CHAPTER 7

Volume

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In its anthropological translation, "volume" might refer to "volume of being". In this chapter we seek to understand volume as referring to being in itself, in its structuration, disconnected from its relationships with other beings. It presents itself as an alternative to the dominant relationalist approach in anthropology.

We attribute six different inspirations to "volume" as a concept. The first inspiration is geometry. Volume then refers to a three-dimensional figure, with a surface—its envelope—and an interior—its content. It is therefore possible to say that a human being is a volume in the literal sense of the term. It is even measurable, as Francis Hallé explains when he contrasts mammals (which are above all volumes) with plants (which are above all surfaces) (Hallé, 2002, 44–47). This is not the volume we are talking about here, the volume filled with water and blood, muscles, bacteria or viruses, and supported by a skeleton. It is the volume of being that interests us. However, it is in the organism that it takes shape. It is not a physical form, in the strict sense of the term, but there is a dependence of the characteristics of the volume of being on the organism that shelters it, that gives it its edge, and whose scale it retains. Maurice Bloch perceives a

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certain confusion in the lexicon of anthropologists when it comes to evoking the human being—agent, self, person. He prefers another term, "blob", which he believes to be neutral, with no particular meaning or form (Bloch 2012). The choice of the term "volume" is not neutral, creating an effect of unity, compactness, and enclosure.

Volume has a second inspiration: sculpture. It invites a dialogue with the history of sculpture and the different genres of sculpture.[1] For example, the reliefs, whether high or low, are characterized by an attachment to the background. Humans are represented as being dependent on a background. In this way, relief does not have to worry about equilibrium [?the mechanics of stasis?], because the figures are held by this background. It follows that the internal structure of the figures is less important, since they are anchored *in something else*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in most cases, anthropology is a science of the background. Even if figures do appear here and there, with varying degrees of prominence, including in research that places great emphasis on subjectivity, anthropology has always valued relations between figures, on the one hand, and between figures and their situations, contexts, and environments on the other, to the point where the latter are seen as what explains or needs to be explained.

As well as reliefs, there are sculptures in the round, the most common kind of which cannot be separated from their insertion in a public space, a square, or a religious building. On the other hand, we are interested in sculpture in the round, which avoids this relation with a context. In this case, it is a "homeless" sculpture (Anders 1944) or "without roof" (Rilke 2011, 19), one that can be turned around, as if detached from its surroundings, closing in on itself. Rodin's *The Age of Bronze* (1877) is very significant here, about which Rodin said he had wanted to make "a simple study from life [...] with no other meaning than life itself" (quoted in Bénédite 1926, 22). We see the movement of the arm raised towards the head. This reveals the armpit, which is presented from the front, and shows the edge of the shoulder blade, which belongs to the back (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2). It is an astonishing invitation to walk around the body, which is cut off from its surroundings. The hand placed on the head gives the measure of the human being represented. He stands between the top of his

[1] From a different perspective, Nigel Rapport's reference to painting to clarify the concept of distortion is exemplary of the heuristic dialogues between art and anthropology (Rapport 2016).

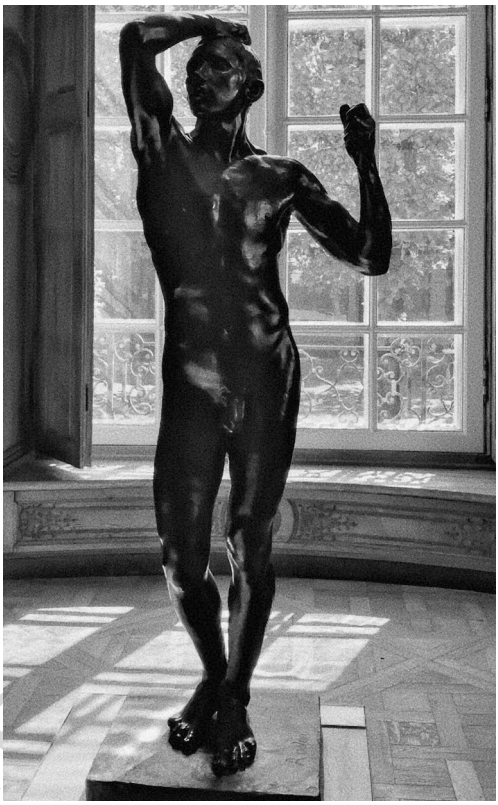

Fig. 7.1 *The Age of Bronze* (Rodin)—photo C. Beaugrand

head and the tip of his foot. Here we have the empirical unity of a volume of being, in its separate wholeness, with its edge freed from a context. It is as if, with this sculpture, Rodin was saying that it is possible to look at and describe a being, just one, extracted from its context, without adding what is around it—other beings or objects.

