

## Chapter 2

# Winckelmann: The Responsibility of Aesthetic Response

*What can I do, if the Medici Venus seems to me like a lovely chambermaid surprised in her toilette by her young master?*

(August Friedrich Kotzebue)

### 2.1 The Purpose of This Chapter

The idea that a *beautiful* painting or sculpture can be encountered as a *quasi-individual* that seduces us (and troubles us!) with the promise of a self-plenitude impossible in ordinary experience is as old at least as the legend of the young man who attempted to have sexual intercourse with the beautiful statue of Aphrodite of Cnidus. But this idea becomes the kernel of an aesthetics of figurative art only with Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Plato's Socrates had made this point, but only about living human bodies: in the *Phaedrus*, he noticed how gazing upon the beauty of the beloved, the lover recollects his pre-embodied existence in a heavenly realm. And Orthodox theologians claimed that icons could indeed be experienced as divine traces—but images did not do so *qua* beautiful.<sup>1</sup> Mannerist Italian art theorists did claim that the beauty of some figurative artworks could indeed strike us as a sensible presentation of the Idea. But these writers saw beautiful works as interchangeable *tokens* of a single, transcendent perfection: the immutable genius of the artist.

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<sup>1</sup>Orthodox theologians like John of Damascus and Theodore Studite had already claimed that icons of Christ could be taken as traces of the divine, and (because of the anthropomorphic nature of Christ) hint at the communion between divine and human nature. But icons did not do this *qua* beautiful. These iconophile writers had taken for granted that icons complemented, *and were complemented by*, a doctrinal, cultic and liturgical framework. The reliance on that framework is most clear in their specific defense of the icon: against the Iconoclasts, they argued that it is impious to deny that God can transfer his force to his pictorial representation—God and icon are numerically different only in matter, not in form. Theodor Studite proclaims: “Anyone who says that the divinity is present in the image, is not in error”; from *Antirrheticus* I, 12, in *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XCIX, c. 344; quote taken from Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz's discussion of Byzantine Aesthetics (Tatarkiewicz, vol. 2, 53–54). In this ‘top down’ approach, it is dogma that gives authority to the icon, not the other way around. This explains also why the Iconophilic theology can dispense with aesthetic considerations—on the assumption of an omnipotent archetype, pictorial beauty is no longer a tool of divine self-disclosure.

The idea that a specific artwork is a quasi-individual that can address us *personally*—this notion, as we will see, begins with Winckelmann.

For that idea to assert itself, Winckelmann needed first to challenge the primacy that poetry enjoyed over figurative art. As I shall argue, that primacy was based on the claim that poetry could represent the intrinsically dynamic phenomenon of inner life far better than figurative art could. In this respect, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was Winckelmann's crucial intellectual antagonist. Indeed, despite his pretended neutrality, in his *Laocoön* Lessing was trying to assert the primacy of poetry over painting. This assertion took the shape of an assault on the ancient idea that poetry is like painting, or—to say it with Horace—*ut pictura poesis*. Against the partisans of *ut pictura poesis*, Lessing countered that because of crucial differences in the respective media (figurative art is static, poetry is temporally successive), poetry was *not* like figurative art—and could do what was impossible for the latter. Language could re-present a temporal flow, whereas figurative art had to confine itself to a single instant. And figurative art could represent only bounded figures and hence could not represent (if not through dry allegories) sublime infinities like the soul and the divine.

Behind Lessing's attack on the *ut pictura poesis* tradition was his anxiety at the enthusiasm for antique sculpture sparked by Winckelmann's writings, where the spectator experienced a quasi-mystical trance in front of antiques like the *Belvedere Apollo* (Fig. 2.1). Unlike Winckelmann, Lessing thought that statues were there to 'look pretty' (i.e. offer us beautiful surfaces) but were inadequate to represent invisibles like the soul and god, which could only be tapped into by poetry; quite consistently, Lessing feared that the rise of a culture of surfaces would invite a superficial ethos, and turn the public away from the sublime ethos and pathos of which drama and poetry were capable.

Winckelmann's read Lessing's *Laocoön* only in 1767, three years after the appearance of his magisterial *History of Art of Antiquity* (incidentally, Winckelmann's judgment of the *Laocoön* is withering: so deep are the art-historical lacunae of the book, that a reply to its author would be useless; see KS 348). Nevertheless, Winckelmann's writings turn on a prescient, tacit rejection of Lessing's reductive theory of images. Lessing's case stood or fell with his claim that figurative art had only *two* spatiotemporalities: the recursive, unchanging 'now' of its rigid material support (be it canvas or marble); the represented 'now', the slice of implied narrative embodied in the represented figures. I have already outlined these two temporalities in the Introduction, calling them—respectively—'the spatiotemporality of the artifact *qua* thing', and 'the spatial representation of concentrated narrative temporality'. We should again note that Lessing believed that—for the sake of verisimilitude—figurative art could offer only an instant *constrained by the laws of possible experience*: a painted or sculpted body should not be transparent, nor should it float. Ponderous mass and the laws of gravity tether the representation of human bodies, which as a result had to be rendered as completely worldly entities. Given these premises, Lessing had to look with deep mistrust at Winckelmann's Neoplatonizing aesthetics, where a beautiful statue can be a site which challenges us forcefully to imagine the infinite within and beyond us.

**Fig. 2.1** *Belvedere Apollo*  
(Pius-Clementine Museum)  
(Author of photography:  
Mary-Lan Nguyen)



In this respect, Lessing followed in the wake of German Rationalists like Christian Wolff, Alexander Baumgarten, and Moses Mendelssohn: these thinkers thought that the enmattered nature of figurative art impaired its capacity to gesture beyond the realm of the visible (Wellbery 89).

To go beyond the rationalist aesthetics of the German Enlightenment (of which Lessing was the latest, and most forceful voice), Winckelmann keyed into an *additional temporality* within figurative art, which I labeled “the spatiotemporality of the artifact qua *aesthetic object*”. For Winckelmann, if we dwell on the *beauty* of a sculpture, we will discover it as a site of a unique, utopian temporality; a time of ecstatic plenitude where the ‘now’ is pregnant with both past and future. As we will see, already Lessing had pointed out that figurative art could legitimately help itself to a ‘pregnant moment’ that implied the before and after of a narrative. But where Lessing’s ‘pregnant moment’ remained largely anchored to that overarching narrative, the ‘now’ of Winckelmann’s line of beauty was felt to go beyond narrative as such—a transcendent ‘now’, above the constraints of ordinary temporality. A



**Fig. 2.2** *Laocoön Group* (Pius-Clementine Museum) (Author of photography: Xiquino Silva)

case in point is Winckelmann's ode to adolescent beauty, which is not just poised between childhood and adulthood, but appears to magically contain them both (HAA 197).

In the next section, I will discuss how Winckelmann's gaze brought to light what Lessing glossed over: the transcendent temporality of beauty. Such temporality is best understood against the foil of Lessing. Why? Because it involved a revision of what Lessing confined visual art to: the enmattered level (canvas or marble) and the narrative level (the artifact's implied *story*). What Winckelmann saw as quasi-hallucinatory quivering of the line of beauty turned on a transfiguring *animation* of the otherwise static physical artifact. And these oscillating contours were felt to usher in a supernaturally perfect temporality that superimposed itself (in a manner at once exciting and troubling) upon the implied sublunary narrative. In Section 3, I give flesh to the main categories of Winckelmann's aesthetics via an analysis of his celebrated lyrical description of the *Belvedere Torso*. Finally, in section 4 I consider how for Winckelmann history is part and parcel of aesthetic experience—the beauty of an artwork can arrest us also because we feel it is 'breaking time', i.e. addressing us across the sands of centuries. And—no less importantly—a statue's beauty can grip us also by the compelling feeling that it is a trace of an irretrievably vanished past (Fig. 2.2).

## 2.2 Winckelmann *Contra* Lessing, I: Beyond Narrative Temporality

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's insistence upon expunging temporality from the province of the visual arts was designed, in part, as a critique of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the historian, theorist and art critic.<sup>2</sup> Winckelmann had rightly claimed noble simplicity and calm grandeur as sculptural *desiderata*, but the reasons for this had allegedly eluded him. Overt expressive intensity is to be avoided only in a static medium like stone, where repeated emotional stimuli would be cloying. But in a quintessentially temporal medium like poetry, moments of intense pathos can have their place, precisely because it is possible to counterbalance them with calmer tones. A sculpted Laocoön must only sigh, but the Laocoön of the *Aeneid* fascinates us all the more when he jolts us with the occasional blood-curdling scream (L 23–4).<sup>3</sup>

Lessing's charge was false: even for Winckelmann emotional understatement in sculpture depended on medium-specific constraints. Such has been conclusively shown (Rudowsky 237–8).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is still valuable to read Winckelmann

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<sup>2</sup>For a comprehensive, authoritative, and up-to-date biography of Lessing, see Nisbet 2013. For Winckelmann, Leppman 1970 remains the standard biography in English. For a critical account of Lessing's critique of Winckelmann, see Rudowsky 1986; Dècoultot 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Lessing's quarrel with Winckelmann took as its starting point the famous sculptural group of the *Laocoon*, generally ascribed (following Pliny) to the Hellenistic artists Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus. The *Laocoon* depicts the Trojan priest Laocoon and his two sons, as they vainly oppose the deathly grip of a monstrous snake. Excavated in 1506, its grandeur immediately sparked the imagination of artists like Michelangelo, who even sculpted a replacement for the missing right arm of the central, titular figure (today, the right arm of the Laocoon consists of a readapted fragment found in 1905 by Ludwig Pollack).

