SERMON IN STONE:
SYMBOLS AND ICONOGRAPHY IN THE GARFIELD MONUMENT

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We in the Western Reserve have grown so accustomed to the Garfield Memorial over the past one hundred years that we tend to forget how unusual it really is. Constantly seeing it loom over Cleveland’s east side, we may well dismiss it as just another presidential memorial, though perhaps somewhat more imposing than most. Yet the curious fact is that the Garfield Memorial is remarkable, even among presidential tombs.

Most American presidents lie in modest graves, either in local cemeteries (common in the North) or in family plots (more common in the South). Often little sets them apart from their more humble neighbors other than a fence, or a flag, or perhaps a slightly larger headstone. This lack of ostentation is in itself symbolic. "Death is republican," explained the author of a nineteenth century guide to presidential tombs. An era that prided itself on republican simplicity refused to elevate its rulers above the ruled. In office, presidents were expected to be accessible to the public, without the buffers of secret service guards, speechwriters or press secretaries. After their term was over they were expected to fade back into private life, without even pensions or the franking privilege. And in death, they were to lie without pomp, side by side with their neighbors and families.

Early Americans would have it no other way. Even though a place was set aside at the base of the Washington Monument to house the first president’s remains, the Washington family refused to surrender the body from its resting place in the family crypt.

In fact, the number of presidents buried in ostentatious memorials is surprisingly small. Only Lincoln, Grant, Garfield, McKinley and Harding have tombs that can be considered monumental. Some striking things emerge from this short list. For one thing, except for Lincoln, and possibly McKinley, these are not the presidents generally considered as great leaders. On the contrary, Grant and Harding are usually (and unfairly) placed at the bottom of presidential effectiveness. Garfield is generally excluded from such polls because of his brief tenure. No correlation, therefore, exists between presidential accomplishments and the size of presidential tombs except, perhaps, for a negative correlation.

Four of these presidents do have something in common: except for Grant, all died in office, three at the hands of an assassin. One might be tempted to conclude that national grief inspired their monumental tombs, except for some contrary examples. Neither of
the first two presidents who died in office—William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor—were given stately monuments. Both were buried in simple crypts near the family home, and both crypts suffered from severe neglect over the years. (Harrison's, it is true, does have an imposing tower, but that was added much later, during the 1920s.)

The fact of assassination may carry greater weight. Living in a modern secular state, we tend to forget that the primitive origins of government were religious. The first rulers were not public servants but divine emissaries and the first lawmakers were not elected representatives but the gods themselves. Despite the efforts of modern-day political scientists to demythologize the state and turn it into something prosaic, the mystical and even magical aspects of government cannot be totally eradicated. As late as the eighteenth century, the so-called Age of Reason, it was still believed that the English sovereign could cure certain diseases simply by touching the afflicted area. And even today, though we scoff at such superstitions, the crime of assassination evokes a shudder of horror because it seems more than murder—it verges on the sacrilegious. Is it too farfetched to suggest that by raising splendid monuments to murdered presidents we are propitiating their spirits and absolving ourselves of their blood guilt?

Perhaps it is. But how else can it be explained that Garfield, president for only 200 days, lies at the base of a towering castle, while Franklin D. Roosevelt, president for over twelve years, rests under a simple slab in his rose garden?

It could, then, be argued that the very first symbolic statement made by the Garfield Memorial is simply that it exists, that it is grandiose and that it somehow seems uncalled for, or at least more excessive than the bare facts of Garfield's life and death might seem to warrant. When Henry Adams contemplated the great cathedral at Chartres, he asked himself: what energy powered this building? We could put the same question: what force raised this monument?

For clues we need to examine Garfield's life and death in the content of his times. To his contemporaries Garfield's career seemed something out of a storybook. Born in 1831 in a log cabin in Cuyahoga County's Orange township, he was left fatherless and impoverished while still an infant. As he grew into adolescence, not even his strong-willed mother could keep him entirely within the path of respectability. A clumsy, overgrown, introspective boy, he drifted into the company of Cleveland waterfront loafers as he searched for wider horizons than could be found on the family farm. This search for adventure led to his later-celebrated stint on the Ohio Canal at the age of seventeen, an episode that abruptly
ended when he came down with the "ague," and had to be nursed back to health by his mother. His brief rebellion quashed, he dutifully returned to school and allowed himself to be baptized. Supporting himself by preaching and teaching he worked his way through college.

