony can lapse into drained-out restatement—for instance, those Barbara Kruger posters used by Selfridges, the London department store, in collaboration with an advertising agency and with the artist’s full involvement. The intention of slogans such as “I shop, therefore I am” is to satirize the emptiness of a life validated by buying. Another Kruger poster slogan runs, “You want it, You buy it, You forget it.” This comes close to being a critique of the store’s inevitable failure to realize the consumer’s hopes, for the psychology of buying will habitually end in dejection. Yet another poster has the sardonic instruction “Buy me, I’ll change your life.” These posters deploy her distinctive, slanted Futura Bold typeface, the font of brash post-war advertising. The sentiments here are certainly terse; but their means of exhibition is not lapidary.

### *The Lapidary and Time*

A vaguely Kleinian psychosocial term, “object loss,” denotes the experienced absence of an emotional center of attachment. It’s a curious phrase if taken too literally, for these are precisely objects that won’t get lost, insofar as inanimate things stay, somewhere or other. People go. Then the graven word may fix their trace, offering to the onlooker some suspended or arrested thought.<sup>2</sup> Their longed-for but frustrated permanence comes to dwell, instead, in a reliably incised mark. Lapidary inscriptions function, too, as a way of “stopping time.” The lapidary has already done its coming to being. It’s the triumph of what has already become, has settled, and can now be proclaimed. The lapidary style turns on a kind of confident singularity. Here, the word stands to present itself to itself, so to speak, *as* the word.

In fact, a writer can exploit this quality of useful estrangement, through self-contemplation, for her own writing. What happens when you put a draft away and then fish it up a week later to look again at it? You’ll suddenly see it clearly “as it is,” with all its weaknesses. It has cooled down during its separation from its author; it’s stepped away from being an emanation of you and has gone toward becoming more of a thing for itself. It can now expose its formal qualities to be scrutinized. (One way of “seeing what you’ve written,” if you’re struggling with the draft of a poem, is to throw it into a huge typeface. This, strangely enough, reveals more to you of what you’d put down, which then lets you edit it accordingly.)

But to speculate about the lapidary inscription’s capacity to freeze time would need a return to the topic of concision. There’s undoubtedly a pleasure, an aesthetic value, in concision, but what kind of value is this?



Why should less be more, unless you're short of space? Yet compression is often admired, even where there aren't any pragmatic needs for it, such as those imposed by the spatial limits of a gravestone. We might wonder, what's the nature of the beauty of the taut, the incisive, and what particular kind of brilliance exists in this highly compressed and specific gesture?

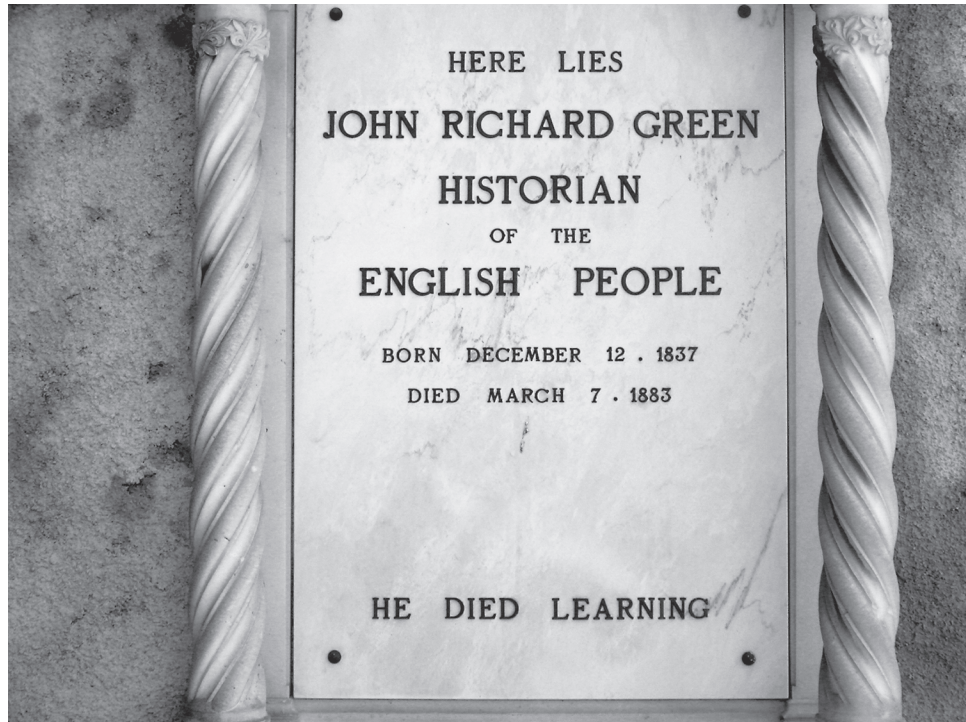
The link between *incision* and *concision* holds strong at the level of etymology. So in the late fourteenth century, the word *concision* was synonymous with "cutting away" or even with "mutilation." We recognize the gradations of the lacerating or cutting remark (we even speak of someone having a "sharp tongue"—a peculiarly pointed figure of speech, because what could be less "sharp" than an actual tongue?). If we pursue the figure of the sarcastic speaker, we'll find that sarcasm's own etymology is surprising in that it shows its fleshy origins: it comes from the Greek *sarkasmos*, "a taunt, mockery," from the verb *sarkazein*, "to speak bitterly, sneer." And that word in its turn means literally "to strip off the flesh," from *sarkos*, "flesh," as in "sarcophagus"—or, like the modern phrase, to "tear someone off a strip," which comes from "to tear a strip off them."