<sup>4</sup>In the 1764 *History of the Art of Antiquity*, we read that "in representing heroes, the artist is allowed less latitude than the poet. The latter can portray them as they were in their own time, when the passions were as yet unrestrained by authority or by the artificial decorum of life, because the attributes represented in poetry have a necessary relation to the age and the condition of man but not to his figure. The artist, however, because he must select the most beautiful parts of the most beautiful appearances, is limited as to the level of expression of the passions, which must not become detrimental to the appearance." (HAA, 205). Astonishingly, Lessing knew of this principle two years *before* Easter 1766, when the *Laocoon* was published (Rudowsky 237–8); the smoking gun is in the 1763/4 draft of the *Laocoon*, where Lessing admits: "Herr Winckelmann himself has come, in his history of art, to the realization that the sculptor is obliged to depict his subjects in a state of tranquility, so as to preserve the beauty of form, and that this is no law for the poet... On this matter we [i.e. Lessing and Winckelmann] are in agreement" (quoted from Rudowsky 237). Why, then, does Lessing's *Laocoon* charge Winckelmann of being fatally ignorant of media-specific constraints upon expression? Rudowski suggests that Lessing's argumentative style required the foil of intellectual opponents, be they real or imaginary (Rudowski 235). But, in order to hide from the reader that he was fighting a straw man, it was necessary to establish the fiction that the author of the *Laocoön* had *not* read the *Geschichte* yet. That is why, after having clinched his overall argument, Lessing declares (falsely) that he has finally received his copy of Winckelmann's magisterial treatise, and that he will not "venture another step without having read it" (L 138).

against the backdrop of the *Laocoön*, because Winckelmann's revolutionary re-interpretation of the *ut pictura poesis* convention—and what was ultimately at stake in it—stands out more clearly against the foil of Lessing's brilliant attack on that tradition. As is known, Lessing claimed that temporality was not the business of the figurative arts: because of their irreducibly corporeal nature, they are limited to the depiction of bodies; furthermore, the static nature of the figurative arts make them less-than-ideal for depicting bodies *in action* (to the extent that action unfolds in time). Conversely, because poetry allows a progressive and unfolding temporality, poetry shines in depicting embodied action. But Lessing's bifurcations applied only to artwork and its immediate representational content, and not to the aesthetic object itself: i.e., the artwork qua world of self-contained form, i.e. the artwork qua beautiful. Conversely, Winckelmann believed that the artwork qua beautiful was shot through with an ecstatic temporality of its own—a temporality that was 'activated' by the spectator. As we will see, some of the *History's* most celebrated descriptions of sculpture hinge on a quasi-hallucinatory encounter, where the marble is animated and set into motion by the spectator's transfiguring gaze. The imagination of the spectator is, of course, key, though not in the sense that the imagination may give rise to a gratuitous, arbitrary projection. Rather, the assumption is that the spectator brings to fruition a capacity for *apparent* movement that the statue already contains, albeit only as mere *potential*. Winckelmann's *ekphrases* sets up an influential prototype for aesthetic experience, where the spectator (not the artist) becomes a Pygmalion-like figure, imaginatively quickening stone into life.<sup>5</sup> But the animation that Winckelmann sought was profoundly different from that wrought by the mythical sculptor. Pygmalion wanted (and through divine intervention secured) the transformation of his statue from aesthetic object into living being. Conversely,

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<sup>5</sup>The most famous version of the story of Pygmalion is provided by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, book X. This myth functioned also as the trope of a unique late eighteenth-century aesthetics of reception, which was seminal for the age, as it expressed a typically Romantic desire to animate the past in order to draw from it a meaning that seemed to be absent in the present. A 1766 letter by Swiss artist Hans Heinrich Füssli provides an astonishing testimony of the quickness and power with which Winckelmann's aesthetics captured the European imagination. In the letter, Füssli remembers his encounter with the *Niobe*, a sculpture of a mother embracing her daughter, in the vain attempt to save her from murderous gods. The account reaches a climax in the imaginative transfiguration of the mother and the young maiden: "Be quiet, wanderer! Young man eager to know, keep a silence of amazement! She is no Venus casting amorous glances. Fear not, she does not want to perturb your senses, but fill your soul with veneration, and edify your mind. Look at the honest grace on her face, the unimitable simplicity (*Einfalt*) in the sharp forms of the daughter's head. No part of her is heightened or deepened by any excessive passion. Her eyes do not display the squinting of drunk desire, her gaze is not languorous, but open with innocent serenity. Her virginal breasts rise softly, swollen only by a child's love. This has been granted to you, young man! Breathe deeper at this sight, enjoy a pure pleasure, and crown your delight with the quiet wish that you may find a bride just like her" (quoted from Bättschmann, 238–9). Oskar Bättschmann explores this style of spectatorial engagement in detail, although he reductively concludes that this *Pygmalion-Ästhetik* was essentially one of therapeutic mourning (once the spectator realized that the statue was only a vestige of an irretrievably lost past, there would be a catharsis from pathological nostalgia). For a more balanced conclusion, see Müllder-Bach.

Winckelmann's gaze is attuned to an animation that belongs to the aesthetic object as such. As Sartre has forcefully shown, aesthetic properties are *existentially absent* (*irréel*), i.e. they do not regard the artwork as a thing; they arise in the meeting of the spectator's transfiguring imagination with the artwork itself.<sup>6</sup>

Winckelmann believed that, among the possible properties activated in the artwork by the spectator's imagination, there was also a unique, extraordinary temporality, where the 'now' was felt as a whole, not as a fragment of a larger, external totality. Such temporality was intimated by the feeling of a motion that, paradoxically, did not scatter itself into a series of different moments. Here I rely on Cesare Brandi, who calls '*plastica*' the transfiguration of a statue into an object shot through with 'motionless motion'. Through an illuminating example, he points out how such a paradoxical aesthetic object supervenes upon natural forms

The natural object's various features, besides shape, color, the specific spatial, aerial, and luminous situation, we can consider the object in its inner unfolding, in the uninterrupted reciprocal grafting and fusion of the volumes... the anatomic individuality of the object will tend to disappear vis-à-vis this new dynamic continuity which fuses, activates, drags, inflates, depresses... In front of how many ancient trees, dragged by the solid and motionless current of their own fibers, contorted and agitated, didn't we have the sense of a vortex-like motion, similar to that of a river's current? This motion did not exist in the present, but our consciousness constructed it, feeling it still in action through the visual inspection of motionless traces of an ancient growth. Such a *motionless motion* that represents the possible formal structure that consciousness constitutes for itself—we can call it the plastic structure of the object (Brandi 1956, 30–1).<sup>7</sup>

And so, when our gaze turns a gnarly oak trunk into an aesthetic object, there is a tension between two temporalities: the chronological one (in which the oak is still) and the idealized one (in which the oak seems to liquify into its own internal motion). It is this tension between the real and the aesthetic that accounts for the quasi-hallucinatory character of aesthetic experience, as Brandi and Winckelmann understand it. This example also nicely brings out the difference between their sculptural aesthetics and that which is embedded in the ancient Daedalus-myth. According to the myth, Daedalus' statues were so life-like that they needed to be

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<sup>6</sup>To my knowledge, Jean-Paul Sartre offers the most compelling, nuanced account as to how aesthetic properties derive from the imaginative 'nihilation' of the artwork's sensuous immediacy. Here is a particularly pregnant passage: "Certain of Matisse's reds, for example, provoke a sensual enjoyment in those that see them. But we must understand that this sensual enjoyment, if considered in isolation—for example, if it is provoked by a red actually given in nature—has nothing of the aesthetic. It is purely and simply a pleasure of the senses. But *when, on the other hand, one grasps the red on the painting, one grasps it, despite everything, as making up part of an unreal whole, and it is in this whole that it is beautiful*. For example, it is the red of a rug near a table. Besides, there is never pure colour. Even if the artist is concerned solely with the sensible relations between forms and colours, that artist will choose a rug precisely in order to increase the sensory value of the red: tactile elements, for example, must be intended through that red, it is a woollen red, because the rug is of woollen material. Without this 'woollen' characteristic of the colour, something would be lost. And certainly the rug is painted for the red that it justifies, and not the red for the rug. But if Matisse had chosen a rug rather than a dry and glossy sheet of paper, this is because of the voluptuous mixture that is constituted by the colour, the density, and the tactile qualities of the wool (Sartre 2004, 190; italics mine).