In education and religion he had found those wider horizons which had eluded him on the canal. Both carried him into respectable careers. By his mid-twenties he had become an ordained minister in the Disciples of Christ and the president of a small Disciple college in Hiram, Ohio. Still restless, he turned to law and politics, studied successfully for the bar and then, not yet thirty, won election to the Ohio Senate.

The Civil War brought him onto a national stage. Enlisting as colonel of the 42nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry, he quickly rose to be one of the youngest major generals in the Union army, aided by hard work, an intuitive grasp of military principles and, it must be added, political connections. His military career climaxed with the Battle of Chickamauga. Shortly after that he resigned his commission in mid-war to take a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives which he would occupy for the next seventeen years.

Rising steadily to a position of leadership within the Republican party, Garfield was considered a likely candidate for the presidency sooner or later. His opportunity came sooner, rather than later, and in a highly unexpected fashion. In 1880 he was attending the Republican convention as campaign manager for fellow Ohioan John Sherman. When that convention deadlocked, delegates spontaneously turned to Garfield as a compromise candidate who could bridge the gap between the party's deeply divided factions. In the subsequent election Garfield carried his party to the narrowest possible victory--less than a ten thousand vote plurality nationwide.

His administration began on March 4, 1881, and was immediately embroiled in a series of messy patronage squabbles as the various factions of the party jockeyed for supremacy. These unedifying matters consumed the entire spring, but by early July they seemed sufficiently settled so that the president could enjoy the luxury of a summer vacation. He was waiting in the train station when an unhinged religious fanatic named Charles J. Guiteau stepped behind him and pumped two bullets into his back at close range.

Now began the most memorable part of the Garfield Administration. For eighty days he slowly slid into death, with the entire nation nervously sharing the death watch. His gallant struggle for life made Garfield a national hero, almost a national obsession. Party and factional differences were erased during the long vigil and
when the end came the suppressed tension exploded in an unparalleled orgy of grief. The entire route of Garfield’s funeral train was lined with mourners and over 250,000 filed past his bier on Cleveland’s public square before the coffin was transported to a temporary vault in Lake View Cemetery.

What, precisely were they mourning? It could not have been a president, since Garfield’s administration was too brief to leave much of a mark on the nation. Nor could it have been a political leader, since Garfield’s narrow victory in 1880 had been hard fought and bitterly divisive. It was Garfield’s life story, not his public career, which so captured the imagination of his countrymen.

That life story encapsulated many facts of what used to be called, unashamedly, The American Dream. Rutherford Hayes put his finger on a central aspect of that dream when he described Garfield as "the ideal self-made man." Garfield not only lived the Horatio Alger story, he helped inspire it. Alger himself acknowledged the debt by writing one of Garfield’s campaign biographies.

Suitably mythologized, Garfield’s career could serve as living proof that the American ideal of social mobility was not a fraud, that a poor farm boy could rise to prominence through hard work, good character and native ability. All of the most cherished symbols of nineteenth century American values played a part in his success. Home, Mother, Church, Schoolhouse, Army and Flag were woven together in the story of an impoverished lad who was good to his widowed mother, studied hard, preached in the (Protestant) church of his choice, fought to save the Union and free the slave and thereby rose from height to height.

At a time when the comfortable structure of the old America was beginning to crumble under the onslaught of hordes of strange immigrants, of grimy factories, impersonal cities, coarse millionaires and the new gospel of wealth, it was important to cling to the memory of someone who embodied traditional virtues. In mourning Garfield, Americans were reaffirming their own threatened values and by building him a monument they were honoring themselves.

This may account for a further peculiarity of the Garfield Monument—the fact that it bears so little overt reference to Garfield himself. Instead, it seems, at first sight, little more than a generalized expression of the idea of the mausoleum.

Of course, it is difficult to characterize any individual by way of an architectural form. Thomas Jefferson is an exception, since he was an architect himself. His monument in Washington reflects the
man by being built in the Roman style he so favored for his own creations, a style that had the added benefit of recalling that era of antique republican virtue which inspired his political vision.

The Washington Monument is harder to justify. What historical connection links the Father of His County to an Egyptian obelisk? With sufficient ingenuity (and leaving Freud to one side), some sort of symbolic linkage can be made. It could be said, for example, that the Monument towers over the city just as Washington's lonely eminence towers over mankind, or some similar sort of high-flown verbiage so beloved by the people who write catalogs for art exhibits.