A volume is also—and this is the third inspiration—a "scroll of parchment or papyrus containing written matter", all the sheets gathered together by binding, and later "a single book or collection of printed sheets" (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*). Scrolling and binding indicate some ways of keeping a volume together and making it a unity. Loose sheets, bound sheets, and texts are the contents of a volume. Just as there are no books without these elements and as these elements become meaningful

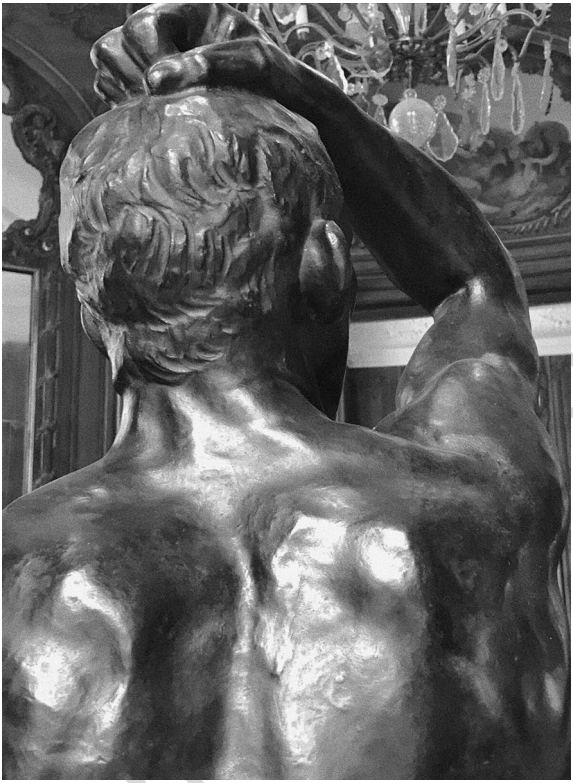

Fig. 7.2 *The Age of Bronze* (Rodin), detail—photo C. Beaugrand: The movement of the arm raised towards the head shows the possibility of 'turning around'

only when contained in a book, there can be no volumes of being without the components that constitute them, and which themselves need to be contained in a volume to exist. Understanding an individual as a volume of being then implies looking at these various components as interrelated, without fragmenting and reducing the entire volume. These are the components that are most often of interest—albeit separately—to the human and social sciences: actions, gestures, emotions, language, moods, social or cultural markers, thoughts, memories, cognitive, socio-cognitive or psychological expressions, and also one's own stylistic traits. We call these components "voluments", a word formed from the contraction of volume

and element. As with the book, these components, which have different possibilities of expression and content, are part of the volume of being and, above all, do not leave it. They are, as it were, attached to it.

With regard to the etymology of the word "volume", the Latin verb *volvere* indicates a movement and certain actions: rolling, causing to roll, letting time go by, but also stirring something in one's heart and meditating in one's mind. As a three-dimensional solid, a volume of being moves, is situated in time and follows variable rhythms, with different intensities and strengths. This etymology could be a fourth inspiration, one that takes us back to sculpture in a surprising way. Let us take a look at Rodin's *The Walking Man* (1900), Fig. 7.1.

For the purposes of our reasoning, a few details of the sculpture are worth noting:

1. both feet rest on the floor. However, in the actual movement of walking, the heel of the rear foot would be at least slightly raised (Fig. 7.2);
2. the musculature of the right thigh, in front, is very anatomically detailed—the muscles are contracted because of the temporary support needed for the weight of the body. In contrast, the musculature of the left thigh appears smooth, as if the muscles were relaxed, which is contradictory to the support of the left foot. The process of walking thus keeps a support, in this case an overdetermined one, seeming to indicate that we must wait for this back leg with what it is carrying. It is as if there is a kind of "retention" of the previous step (Fig. 7.3);
3. the torso is only slightly inclined, corresponding to the balance given by the support of the two feet. Rodin himself says: "You have to find the balance given by each movement and vary with it". And he adds: "True balance results from the general movement of the figure, and those whose line passes through all the planes that give the whole its stability and balance" (in Dujardin-Beaumetz 1992, 24).