<sup>7</sup>Translation mine.

tied down, lest they escape. But this illustration implies that the statues were on the verge of a motion that would unfold in successive, chronological time. Conversely, for Winckelmann and Brandi, the aesthetically salient feature of a statue is rather its evocation of a paradoxical, non-successive temporality. Being a sober Kantian, Cesare Brandi refused to ascribe any epistemic or ontological resonance to what he called ‘*plastica*’. Conversely, this ‘motionless motion’ had crucially broader resonances for Winckelmann. Why? Because—by evoking a living principle that was not dispersed into temporal parts—this special motion invited the spectator to feel himself or herself as a whole exceptionally raised above the fragmenting power of ordinary time. As we will see, this ecstatic temporality did not function as a facile site of self-plenitude. It was also the place where the self could (and did) get also a painful sense of its limitations—of its biological, ethical, historical finitude. It was no less the place where beauty summoned the self to a heady (but also troubling) call to embody the unity it merely felt in aesthetic experience.

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To grasp more fully Winckelmann’s *aesthetic* temporality, let us consider further how it emerged via a partial break with the traditional constraints upon painting and sculpture. Before Winckelmann, whatever animation a sculptural or pictorial representation seemed to have was subservient to narrative temporality: the former was supposed to bring to life the latter, but not alter its nature. Here is an example. In 1719, the Abbé Dubos remarked that “the eye, bewitched by the work of a great painter, believes sometimes to perceive even some movement in the figures.” (RC 417). To understand this principle, DuBos refers us to the example of Peter Paul Rubens’ *Crucifixion*, where the crucified thief on the right, upon receiving a blow on the leg by a soldier, violently arches his body in pain, and—thanks to the magic of *chiaroscuro*—seems to leap out of the picture’s corner (RC 235). Here *pictura* contains temporality, yet in a way that remains faithful to the temporal flow of the pre-existing story of Christ’s passion.

Even Lessing, who took it upon himself to deliver a fatal blow to the *ut pictura poesis* theory, remained significantly bound to it. True, he did recommend the choice of a ‘pregnant moment’ (L 78), such that—thanks to our imaginative transfiguration—a representation is no longer a frozen temporal snapshot, but seems instead (if I may use an anachronism) something like the moving image of cinema. But Lessing’s imagination-time remains subservient to the time of the poet, as we can infer from his claim that the pregnant moment is the one that best allows us to grasp what happened before and after. The point is to jolt into life the petrified narrative of the poet, but *not* to rewrite it.

[If] the works of both painter and sculptor are created not merely to be given a glance (*erblickt*) but to be contemplated (*betrachtet*)—contemplated repeatedly and at length—then it is evident that this single moment and the point from which it is viewed cannot be chosen with too great a regard for its effect. But only that which gives free rein to the imagination is effective. The more we see, the more we must be able to imagine. And the more we add in our imaginations, the more we must think we see. In the full course of an emotion, no point is less suitable for this than its climax. There is nothing beyond this,

and to present the utmost to the eye is to bind the wings of fancy and compel it, since it cannot soar above the impression made on the senses, to concern itself with weaker images, shunning the visible fullness already represented as a limit beyond which it cannot go. Thus if Laocoön sighs, the imagination can hear him cry out (L 19–20).

It is undeniable that here Lessing seems to look at the artwork through Winckelmann's lingering Pygmalionic gaze. For one, Lessing distinguishes between what is immediately visible in the artwork, and what is perceptible to the viewer's projective imagination. If the first is a temporal fragment, then the second is something that is gradually revealed in an attentive perusal. The more the viewer sees, the more he or she must be able to imagine: notice that the intentionally-understated image (sighing Laocoön) is—and this is Lessing's Dubosian side—a trampoline for imagining a *maximum* of emotion, (such as the screaming Laocoön). Nevertheless, the image itself becomes transformed. The more we add by our imaginative response, the more we must think that we see. Is Lessing implying a virtuous circle of sorts, where the image acts upon the imagination and is acted upon in return? To be sure, the artwork's theme should be instantaneously intelligible, (and here the artist is urged to eschew the arcane, and draw upon a stock of familiar themes); Lessing says that "the greatest effect depends on the first glance." (L 64). But—again—the artwork is not "to be given merely a glance;" the function of this *Blick* ('glance') is that it "induces us to linger" before the work, and start a transformative process of *Betrachtung* ('contemplation', 64).

And yet, in all this, again, the temporal sequence of the poet remains authoritative. The expressive understatement which Lessing urges on the sculptor is aimed at recreating the emotional crescendo which (so Lessing believes) only the poet can express in its most fitting way.

I note that Lessing too could distinguish between the flagrant and the aesthetic presence of the artwork, as is clear from his claim that physical beauty is never taken in by the eyes alone: it is the imagination that sees through the eyes (L 41).<sup>8</sup> And Lessing's praise of idealization in the visual arts shows that—just like Winckelmann—he endorses a one-out-of many construal of beauty. Artwork is beautiful when it displays itself as a visual maximal unity-within-multiplicity.<sup>9</sup> But, unlike Winckelmann, Lessing does not grant visual beauty an ecstatic, *sui generis* temporality. Thus, he also disallows Winckelmann's manner of ontologizing plastic beauty, reserving such beauty instead for poetry. This is where Lessing's rationalist credentials come to the fore—for him figurative beauty is shorn of any serious epistemic content. The corporeal nature of painting and sculpture make them inadequate tokens of the intelligible, while linguistic signs have a greater capacity

<sup>8</sup>By 'flagrant', I mean (with Cesare Brandi) the artwork *qua* raw cluster of physical properties. Maurice Denis' famous warning called our attention precisely to the aspect of flagrancy: "Remember that a painting - before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote - is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order".

<sup>9</sup>Cf. L 13, for Lessing's implicit praise of the ancient Theban law that commanded the figurative artist to idealize his representation, and that sanctioned correspondingly the pursuit of the ugly.

to become ‘transparent’, and thereby to avoid obfuscating the immaterial essences they evoke (cf. Wellbery 119–123). And so, since visual beauty supervenes upon an irreducibly material basis, its cognitive worth is superficial at best: “if the range of my physical sight must be the measure of my inner vision, I should value the loss of the former in order to gain freedom from the limitations on the latter” (L 74).

In sum, Lessing thinks that a beautiful artwork *could also* have truth-bearing values, but artistic beauty *per se* does not. Its *raison d’être* is that of giving the spectator pleasure, rather than truth. Consider, for instance, Lessing’s surprising concession: the painter is infinitely better suited than Homer to depict a banquet of the Olympians (L 72), since the painter is more capable of a nuanced play of light, shadow, and a variety of expressions (72). But notice that these aesthetic features are shorn of any ontological reverberation. Lessing sees them simply as entertaining chromatic and expressive variations.

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There are two moments in the *Laocoön* where Lessing gets rather close to the idea of extraordinary temporality in figurative art. The first is Lessing’s praise of Raphael’s (1483–1520) handling of drapery, whereby he notices how its position is sometimes artfully unrealistic, suggesting a motion that the limbs have not yet undertaken (L 92). The old tradition insisted on verisimilitude as a constraint upon mimesis: the imagination could only be taken in by simulacra that did not trespass the boundaries of the possible. Yet, despite the fact that Raphael’s drapery implies an impossible conflation of two different points in time, Lessing praises Raphael for having had “the courage to commit such a minor error for the sake of obtaining greater perfection of expression” (92). Here, the perceptual simultaneity of the painting is no longer a shorthand for the sequential nature of narration, but the site of an expressive concentration that is beyond the means of the verbal. Here, Lessing is almost anticipating Aby Warburg’s idea of moving drapery as a window into a Dionysian energy, which cannot be captured by the orderly sequence of linear narrative.

The other passage where Lessing flirts with ideas of extraordinary time is in his critical assessment of Timomachus (first century BCE), a painter who

[W]as able to combine two things: that point or moment which the beholder not so much sees as adds in his imagination, and that appearance which does not seem so transitory as to become displeasing through its perpetuation in art. Timomachus did not represent Medea at the moment when she was actually murdering her children, but a few moments before, when a mother’s love was still struggling with her vengefulness. We can foresee the outcome of this struggle; we tremble in anticipation of seeing Medea as simply cruel, and our imagination takes us far beyond what the painter could have shown us in this terrible moment. But for this very reason, we are not offended at Medea’s perpetual indecision, as it is represented in art, but wish it could have remained that way in reality. We wish that the duel of passions had never been decided, or at least had continued long enough for time and reflection to overcome rage, and secure the victory for maternal feelings (L 20–21)

This passage is a great example of how Lessing straddles an older and newer critical tradition. On the one hand, he is the DuBosian spectator, who wants to get the greatest emotional mileage out of the encounter with the picture; he likes the emotionally-restrained face of Medea, precisely because it enables the imagination to soar into the future of Medea's full-blown rage. On the other hand, the under-determination of the immediately visible becomes important *per se*, by crystallizing the moment in which Medea is suspended in existential doubt; the image stages some sort of symbolic victory over time. The imagination no longer wishes to soar beyond the immediately-visible Medea and picture her incipient bestial madness; the humane, conflicted mother, painted by Timomachus, is the real Medea, and it is on her that our gaze tarries. The viewer no longer appreciates her understatement because it enables his or her free flights of fancy, but rather because he or she is mindful that a painted rage would have endowed "her brief instant of madness with a permanence that is an affront to all nature" (L 21). Here Lessing strays significantly from his official position, which is that painted figures must show emotional restraint for the sake of beauty. In this case, the viewer no longer reconstructs the embedded nature of the painted moment in the preceding and successive actions; rather, Medea's emotional restraint is re-imagined as a fragment of *another* narrative, one where Medea successfully vanquishes her murderous instincts.