But even they would be hard pressed to find some linkage between this massive, gloomy castle and the humble facts of Garfield's life. So far as can be seen, no such attempt was even made. After Garfield's death, $225,000 was raised by popular subscription to finance a suitable monument. The trustees of this fund announced a nationwide competition, but the judges, who were themselves architects, seem to have given serious consideration only to those entries which reflected the currently fashionable pseudo-medieval style.¹

The winner was George Keller, of Hartford, Connecticut, a leading exponent of what has come to be known as the High Victorian Gothic Style. Born in Cork County, Ireland, he had come to the United States as a boy. His formal education was slight and, like most architects of his day, he learned his craft on the job, rather than in an academy. After the Civil War he settled in Hartford, where he gained some local prominence. Before the Garfield Monument, his most celebrated commission was Hartford's Memorial Arch, a massive structure with an uncanny resemblance to the final design of the Garfield Monument. Indeed, with its round towers of rough-hewn stone surmounted by conical roofs, its narrow windows and terracotta bas-relief frieze, it resembles nothing so much as two Garfield Monuments joined together at the waist by a crenelated walkway.

The resemblance was not apparent at first, since the winning design Keller originally submitted was somewhat different from the final product. Initially, it was intended to be a cylindrical tower, soaring 225 feet above its base. Near the top, it flared out, then narrowed to an open lantern, similar to a lighthouse. It was surmounted by a conical roof topped with a statue of a female figure, presumably Liberty. The outside of the tower was to be adorned with numerous shields and broken by arches, niches and windows (both gothic and romanesque). Although a porch over the elaborate gothic entranceway added some variety, the whole structure seemed ill-proportioned and top-heavy.
It was modified, not for aesthetic reasons but, as is so often the case, because of economic necessity. Sixty feet was lopped off the top and two small turrets were added to the sides of the porch for balance. The decorative shields and arches were reduced, the female statue was eliminated, and a simple conical roof replaced the elaborate lantern. The $20,000 thus saved was poured into the opulent interior, which has been praised by an architectural critic as "one of the great interiors of the era."

That era did not subscribe to the modernist imperative that "less is more." On the contrary, it believed that more was always better than less. Or, as in the words of Mae West, that "too much of a good thing can be wonderful." Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Keller filled every inch of the Memorial Hall rotunda with decoration.

Now that the interior of the Garfield Monument has been cleaned and restored, the original impression it must have made can once again be experienced. The effect is dazzling. Keller's space pulsates with light that streams through the stained glass windows and reverberates from the glittering mosaic tiles. The predominant color, as befits the so-called Gilded Age, is gold.

That visual pun was no doubt unintentional, but the decision to employ mosaics as the artistic medium was deliberate and symbolic. It was an effort to invoke eternity. Paint may eventually deteriorate, but stones last forever. The monument, like Garfield's reputation would defy time and decay. That same intimation of immortality was also intended to have been conveyed allegorically. Just beneath the roof are twelve empty niches that were originally designed to hold statues representing the signs of the zodiac. This was supposed to signify "that the memory of Garfield shall be as enduring as time,"—a prediction which may now seem unduly optimistic. In any event, funds ran out before the statues could be constructed.

Within the Rotunda there are three levels of representational figures. On the domed ceiling can be seen four winged figures resembling angels, signifying the cardinal points of the compass—a symbol with Masonic overtones. They stand on bands of red and white stripes, reminiscent of the American flag, mingling the symbols of the civic religion with those of Christian iconography. Among them are interspersed wreaths of laurel (for earthly glory) and immortalles (for heavenly bliss).

Running across the circumference of the vault, about halfway up, is a frieze depicting, in idealized form, a funeral procession. Garfield lies on a bier from out of which shoots the rays of the setting (or perhaps rising) sun. Columbia, wearing a liberty cap
and holding an American shield, stands with head bowed. An eagle and a laurel wreath are at her feet. The procession of mourners is rendered in muted colors—umber, white and black—in keeping with the funereal motif. Figures representing Law, Justice, Veterans, Literature, Labor and other groups file past to pay their respects with bowed heads, indicating the universality of grief. In this vast procession, the bier itself is quite overshadowed and unless a viewer is careful he could easily overlook Garfield in the multitude of mourners.

The third set of allegorical figures consists of sixteen stained glass windows (ten of which admit light). They represent the thirteen original states, Ohio, Peace and War. All but War are female figures. Each of the states carries some characteristic product or attribute. Virginia bears tobacco, Massachusetts books, New York displays the recently-completed Statue of Liberty, and so on. Ohio holds a log cabin similar to the one in which Garfield was born.