In brief—to return to *concision's* historical closeness to *incision*—the lapidary style is a perfect blend of these two related nuances of cutting. It cuts away, gouges out, as its way of compressing. But these elements of incisiveness are saved from the taint of destruction, even of sadism, by the stillness of the lapidary style. In this, the lapidary harmonizes with the monumental and funerary mode. Perhaps this quality stems from that air of timelessness embodied in the hard lettering on hard stone. Speech is being rendered numinous by means of a durable inscription. Its immobility becomes a virtue here, expressive of the precise element "fixed in time." This suits a possible feeling of atemporality in the living, in their feelings of the suspension of time's flow that may follow from a sudden death.

Death and the lapidary style make easy companions; the latter's stillness settles the conceptual tension between the physical thing, or body, and its animation. Engraved words are at home on graves. Their final interpellation is that calling-out to the passerby, "Someday you too will be like me, entombed." This sentiment is monumentalized as the words are held in display. The naturally mobile timing of language gets suspended for the eye as the lapidary inscription. The word is no longer fleeting or gestural. It is literally "set in stone." This very material of stone itself conveys the duration of time as endurance, as hardening. It also marks the evanescence of human temporality. "Time, how short," it says. The mark of meaning also becomes a calcified gesture. As such it defies time's

**Figure 7**  
Tomb of J. R. Green.  
English Cemetery,  
Menton, France

Photograph by  
Denise Riley (2009)



eroding powers as it also defies human amnesia. It's the very opposite of a "mystical writing-pad," the toy on which any writing will easily let itself be wiped away (Freud 230).

So the "lapidary" also touches on our styles of remembering. Do we think of ourselves as being "impressed" with our memories, as if we are a softer kind of stone? Or we might understand ourselves to be sharply incised by remembering. To be, as we say, "deeply marked" by some distressing experiences. Conversely, we might feel relieved joy in being somehow "unmarked" by them. That they were "water off a duck's back" means that they slipped easily and harmlessly over our well-protected surfaces.

Then could "the lapidary style" even function as emblematic of some human recovery from an attack—as a recording gesture on a marked rather than an unscarred surface? The cutting of stone has, in common with cutting into flesh or with tattooing, the will to permanence. Some bereaved mothers, for example, will decide to wear, tattooed, the names of their dead children. These will indeed prove to be longer-lasting inscriptions than the names of transient lovers—as in those cartoons of a sweetheart's name crossed out on a shoulder, another substituted, and then a whole run of erased names down to the forearm. Perhaps it is more plausible to hope to

live on as an inscribed, if lacerated, pillar, rather than as a surface carefully sandblasted by some willed amnesia into smoothness.

The lapidary, in short, is an instance of a style that in practice is doubled between asserting its aesthetic values (of tautness and clarity) and its material values—the constraints and potential of the cut stone or the faceted jewel. It is the *cutting gesture alone* that pulls together such disparate objects: the jeweler’s lapidary to the grey stone to the writing style. It’s a triumph of the enacted verb of incising. Different sorts of “materiality” are worked up into a style that’s intensively wrought and highly fashioned. That notion of “style,” extended to literature, runs closer to control and craft than to style considered as a demonstration of its author’s sensibility or persuasions. Such a writing style can only be willed to a limited extent; it tends to escape intention and to slip beyond management. If the lapidary holds an ideal of restraint that is difficult to sustain for long, its principled commitment to brevity is underscored by its material limits.

A last lapidary inscription, found in the so-called English cemetery in Menton in the south of France, marks the tomb of the historian J. R. Green, who’d been dogged with ill health and had gone in the hope of recuperating there, as did so many nineteenth-century invalids with weakened lungs (see fig. 7).

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## Notes

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| 1 | Here, Knox has Pascal in mind as the “celebrated French author,” while the King mentioned is Henri IV. | 2 | Adrian Stokes says of the completed art object: “It is as if the various emotions had been rounded like a stone” (406). |
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