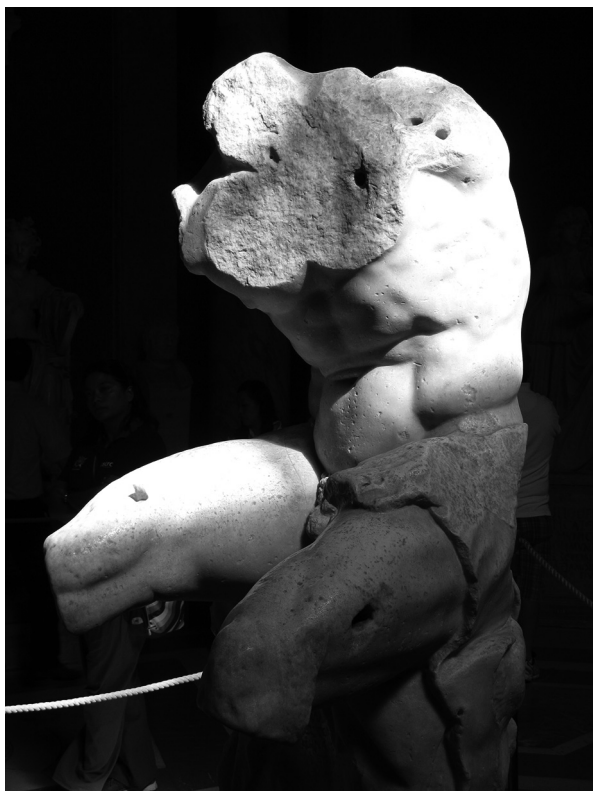
But, unlike Winckelmann, Lessing does not see the image as a window into extraordinary time. He does not imagine Timomachus' Medea as an amphibious creature with one foot planted in the time of narrative, the other foot tentatively raised in ecstatic, non-narrative temporality.

## 2.3 The *Belvedere Torso*: A Closer Look at the Time of Beauty

Lest my discussion of the idea of the ecstatic temporality of sculpture remain abstruse, we should see—by way of illustration—how that idea itself is *at work* in Winckelmann's passionate engagement of the famous *Torso Belvedere* (Fig. 2.3). As we follow Winckelmann's description of his own experience of the *Torso*, I will continue to lean upon the visual artwork's four spatiotemporal categories, as outlined in the Introduction. I have already dwelt extensively on the first two (physical and narrative spatiotemporality) in the previous section. In this section, the aesthetic spatiotemporality of sculpture will take center stage. I hasten to add that these categories are implied by Winckelmann's aesthetics, and are nowhere made thematic as such—that is why I have tried to pry them loose (not without trepidation) from the descriptions in which they are embedded.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Winckelmann's poetic style is not the sign of conceptual laxity, but strength. Only a metaphorical use of language could do justice to the paradoxical dimensions of Winckelmann's thought; Michele Cometa aptly refers to Winckelmann's "aesthetic of duplicity . . . which articulates contradiction and makes it significant and epistemically efficacious" (Cometa 18). Peter Szondi offers a helpful

**Fig. 2.3** *Belvedere Torso*  
(Pius-Clementine Museum)  
(Author of photography: Yair Haklay)



Given that the Vatican *Laocoön* is the site of Lessing's assault on Winckelmann's aesthetics, my engagement with Winckelmann's *ekphrasis* of the *Belvedere Torso* might seem an unwarranted detour. But the *Laocoön* is not a paradigmatic sculpture within Winckelmann's mature aesthetics. To be sure, even in his 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Winckelmann saw the Vatican *Laocoön* as a paradigm of beautiful heroic composure.<sup>11</sup> But the fact remains that the heroes of the *Geschichte* are all deities: the *Belvedere Apollo*, the *Medici Niobe*, the *Genius Borghese*, the

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example of this duplex aesthetic. With his well-known praise of the 'quiet grandeur' (*Stille Grosse*) of the best Greek sculpture, Winckelmann is exploiting the oxymoronic force of the expression. 'Stille Grosse' suggests a tensile unity of measuredness ('quiet') and sublime transcendence of measure ('grandeur'), which is at the heart of Winckelmann's aesthetic experience (Szondi 58).

<sup>11</sup>As Winckelmann saw it, the emotional *and* ethical climax of the whole statue resides in the mouth, nose, and brow of the priest: each of them made *visible* a tension-filled unity of terror and noble self-control: "The mouth is full of sorrow, and the lowered bottom lip is heavy with it; in the upwardly drawn top lip, this sorrow is mixed with pain, which in a stirring of discontent, as at an undeserved and unworthy suffering, runs up to the nose, swelling it and manifesting itself in the dilated and upwardly drawn nostrils. Beneath the brow, the battle between pain and resistance, as if concentrated in this one place, is composed with great wisdom, for just as pain drives the eyebrows

*Belvedere Torso*. Winckelmann praises the anatomical learnedness of the *Laocoön*, but immediately adds that it lacks the sublimity of the *Apollo Belvedere* (HAA 198). The muscles of the *Laocoon*, though endowed with extraordinary flexibility, are still organs subordinate to a biological function, but those of the *Torso* and the *Apollo* have ceased to do the office of human muscles; they seem transmuted into hills or waves (HAA 203). It is in *these* statues that Winckelmann sees a line where divine and human, eternal and temporal, are felt liminally to overlap. This overlapping quality is a clue that Winckelmann's humanist aesthetics constitute also a theo-aesthetics—and it needs to be assessed as such, whatever its ultimate merits.<sup>12</sup>

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With this in mind, let us consider Winckelmann's famous *ekphrasis* of the *Belvedere Torso* (1758). While Dubos and Lessing do not disturb the traditionalist subservience of figurative image to narrative time, Winckelmann detaches contour from strict mimetic subservience. Thus, Winckelmann permits a phenomenology of ideal time and space.

Ask those who know all that is most beautiful in the nature of mortals, whether they have seen a side to be compared with the left side of this torso. The action and reaction of its muscles are equated with a skillful measure of alternating movement and swift strength, and the body, on account of them, was ready for everything which he wished to accomplish. As in a swelling movement of the sea, the previously smooth surface sprouts with a vague unrest into rippling waves, whereof one swallows another and again throws it out and rolls it forward, so, with the same soft swell and quivering (*Schweben*), does the one muscle pass into the other, and a third, which rises between them and seems to strengthen their movement, loses itself in the first, and our gaze is, as it were, swallowed up with it (DT 188; partially amended translation).

As a physical object, the *Torso* is a static mass: nothing other than mere contiguity connects each of its parts to the others. Here we have space as the mutual indifference of neighboring elements: space as a fact. This changes when—upon prolonged observation—sculptural representation (of the left *serratus anterior*, a muscle-group partially covering the ribs) morphs into aesthetic object, an ensemble of perceptually unstable parts that seem to both coalesce into one another and to remain separate. As a merely perceptual phenomenon, this oscillation would seem to fall within the purview of *Gestalt*-psychology, less so of aesthetics. But for Winckelmann, this formal oscillation matters also because it is experienced as

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upward, so resistance to pain pushes the flesh above the eye down and against the upper eyelid, so that it is almost completely covered by the overlying flesh" (HAA 313–4).

<sup>12</sup>Michele Cometa speaks of two sides of Winckelmann: the Baroque Stoicism of German *Aufklärung*, which speaks through Winckelmann's 1754 praise of the *Laocoön*; a Neoplatonic side, which inspires the superior religious-ethical vision that is behind the celebration of the *Belvedere Apollo*, the *Torso*, and the *Niobe* (Cometa 11–2). As I see it, the second side gradually claimed pre-eminence over the first. Ernst Busch suggests that the quarrel between Lessing and Winckelmann was essentially a clash between the two dimensions: the latinate, Stoic humanism of the *Aufklärung*, and a philellenic theo-aesthetics (Busch 26–7).

a pendularity between two images of the self: one of individual autonomy, and one of mystical dissolution of the individual into the divine. The first seems to prevail when the quivering is felt to intimate monadic self-sufficiency: aesthetic object as ‘temporalized space’. The second is affectively preponderant when the oscillation is felt as the reduction of form into an overarching formation process: aesthetic object as steeped in ‘mythic time’. Again, I have adumbrated the ideas of temporalized space (Cesare Brandi) and mythic time (Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gianni Carchia) in the Introduction. In what follows, I will be at pains to make them less abstruse.