The message on the Rotunda walls is that of universal grief. In descending order: on the dome, the heavens declare the glory of Garfield; in the frieze, all the nations pay him homage; and, from the windows, the states offer him their choicest fruits.

The dominant elements of the Rotunda, to which the eye is irresistibly drawn, is a larger than life-sized white marble statue of the object of all this grief. It represents Garfield as a congressman. He has just risen from his chair. A speech is clenched in his hand, his eyes peer into the distance and his demeanor is solemn. He seems to be gathering his thoughts for some important pronouncement. In contrast to the allegorical symbolism of the rest of the Rotunda, the statue is naturalistic to the point of literalism. Every button on his frock coat, every fold in his fashionably uncreased trouser, the lacing on his shoes and decorative fluting on the chair legs are all rendered with unimaginative precision which may seem out of place with the symbolic ambiance of the chapel.

In fact, it is out of place. It was not intended to be part of Keller’s scheme but, as the architect complained: "While I was in England a sculptor named Doyle took advantage of my absence to induce the committee to commission him to provide the statue of Garfield that still disfigures the Memorial."

Keller seems to be suggesting that Alexander Doyle, a local sculptor, somehow foisted the statue on the commissioners, but he missed the point. Americans were a literal-minded people, proud of their practicality and their sense of realism. Allegory might be all right in its place, but that place was in the background. The
foreground was to be occupied by the here and now, the solid and the useful. The statue might spoil Keller's carefully planned spatial conception, but Americans had little patience with abstract conceptions.

Keller was enraged by this philistine intrusion: "...whenever I think of that monstrosity standing in the center of the beautiful interior," he grumbled, "I burn with indignation." But he seems to have forgotten just whose tomb this was. Except for the name over the entrance and coffin in the basement, this alleged "monstrosity" of a statue was the only specific reference to Garfield in the Rotunda other than the easily-overlooked reclining figure on the frieze. Without the statue a visitor might be hard pressed to discern just what purpose this monument was intended to serve.

Keller had intended to relegate all pictorial realism to the Monument's exterior. His Connecticut friend, Caspar Buberl, who had designed the terra-cotta bas-reliefs for the Hartford Arch, was commissioned to provide similar friezes for the Garfield tomb. He created five huge panels, containing over a hundred life-size figures, to tell the story of Garfield's life in stone. These panels were placed near the top of the portico. From them a visitor with strong eyes and a sturdy neck can derive some idea of the message he is supposed to read in Garfield's life.

The realism of these panels, however, is deceptive. In their own way they are as fanciful as the angels on the Rotunda ceiling. Even though they are supposed to depict scenes from Garfield's life, they actually reshape the contours of that life into a palatable, edifying myth.

The first panel portrays Garfield as Teacher. Since the central theme of Garfield's life, as Americans interpreted it, was the myth of the self-made man, it was essential to begin with Garfield as a poor youth, if only to dramatize how high he later rose. The surprise here is that the artist avoided the seemingly obvious choice of portraying young Garfield as a canal boy. This could have directly evoked the Horatio Alger story by a visual quotation of Alger's own biography of Garfield, which was entitled From Canal Boy to President. Perhaps Buberl thought manual labor was too humble a beginning for his hero. Placing Garfield in the classroom emphasized his intellectual gifts rather than his physical attributes and was in keeping with Buberl's didactic intentions.

But the classroom of Buberl's imagination was not one Garfield was likely to have recognized. The country schoolhouses in which he taught had been rough-hewn cabins with benches made of split logs. As many as fifty boys and girls of all ages were crammed into a
stuff room. Books were few; brawls were frequent. A constant hubbub of noise rose from the unruly students and the teacher had to enforce discipline by frequent application of the switch. Young Garfield expressed his pedagogic frustration in verse:

Cooped in a little narrow cell,
As hot as black Tartarus,
As well in Pandemonium dwell
As in this little schoolhouse.

In contrast, the classroom in which Buberl places Garfield looks like it could have been Choate or Phillips Academy. Garfield, the teacher, wears a suit and tie, as do most of his students. He is leaning on a well-crafted lectern; they are seated at individual desks. There are only thirteen in the class, all but one male and, except for one, all are approximately the same age. All of the little scholars are attentively eyeing their teacher, except for the one who is diligently working at the blackboard. There is not a switch in sight. On the wall is a map of the world, a portrait of Washington and (a playful touch) on a slate one can make out a faint sketch of the Hartford Arch, as a sort of signature.