When commenting on Rodin's works, Rainer Maria Rilke's vocabulary is illuminating. He notes that "the motion in the gestures of this sculpture […] takes place within the things, like the circulation of an inner current, never disturbing the calm and stability of their architecture" (Rilke 2011, 134). Rilke insists on the movements that "withdraw within themselves,

Fig. 7.3 *The Walking Man* (Rodin)—photo C. Beaugrand: Neither leg lifts off the ground, indicating retention of the process of walking

curling up" (Rilke 2011, 45). *The Walking Man*'s emphasis on the balancing of steps, feet, and legs means that the movement of a being, its "attempt" to move forward, is also achieved by returning to the interior of the entity. He is "held back", at any rate limited, by the automatic and necessary repetition of his gestures and their singular way of being performed, implicitly saying that they are those of this volume, and not those of another.

The objection can be made that a human being is not a volume of stone or earth, and that he or she is not a closed system. Volume then begs the question: How can we think about stability from the point of view of sculpture while incorporating a certain openness? Let us take a look at the Haniwa, terracotta figures designed to be set into the earth surrounding the tomb-tumulus. They date from the sixth and seventh centuries in

Japan. They are our fifth inspiration. Haniwa are hollow volumes made using the coiling technique. Made in a single piece, they often represent individuals. They appear as envelopes, with a strong sense of delimitation between their interior and exterior (Fig. 7.4).

What particularly concern us are the eyes, two slits incised into the clay before firing, producing a gaze because of the inner darkness produced by their enclosure. These eyes indicate that something external can be "captured", but in a reduced way. In this configuration, a Haniwa gives the impression that its relational movement is very limited and that the exterior has little or no impact on the compactness of the volume. We might venture an analogy with situations in life: there is what is not seen or

Fig. 7.4 C. Beaugrand, *Studies of Haniwa*, clay, 2022

heard; there is what is almost as quickly forgotten for good; there is what has no impact; there are a few facts retained in the memory; there is what everyone reacts to quickly, but which has no impact beyond that reaction; there is what is added to the knowledge and know-how—but none of this changes the temperament, the character, the way of walking or looking. Like a Haniwa, a volume of being is made up of a single piece, with limited entry of what might come from outside. What we mean is that the volume of being is more like a Haniwa than a barrel that has to be filled and emptied as situations arise. What is kept are traces, for example, of voluments seen and heard (a trace of the emotion of another volume)—and not the voluments themselves (the emotion of this other volume). In all cases, they are attached to their own volume. One characteristic of the volume of being is therefore a presence of traces, which is moderate (they are only traces), filtered and selective. Ultimately, some traces seep into only one or other volument in particular, altering only gradually and partially—which maintains a certain constancy, as moments and situations go by (for more details on the volume of being, see Piette 2023).

The image of the ball, summoned by Parmenides at the foundation of Greek philosophy, is very much relevant here. It is our sixth inspiration and sums up our discussion. Undoubtedly, Parmenides does not designate a being in particular, for example a human being. But the characteristics of the being in question call out nevertheless. Parmenides presents a substantialist being, non-divisible, in one piece, all alike, "in the coils of huge bonds"; and he adds that "strong necessity holds it in the bondage of a limit, which keeps it apart", remaining the same, "like the volume of a spherical ball, and equally poised in every direction from its centre", without more being or less being here and there (Coxon 2009, 72–78). The human ball is not perfect, nor complete, unlike Parmenides' ball. But the volume of being is held with ligatures, intra-ligatures, these "bonds" that Parmenides speaks of, reminiscent of the book bindings mentioned above. The volume of being has different kinds of ligatures: those which retain the voluments to the volume itself, in its limits; those which connect the voluments between them in the volume—an action with an emotion, a thought, a knowhow, a habit, a gesture, a mood, and so on; those that regulate them and contain, control the intensities, including of what happens; those, very important, which consist in impregnating, with repetition and regularity, the acts, the words, the emotions, the moods. Mimicries, gestural forms, character tendencies and their own details:

these are the stylistic traits that indicate singularity and "retain" the movement of a volume.

On the basis of these various points, we conclude that a major challenge in Anthropology is to build *a science of existents*. To describe the individual X, the volume of being X, is not to describe an action, an experience, a gesture, it is to describe the action, the experience, the gesture of X, with the details characterizing it. Most of the time, there is an almost natural erasing of the singularizing stylistic details that make X not interchangeable with Y. To describe the individual X is to push to the extreme the case study, since it is a question of observing and describing X as X, in the continuity of its moments. To this end, we note that old metaphysics can be more heuristic than new ones, and that an art that we would not expect—sculpture—can also have a strong heuristic effect.

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