### 2.3.1 *The Belvedere Torso as Temporalized Space*

The action and reaction of its muscles are equated with a skillful measure of alternating movement and swift strength, and *the body, on account of them, was ready for everything which he wished to accomplish* (DT 188, italics mine).

These are not muscles through which the self negotiates the recalcitrant otherness of the external world. They simply relate to each other, in a pattern of action and reaction. This specific praise is immediately paired with a transfiguring reverie, where muscles turned waves engage in essentially self-relating motion: one wave ejects another wave, only to reabsorb it into itself. While in any moment of narrative time a character has to engage in *this* as opposed to *that* action, Hercules’ rib muscles transcend this limitation. They contain simultaneously the most diverse *possibilities* for action.<sup>13</sup>

This aura of atemporal unity of the body reaches a climax at the end of the ekphrasis. After prolonged inspection, the *Torso*

is no longer a body which has still to fight with monsters and destroyers of peace, it is that which has been purified upon Mount Eta from the dross of humanity, now smelted away from the original source of likeness to the father of the gods. Neither the loved Hyllus nor the tender Iole ever saw Hercules so perfect. Thus he lay in the arms of Hebe, of everlasting youth, and inhaled an undying influence. His body is nourished by no mortal food or coarse particles; he lives on the food of the gods, and he seems only to taste, not to eat, and altogether without being filled (DT 189).

We begin with what is supposedly an image of Hercules the mortal hero. His powerful play of muscles evokes an heroic sequence of labors. Those muscles made him “ready for everything he wished to accomplish” (188). Under the devoted gaze of the art-lover, these contours become suddenly imitations of an aquatic surface. Hence, in the course of reverie, the muscles are freed from their original

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<sup>13</sup>Ingrid Kreuzer points out how Winckelmann’s aesthetic theo-humanism turns on an almost gnostic prioritization of potency over actuality: “For Winckelmann . . . this is the most essential task of sculpture in the metaphysical realm: . . . to free pure ‘being’ from ‘appearance’, the ‘uncreated’ from the ‘created’—and to lead it back to its divine origin” (Kreuzer 43).

biological office—for instance, the abdominal muscles appear emancipated from the mundane task of digestion (living on ambrosia, “he seems only to taste, not to eat”).<sup>14</sup> All teleologically driven processes (such as digestion) turn on a disjunction between the deficient ‘now’ and an aimed-for future fulfillment. The same is arguably true of narrative temporality: only at its end does a story offer some resolution of the conflicts it articulated earlier. Hence, by claiming that Hercules’ muscles have ceased any purpose-driven action, Winckelmann is also suggesting that narrative time (which moves from a deficient past to a hoped-for future fulfillment) has been replaced by the circular time of Olympus, where every moment is as perfect as the previous one and the next. In terms of my framework of ‘levels of spatiotemporality’, we have moved from level 2 (sculpture as mimesis) to level 3 (sculpture as aesthetic object). But Winckelmann is not a formalist: level 3 does not supplant level 2, it *transforms it*. That is, temporalized space does not obliterate the antropomorphic content, but allows us instead to imagine humanity *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Now, what prevents the spectator’s *reverie* from degenerating into smug self-divinization is the dialectical interplay between temporalized space and mythic temporality, to which we now turn.

### 2.3.2 The Mythic Temporality of the Belvedere Torso

We should not forget another essential moment of Winckelmann’s visionary engagement. The feeling of simultaneous coalescing and separation can put vision in crisis: “our gaze is, as it were, swallowed along with it”. Here the undulatory movement of the *Torso* evokes the undoing of the self, as opposed to the *reverie* of its perfect autonomy. Although Winckelmann is silent about this, even the sense of somatic integrity of the observer could feel threatened. This disintegration becomes clear through Karl Philipp Moritz’s experience of the *Apollo Belvedere* by torchlight, an *ekphrasis* that is heavily indebted to the author of the *Geschichte*:

The finest elevations become visible to the eye, and in whatever appeared uniform, an infinite multiplicity shows itself. Because now all this manifold constitutes only of one complete totality, so one here sees *at once (auf einmal)* all the beauty there is to see, the concept of time vanishes, and all collapses in a moment that could last forever, if we were purely contemplating beings (MW II, 753).

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<sup>14</sup>It is worth noticing the withering criticism that Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896) and Jules de Goncourt (1830–1870) leveled at Winckelmann on precisely this point: “The only work of art in the world to have given us the complete and absolute sensation of a masterpiece [is] . . . the *Torso*—Yes, here in this *Torso*, so admirably human, is the divine sublimity of art; it draws its beauty from the representation of life: this breathing fragment of chest, these muscles at work, these palpitating entrails in a stomach that is digesting. For its beauty is that it is digesting, despite Winckelmann’s imbecilic encomium; he thinks he is honoring the masterpiece by saying that it does no such thing.” Quoted from Lichtenstein, 156.

Here the instantaneous saturation of space with contrary motions appears to undo not only the overall perceptual stability of the statue, but the very integrity of the spectating self.

The question now becomes: what is at stake in the affective oscillation between self-constitution and self-dissolution? Alex Potts has acutely claimed that the latter follows dialectically from the first. A dream of complete autonomy, of freedom from all external interference is semantically unstable. It can intimate unalloyed liveliness, but also the calm of death (Potts 146). As I see it, Potts is right: it is entirely plausible that Winckelmann's *Schweben* plays out the implicit fears attaching to one's *reverie* of narcissist self-plenitude. It would be wrong, however, to reduce it to that. In particular, the pole of self-obliteration may be—from Winckelmann's pietist perspective—also one of joyful mystical unity. Consider this point from Madame Guyon's Quietist description of the culminating moment of mystical encounter:

My prayer was, in the moment of which I speak, empty of all form, species, and images. Nothing happened in my prayer in my head. But it was a prayer of joy (*jouissance*) and of (self)possession through the will, in which the taste (*goût*) of God was so great, so pure, and so simple, that it attracted and absorbed the other two powers of the soul [desire and reason] in a profound retreat without action nor discourse . . . it was a prayer of faith which excluded all distinction, because I had no view of Christ, nor of divine attributes; and everything was absorbed in a flavorful faith (*foi savoureuse*) where all distinctions were lost, so that love could love with a greater scope, without motives nor reasons for loving (Quoted from Gusdorf 72).

As these words (so surprisingly Winckelmannian *avant la lettre*!) suggest, one cannot account adequately for Winckelmann's water-tropes only by reference to his marine metaphors. One needs to consider also the famous spring-metaphor, according to which beauty has the indeterminacy of a pure, tasteless, salubrious water. Winckelmann's sea water has the property of swallowing the observer, but need this image describe an ultimately nihilist nightmare? It does if (again, following Potts) we ascribe to Winckelmann an Enlightenment construction of the self, where what matters is the sovereign autonomy of the self. Within that framework, any reverie of fusion with an overarching ground is simply a concealed dream of subjective omnipotence—a dream whose pendant is the nightmare of solipsism. Conversely, Madame de Guyon (one thinks here also of the souls of Dante's *Paradiso*) put into play an alternative model of the self, where the highest form of desire is truly agapeic; where the highest self-realization is found in the loving self-surrender to the object of one's love.

As I see it, Gianni Carchia's idea of 'mythic time' does the most justice to those moments in which stable form suddenly shows itself 'checked' by, if not resolved into, indeterminate chaos. For Carchia, these fissures of aesthetic form can be felt as windows into a primordial, Dionysian nature (Carchia 2003, 297). This nature is the site of what Carchia calls 'mythic time': i.e. the temporality of a raw plenitude of a dyonisian matrix of all Being, a matrix that we usually veil over by the orderly matrix of scientific discourse. By his own admission (Carchia 1995,

119–124), Carchia here leans upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's cursory, yet intriguing remarks on the 'mythic time of nature' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 267). Merleau-Ponty was so fascinated by Cézanne, because in his paintings he saw the fusion of an apparently self-standing world into a dynamic matrix which is prior to the world of human purposes. Consider these lines on Cézanne, where Merleau-Ponty' leans upon Winckelmann's ontology of quivering contours: "The outline should therefore be a result of the colors that would be given to the world in its true density. For the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed . . . If the painter is to express the world, the arrangement of his colors must bear within this indivisible whole, or else his painting will only hint at things and will not give them in the imperious unity, the presence, the insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real" (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 65).