This idealized, sanitized portrait sets the tone for the other panels in the series. To one degree or another all smooth the rough edges of Garfield's life. The second panel portrays Garfield as a soldier. The scene is a climactic moment at the Battle of Chickamauga. Though one could not tell from the picture, this was one of the more controversial episodes in Garfield's career. The center of the Union line had just been swept away, carrying with it the commanding general, William S. Rosecrans and Garfield, his chief of staff. Only the Union left wing, under General George Thomas, stood firm. During the retreat, Garfield left Rosecrans to join Thomas and for the rest of his life Rosecrans would unfairly but vehemently blame Garfield for deserting his post so as to win some easy glory alongside Thomas. Buberl sidesteps the controversy by portraying Garfield in the act of handing Thomas a written order. This suggests that Garfield joined Thomas on official business and absolves him of any disloyalty to Rosecrans.

The central panel, Garfield as Orator, pictures him in a characteristic pose. He has just delivered what appears to be a campaign speech at an outdoor rally. The audience is cheering and some are waving hats and banners. Even the reporter looks up from his notes as he gazes on the speaker with rapt admiration.

The fourth panel depicts the high point of Garfield's career--his inauguration as president. One hand is on the Bible, the other is raised to Heaven. Administering the oath is Chief Justice Morrison R. Waite, who is holding what looks to be the Constitution. They
are surrounded by Republican dignitaries, including outgoing president Rutherford B. Hayes, vice president Chester Alan Arthur and various senators and party leaders.

The fanciful element of this composition consists in what is excluded. At the real inauguration Garfield was surrounded not only by public men but also by his family: wife, children and aged mother. They would have made a pretty tableau. Why were they eliminated? One can only guess, but it is possible that Buberl wanted a Garfield who belonged exclusively to the nation, any competing ties to private life would confuse that relationship and diminish Garfield's heroic stature.

Another omission is worth noting. One of the most conspicuous figures at Garfield's inauguration was Roscoe Conkling, the powerful Republican senator from New York. Conkling was the leader of the faction which opposed Garfield. At the inauguration he had maneuvered to stand beside the incoming president in what some interpreted as a peace-making gesture. The truce, if any, was short lived and Conkling soon resumed his feud, causing a bitter inter-party struggle which indirectly contributed to Garfield's assassination. Conkling's presence on Garfield's tomb would be an embarrassing reminder of the late president's major political failure, so out it goes, as literal truth again gives way to edifying fable.

Even the final scene, showing the martyred president lying in state, is rearranged in the interest of decorum. When Garfield died, his body was brought from New Jersey to Washington to lie in the Capitol Rotunda. It was placed in an open coffin, but inadequate embalming combined with the summer heat, caused signs of decomposition to appear and the coffin was ordered closed.

In Buberl's composition, the coffin disappears, as does all hint of earthly corruption. Death has lost its sting. The fallen leader lies on what looks like a sofa, covered only by a winding sheet. This sheet is so wrapped as to give the impression of a toga. To heighten the connection with classical antiquity, a tearful child is laying a wreath of laurel at his feet. Garfield has been transformed into the last of the Romans.

A final aspect worth noting is that out of the seven representations of Garfield in and around the tomb, four show him in the act of speaking. (In the others he is either fighting or dead.) In that highly rhetorical era, public speaking was prized more than it is today. In four of the professions followed by the versatile Garfield—preaching, teaching, the law and politics—his silver tongue and ready eloquence carried him to success. Yet, curiously enough, none of Garfield's words was found worthy of being
preserved in his monument, unlike the Lincoln and Jefferson monuments whose walls are covered with speeches and sayings.

Of course, Garfield's words are not as memorable as those of Jefferson or Lincoln. My little pocket dictionary of quotations contains only two sayings by Garfield and, unfortunately, he never said either of them. The supposedly inarticulate Ulysses S. Grant, on the other hand, has five entries, all of them genuine.

Nineteenth century American chose to memorialize Garfield not for what he said, or even for what he did, but for what he was—a symbol of their own aspirations. The Garfield Monument is a sermon in stone on that text.

ENDNOTES

1.G.S. Weaver, The Lives and Graves of Our Presidents (Chicago, 1897), 360

2.For some rejected designs, see "A Study of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument and Garfield Memorial in Cleveland," Journal of the Cuyahoga County Archives, I (1981), 52.


6.Ransome, Keller, 141.

7.Ibid.