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Let us now take stock of the previous pages in light of Lessing's confrontation with Winckelmann. From a semiotic standpoint, Lessing would say that Winckelmann's imagination engages in the wrong sort of projection. Instead of supplementing the inadequate iconicity of the material sign, it violates it, grafting onto it a foreign element. And proper signification rests also on the necessary condition of verisimilitude. The illusory power of the image rests on its being a picture of possible experience. However, we could never perceive a real human body whose contours quiver just like the surface of the sea. But again, Lessing would be able to say this only by presupposing, as indeed he does, a thoroughly instrumentalist view of the artistic sign, whose sole purpose is to evoke a cluster of interconnected properties that forcefully evoke a quasi-visual intuition of an object of possible experience. It is within this framework that the quasi-hallucinatory experience of the sea-like motion of the Torso's muscles must come across as delirious enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*). However, Winckelmann operates with different assumptions, the most important of which is that the artwork should disclose a realm that transcends possible experience. In this different context, the partial violation of the laws of verisimilitude becomes essential. The fact that the muscles of the Torso seem to morph into a gently troubled watery surface works as a sort of meaningful spectatorial estrangement in which the fictive object cannot be completely situated within the co-ordinates of possible experience.

In other words, Lessing operates with a merely *descriptive* idea of beauty (beauty as a feature of represented corporeality: human bodies, trees, vases). Winckelmann's aesthetics does not reject descriptive beauty, but complicates it with evaluative beauty. The pulchritude of a line freed from the task of a mimesis of *possible* experience—precisely via its tension with the (descriptive) beauty of noses, brows, muscles—invites a re-evaluation of the ordinary in light of the extraordinary.

## 2.4 Winckelmann *Contra* Lessing, II: Visual Beauty as *Original* and *Originary*

I have argued that Lessing's differences with Winckelmann about temporality of the visual arts were a proxy for a more fundamental, covert disagreement on the ontological resonances of visual beauty. As we have seen, Lessing took visual beauty as an essentially *superficial* phenomenon. Far from evoking sublime vistas to the imagination, visual beauty tended rather to anchor it to specific particulars, making it thereby harder to grasp universals. His deeply revealing aside on the matter bears repeating: "if the range of my physical sight must be the measure of my inner vision, I should value the loss of the former in order to gain freedom from the limitations on the latter" (L 74). And so, when Winckelmann had claimed (in 1754) that to the discerning art-lover, the ideal beauty of the *Laocoön* makes it as inimitable as Homer (RI 5); it was this claim, I feel, that was most offensive to Lessing's ears. Even if not explicitly, the *Laocoön* is the *cri de coeur* of a pedagogue who passionately believes in the life-transforming potential of poetry (a traditional humanist position), and who fears that the recent craze for the 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' of ancient sculpture may bring about the rise of a shallow *visual* culture. This preference for the ear over the eye explains why Lessing could write an entire book on the *Laocoön* without having ever seen it, and why—when he finally got to visit Rome—Lessing felt no immediate urge to dash off to the *Belvedere* and see the statue with his own eyes (Cometa 1992, 15). Finally, it also explains why he reduces the *Laocoön*'s emotional *sotto voce* to a matter of cosmetic convenience, whereas Winckelmann saw it *also* as a sign of superhuman virtue. Lessing's implicit point is that statues are there to 'look pretty', and can therefore offer only a subpar mimesis of an heroic *ethos* (whose raw sublimity cannot be importuned with petty decorative anxieties).

Winckelmann too shared Lessing's view that art, at its best, should be more than polite *divertissement*. But—unlike Lessing, who saw drama as *the* art capable of—he thought that beautiful visual art could be profoundly meaningful in its own right. In this respect, Winckelmann breaks not only with German rationalism, but also with the French aesthetic tradition. If we look at the respective aesthetic theories of Jean-Pierre de Crousaz (1663–1750), Abbé Jean-Baptiste DuBos (1670–1742), and Denis Diderot (1713–1784), we note one important commonality: the point of figurative art is to titillate an erudite connoisseur, offering him or her an evasive entertainment that will prevent him or her from experiencing a dreadful *ennui*.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>"The human spirit is essentially drawn toward variety . . . it [the human spirit] is made for variety, which animates it and prevents it from falling into boredom and inertia (*dans l'ennui et dans la langueur*)" (Crousaz 1715, 12); "The soul has its needs, just as the body. One of the greatest human needs is to have one's soul occupied. The boredom (*ennui*) which soon follows upon the inactivity of the soul is so painful, that one often engages in the most laborious tasks, so as to spare oneself its [*ennui*'s] torments" (RC 6). Diderot makes the same point indirectly, through a revealing analogy: "everyone who walks through a picture gallery is really unconsciously acting

Strikingly, even one of Winckelmann's major influences, William Hogarth, condemned any Neoplatonizing inflection of sculptural aesthetics—visual beauty could only be corrupted by any attempt to envision in it an ethical dimension. In his 1753 *The Analysis of Beauty*, Hogarth famously distilled the essence of visual beauty into two formal properties: the bidimensional, wavering 'line of beauty', and the tridimensional, serpentine 'line of grace': "For as among the vast variety of waving-lines that may be conceived, there is but one that truly deserves the name of the line of beauty, so there is only one precise serpentine-line that I call the line of grace" (AB 52). Winckelmann's enchanted attention to quivering contours would have been unthinkable without Hogarth's groundbreaking discourse.<sup>16</sup> But Hogarth pre-emptively criticized any attempt (such as Winckelmann's) to load the formal lines of beauty and grace with ethical resonances. He saw such hybridization of discourses as a reproachable evasion of labor of critical judgment, i.e. of searching the specific aesthetic merits of an artwork. Many treatises on figurative art have lamentably done just that: faced with a seemingly ineffable *je ne sais quoi* of beauty, many authors found themselves

obliged so suddenly to turn into the broad, and more beaten path of moral beauty; in order to extricate themselves out of the difficulties they seem to have met with in this: and withal forced for the same reasons to amuse their readers with amazing (but often misapplied) encomiums on deceased painters and their performances; wherein they are continually discoursing of effects instead of developing causes (AB iv).

Now, I hasten to add that Winckelmann too deplored viewers who remained at the level of inchoate aesthetic approval, without bothering to ferret out *why* the artwork seems beautiful. In a letter to a friend, Winckelmann complains *apropos* of the *Belvedere Torso* that

Artists grope this Torso, letting their hand wander over the wonderful muscular serpentines with a: 'Oh que ça est beau!' I never heard them say *why* (*dire il perché*) (Winckelmann, letter to L. Bianconi, July 1758. Quoted from Bosshard 179).

But, although Hogarth and Winckelmann agree on the necessity of maturing aesthetic appreciation into critical judgment, they part company when it comes to delineate more clearly the latter. For Hogarth, critical judgment is an essentially pleasant, if fussy, exercise, in which we forget our own existence. Conversely, Winckelmann shows that, as he engages in critical judgment, the spectator finds—to

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the part of a deaf man who is amusing himself by examining the dumb who are conversing on subjects familiar to him. This is one of the points of view with which I always look at the pictures" (Diderot 1916, 173). Note Diderot's essentially *ludic* construction of the gaze: the point is to be amused by pictorial inventiveness (analogous to the curious gesticulation of the dumb), not to discover any truth. The sophisticated *Salon* spectator already knows all the stock topics by heart (just as the subjects discussed by the dumb are already familiar to the deaf man who ogles at them). On the idea of art as an antidote to *ennui*, and its central role in French aesthetics, see Migliorini 11; 84; 106; 156. Also, Bättschmann 245–50.

<sup>16</sup>In respect of the 'line of beauty', Winckelmann's debt to Hogarth is clear, as already Carl Justi had pointed out in his monumental biography of the German scholar (quoted from Morrison 32).

his troubled astonishment—that even his own self can be unsettled, perhaps shaken to the core. To my mind, this difference emerges most vividly in the way in which Winckelmann re-interprets Hogarth’s aquatic imagery. For Hogarth, to follow with our eye the ins-and-outs of beautiful muscles is like a delightful nautical romp through playful waves “as pleasantly as the lightest skiff dances over the gentlest wave” (AB 61). Against this, consider again what happens in Winckelmann as we gaze upon the marine contours of the *Belvedere* Torso: “our gaze is, as it were, swallowed up at the same time”. Formal perfection, *pace* Hogarth, is not just a source of refined, harmless visual pleasure; it can also overwhelm us with the force of the sublime.

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But it would be wrong to read these words as evidence of a belated Neoplatonism. Winckelmann does not take sculptural beauty as a cipher for a prior, superior sphere of meaning. He makes a clean break with a well-entrenched eighteenth-century tradition (epitomized by Shaftesbury) that saw visual beauty as a *symbol* of morality. Here the point was to subject the artwork to a “moral decoding exercise” (Morrison 29), through which proportion and grace become diaphanous vehicles of moral ideas—and where sensuous beauty is but a reflection of a higher, intelligible beauty. It is in this light that we must read Shaftesbury’s claim that “thus are the Arts and Virtues mutually friends; and thus the science of virtuosi [*i.e. of artists and art-connoisseurs*] and that of virtue become, in a manner, one and the same,”<sup>17</sup> (Shaftesbury 217) because they are both reflections of a moral source (Morrison 24–5). Clearly, Shaftesbury’s position cannot count as aesthetics, if by that word we mean an experience of something that is *eo ipso* irreducible to another, pre-existing domain of meaning.<sup>18</sup>

As the late Italian philosopher Gianni Carchia has argued, Winckelmann’s beauty is less a sensible prefiguration of the supersensible than it is a re-evocation of a mythic co-presence of sensible and supersensible (where ‘copresence’ means a coincidence in which the respective identities of the opposites are not cancelled; cf. Carchia 2003, 258–9).<sup>19</sup> Understood as this co-presence of visible and invisible,

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<sup>17</sup>Shaftesbury 1900, 207–8.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Sergio Givone’s illuminating assessment of Shaftesbury’s discourse on the arts: “It is clear that on this basis [beauty as prefiguration of moral ideas], aesthetic experience must continue to appear subordinated to a plenitude of sense that one can reach only by leaving behind that [beauty] which essentially remains a prefiguration, a symbolic (or utopic) anticipation. But the typically modern realization that this experience is original and originary (*i.e.* what is at stake in it is the sense we ascribe to our actions, to the relationship with our own tradition, etc.) is due to other authors, for instance, Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder” (Givone 2003, 28).

<sup>19</sup>I owe to Gianni Carchia the thesis that Winckelmann’s beauty evokes an original unity of *aisthetá* and *noetá*: “Winckelmann’s ideal is entirely and exclusively an attempt to seize this limit line, this boundary point in which there is an ideal co-presence of sensible and intelligible” (Carchia 2003, 258–9).

beauty is also *original*: i.e. a whole that is prior to the separation of the parts, and therefore *eo ipso* irreducible to morality. Indeed, morality presupposes a *split* in human nature between sense and reason: hence—from the vantage point of this mythical anamnesis—moral discourse is *posterior*. For Winckelmann, our experience of such beauty is also *originary*: i.e. it has a unique power to catalyze fundamental shifts in the way that the self interprets itself and its place in the world.<sup>20</sup>

How is this the case? First of all, visual beauty prods us to exercise a whole slew of intellectual virtues. Gazing at the beauty of an artwork, sustaining the often prolonged, difficult effort to account *critically* for that beauty: such gestures are at once also *ethical* responses. For Winckelmann, visual beauty both sparks and requires patience of observation, a willingness to defer gratification, a capacity to catch small details, a powerful imagination to amplify the affective power of a fictional object: “this inner sense of which I speak must be quick, delicate, and imaginative” (KS 160).

But it would be wrong to say that sustained aesthetic experience is thereby reduced as an ethically edifying event. In the experience of the artwork ethical and aesthetical overlap *originally*; ‘originally’, in the sense that neither is subordinated to the other. Beauty is not the cognitive ‘bait’ that lures us to the apprehension of a moral pattern, nor are the virtues of contemplation mere props to aesthetic delight. One seeks to account *for* one’s perception of beauty: to increase one’s own pleasure by bringing into greater focus the specific points of aesthetic delight. But—in one and the same stroke—one seeks to account *to* one’s perception of the beautiful: it’s as if autonomous analysis were a response to an ethical obligation laid upon us by the beautiful.

Here we should return to Winckelmann’s dialectic between *evaluative* and *descriptive* beauty. Its point is to account for both beauty as extraordinarily concentrated phenomenon *and* for the implications that this phenomenon has for one’s lived existence. Seen from this angle, Winckelmann’s minute (and sometimes admittedly tiresome) descriptions of the beauty of sculpted chins, foreheads, and noses, appears in a different light. It is an attempt to see if and how the ineffable overarching unity of beauty can be made flesh. In this respect, Winckelmann inverts Platonic aesthetics. In *Symposium* 210e, Diotima speaks of a gradual (*hephexes*) initiation to beauty which would then—hopefully—be crowned by the sudden (*hexaiphnes*) radiant appearance of the beautiful itself.<sup>21</sup> Winckelmann reverses this relationship: the *hexaiphnes* precedes, grounds, and drives the *hephexes*. The initial flash-like apprehension of the beautiful (the enthralling concentrated unity of the aesthetic object) lures an ocular tarrying-on, in which specific graces become slowly discernible: “after repeated contemplation, the soul becomes more still and the eye

<sup>20</sup>Givone pinpoints Hamann and Herder as the pioneers of an *originary* understanding of aesthetic experience. As I will argue, the honor should go to Winckelmann.

<sup>21</sup>On the Platonic dialectic of *hexaiphnes* and *hephexes*, cf. Bodei 1995, 58 (n. 18).

quieter and moves from the whole to the particular” (HAA 264).<sup>22</sup> Anticipating the Romantic idea of the semantic inexhaustibility of the artwork, Winckelmann avers that such accounting must be always partial. In the case of visual art “there is always something to find [even] in what is best known, because art is not exhaustible (*denn Kunst ist nicht erschöpft*)” (HAA 263).

But it is crucial that the critical judgment be always rooted in the arresting phenomenon of aesthetic unity that motivated it in the first place: “here anyone who proceeds from the parts to the whole would show a grammatical brain, and hardly awaken in himself a rapturous feeling for the whole” (KS 160). Otherwise, it is easy to turn criticism into an exercise for its own sake, which loses sight of the fact that an artwork gripped our mind *and* senses.

By focusing only on the moment of analysis, Walter Benjamin could read Winckelmann’s *ekphrasis* of the *Belvedere Torso* as the product of a Baroque gaze, where analysis relishes the irreversible decomposition of the whole:

Such a penetrating gaze is still at work in Winckelmann’s “Description of the Torso of Hercules in the Belvedere in Rome” —in the unclassical manner in which he goes through it piece by piece, limb by limb. It is no accident that he does this on a torso. In the field of allegorical intuition, the image is fragment, rune. Its symbolic beauty evaporates when the light of divine erudition falls upon it. The falsely lustrous appearance [*Schein*] of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* is extinguished, the simile perishes, the cosmos within it is desiccated. The dried-out rebuses that remain contain insight that is still graspable by the confused brooder. By its very nature, classicism was forbidden to contemplate the lack of freedom, the imperfection, and brokenness of the sensuous, of the beautiful physis. But this is precisely what Baroque allegory, beneath its mad pomp, proclaims with unprecedented force (Benjamin 2008, 176–7).

For all its suggestiveness, I think that Benjamin’s reading is not on target, since it elides the erotic logic of Winckelmann’s gaze: the lover obsesses over details of the beloved’s body, but such enraptured lingering over the part, far from detracting from the power of the whole, instead adds to it. Far from seeing the part as a mere fragment of a latent totality, the lover’s gaze sees the whole in each of the features of the beloved. For Winckelmann, each of the parts of the *Torso* have the power to evoke the whole: “in each portion of the body is manifested, as in a picture, the *whole hero* engaged in a particular deed” (DT 188, emphasis mine). For example: “I cannot look at the small portion of the left shoulder which is still visible, without calling to mind that upon its outstretched strength, as upon two mountains, the whole burden of the circles of the heavens has rested” (188). The *Torso*’s shoulders bring

<sup>22</sup>Winckelmann is committed to a phenomenology of aesthetic experience that seeks to illuminate, but not *dissolve*, the original feeling that we are *enthralled by something beautiful*. In this respect, his method is fully congruent with Alan Paskow’s description of aesthetic experience as a non-reductive dialectic between what he calls *consciousness*<sub>1</sub> (the immediate affective response) and *consciousness*<sub>2</sub> (the reflective evaluation/analysis of first-personal response) (Paskow 63–71). Walter Bosshard makes the same point, when he labels Winckelmann’s fastidious phenomenology of beauty as a “grasping what grasps us” (*ergriffenes Begreifen*), i.e. a desire to understand aesthetic unity which is also *eros* for that unity (Bosshard 180).

out so vividly the herculean nature of a single task (supporting the celestial vault), that we feel we are contemplating ‘the whole hero’, not just a single episode of his career.

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Winckelmann’s construction of the aesthetic as the revelation of a primordial unity of beauty and goodness shaped anew the European perception of antiques. Artworks like the *Laocoon*, and *Apollo Belvedere* had already been celebrated for centuries, but merely as models of artistic excellence.<sup>23</sup> But from the mid-eighteenth century forward, these classics were seen also as something like a genomic repository of the exemplary ethical and religious values of the *Anciens*—a role previously reserved for the *writings* of the ancients, and now taken over by figurative art.<sup>24</sup> This shift explains also why painters like Jacques Louis David (1748–1825) show an unprecedented attention to ancient sculpture, and why Napoleon filled the Louvre with looted sculpture (including the *Laocoon* and the *Apollo*): because it was believed that this ancient beauty had the power to *preserve* and possibly *recover* for the present the *ethos* of the ancients.<sup>25</sup> It remains open to question, of course, how much of this discourse was ideological (especially in the case of Napoleon) and how much was not. But for better or worse, without Winckelmann’s seminal theory, this discourse could never have taken place.

But, to his credit, Winckelmann never forgot that the statues he loved so much came from an irretrievably lost past, and hence that their capacity to address the present in a living way was highly problematic, though not necessarily impossible. It is to this aspect of Winckelmann’s thought that we now turn.

## 2.5 Document vs Monument: Between Mourning and Aesthetic Presence

Alas, if I only could see this image in the sublimity (*Größe*) and beauty with which it appeared to the mind of the artist, so that from the vestiges I could tell how he thought and how I should think! It would give me great happiness to describe this work with

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<sup>23</sup>The *Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* touted the *Laocoon* as a paradigm of technical excellence, as we can see in Gérard van Opstal’s 1667 seminar on the *Laocoon* group (CAR 19–27).

<sup>24</sup>On this paradigm-shift (from the ethical exemplarity of ancient writing to that of ancient sculpture), see the classic Busch 1940.

<sup>25</sup>Pierre-Jean Cabanis (1757–1808) and Pierre-Charles Levesque (1736–1812) offer striking illustrations of this belief. Both were convinced that certain human gestures had the capacity to condense and make visible ethical values, and that Greek sculpture provided the most compelling examples of this significant corporeality. Along the same lines, Antoine Mongez (1747–1845) claimed that an ancient cameo called *Ajax Meditating on the death of Achilles* could offer to the illiterate Parisian masses a compelling glimpse at ancient warrior virtue (quoted from Settis 2012, 51–2).

[fitting] dignity! But I remain full of sadness. Just as Psyche wept for her love after she had come to know him, I finally understand the beauty of this Hercules, only to weep for the irreplaceable damage it has sustained. Art weeps with me, because the work . . . through which still today it could have raised its head—as in the golden times—to the highest peak of human consideration . . . [art] has to see [this work] half-destroyed and cruelly mishandled. And how can one here not remember also the loss of so many other hundreds of artistic masterpieces! (KS 147).

Admittedly, the closing of the *Torso* essay seem to justify Benjamin's claim that Winckelmann peddles an aesthetics of mourning. After all, Winckelmann laments the inadequacy of his imaginative reconstruction of the fragment's original beauty. It would be wrong to dismiss this as an artful profession of modesty, where one seeks to enhance the force of one's description by protesting its impossibility. Although it certainly is that as well, it is also a genuine moment of grief, in which the mutilated statue appears as a *document*, i.e. as a trace of an absence. What is irretrievably gone is the ancient artist's original conception, which surely must have been a miracle of *kalokagathia*, i.e. of an *ethos* that is at once *kalos*, beautiful ("sublimity and beauty" yokes together *ethos* and *kalos*). And nostalgia over one battered fragment turns into overwhelming grief over the many masterpieces surviving only in the descriptions of Pliny, Pausanias, or Philostratus.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that this aching awareness of a loss to history is *decisive*, that the art historian is essentially called to register the loss of the history he reconstructs. The very final lines of the essay register a different mood:

But art, which wants to instruct us further, calls us back from these sad considerations, and shows us how much there is to learn from what has remained, and with what eye the artists must look at it (147).

Here the temporal coordinates change. What counts is the *presence*, albeit fragmentary, of ancient artworks, and their potentially living address for the present.

Rather recently, art historian Whitney Davis has (in my view) somewhat flattened the monument/document dialectic in Winckelmann, ascribing to him an art-history-as-mourning approach. Davis leans above the well-known ending of the *History*:

I could not keep myself from gazing after the fate of works of art as far as my eye could see. Just as a beloved stands on the seashore and follows with tearful eyes her departing sweetheart, with no hope of seeing him again, and believes she can glimpse even in the distant sail the image of her lover—so we, like the lover, have as it were only a shadowy outline of the subject of our desires remaining. But this arouses so much the greater longing for what is lost, and we examine the copies we have with greater attention than we would if we were in full possession of the originals. In this, we often are like individuals who wish to converse with spirits and believe they can see something where nothing exists (HAA 351).

By itself, this paragraph legitimates Whitney Davis' reading. The *History* is a dialectic between an historian *he*, who reconstructs the lost history of beloved antiques, and a despairing *she*, who witnesses the irretrievable loss of their original

cultural context.<sup>26</sup> It equally legitimates the conclusion that the *healthy* resolution of this dialectic is that art history must—in a cathartic gesture—lay its irreversibly orphaned objects to rest.<sup>27</sup>

But Davis's reading is a witness to another fateful parting of ways, concerning the nineteenth century divorce between aesthetics and art history. Once the artwork's capacity to appear as an aesthetic object is bracketed as 'unscientific', the artwork itself is deprived of its power to speak to us with a living, present voice. It becomes a mute foundling whose voice can only be situated in the past, whose story can only be a matter of forensics. If Winckelmann writes a *history* of ancient art, it is not out of antiquarian nostalgia, but because he wants to understand it better *qua art*. And by 'art', Winckelmann did not understand an abstract universal. For him, it referred to those artworks which stood out for a beauty that stubbornly *refuses* to leave, and which importunes our present with pressing questions. The business of art-history is to get to the heart of a *presence* that appears to speak with a suprahistorical voice:

Some err . . . out of caution, when they wish to set aside all prejudices in favor of ancient works while contemplating them. Rather, they should approach them with a much more positive bias, for in the conviction that much beauty is to be found, they will seek it, and some of it will reveal itself to them. One must return again and again until it is found: for it is present (HAA 214).

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There is further evidence for the claim that Winckelmann's art history is *intimately connected to the present of aesthetic experience*. Consider these lines from the Introduction of his *Geschichte*:

The history of the art of antiquity that I have endeavored to write is no mere narrative of the chronology and alterations of art, for I take the word *history* in the wider sense that it has in the Greek language and my intention is to provide a system . . . Some writings with the title *History of Art* have appeared, but art has played only a negligible part in them. Their authors were insufficiently conversant with art and could communicate only what they had gleaned from books or hearsay. Almost no one has guided us into the essence or interior of art, and those who have dealt with antiquities have only raised points on which they could display their learning (HAA 71).

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<sup>26</sup>“Winckelmann's practice implies that the life of art history is the mourning of the loss of the history of art. Therefore, the death of art history would be the loss of its life-in mourning. But art history could not be due to loss alone. Art history requires not only the loss of its objects but also, and much more important, a witness to another loss. The witness concerns not the loss itself, since it took place long ago, but the fact that what has been lost is, in fact, being-lost for us. The history of art is lost, but art history is still with us; and although art history often attempts to bring the object back to life, finally art history is our means of laying the object to rest, of situating it within its history and of taking it out of our own, where we have witnessed its departure. Since the history of art is a history of acknowledging the irreparable loss of objects, we must give up the idea of art history as a bringing-to-life, as a denial of departure (Davis 1994, 154).

<sup>27</sup>If it is not to be pathological, art history must take its leave of its objects, for they have already departed anyway” (Davis 1994, 154).

Winckelmann here is borrowing from Herodotus: *historia* is a narrative of that whereof one has been an ocular witness.<sup>28</sup> What does it mean, then, to be an historian of *art*? To be sure, it means to have seen and studied carefully the pieces or vestiges whose history one is reconstructing. But if one does just *that*, one is an historian of *antiquities*, not an historian of *art*. There is a difference, after all, between an ancient artifact qua sensuous object ('antique') and qua aesthetic object ('art'). Wisely, Winckelmann steers clear of a definition of art. But for him, a *necessary* condition for something to qualify as *Kunst* is its capacity to 'break time' as an aesthetic object that troubles the present of the spectator. Only when one moves from his or her own *aesthetic experience* of artworks, and writes a history that *illuminates* that experience—only then one is an art-historian in Winckelmann's sense of the word. Winckelmann saw himself as the *first* art-historian in that sense:

In the large and costly works describing ancient statuary that have so far appeared, we search in vain for investigations into or knowledge of art. The description of a statue should show us the reason for its beauty and indicate something specific about its artistic style (71).

If Winckelmann is right, it is from *within* our first-hand aesthetic experience of ancient artworks that the need for historical reconstruction makes itself felt. As we have seen, that experience presses toward an enhancing self-clarification—that is, to be genuinely seized by the beauty of something is one with wanting to know its beauty more specifically. "With regard to the excellence of a statue, it is not enough to do as Bernini did, perhaps out of unthinking impudence, and dub the *Pasquino* the most excellent of all statues. One needs to give one's reasons as well" (HAA 72) (the *Pasquino* (Rome, Piazza Pasquino) is a battered torso currently believed to be a portrait of Alexander the Great and a soldier; see Haskell and Penny 262).

But can one not find those reasons on the terrain of a *formalist* aesthetics, both general (e.g. Crousaz's *Traité du Beau*) and specifically sculptural (Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*)? Why does a search for the grounds of beauty need to take on also the form of a *historical* reconstruction?

For Winckelmann, this question is ill-posed, because it presupposes that perception (aesthetics) and reconstructive narration (history) are separated to begin with. As we have seen, he takes his bearings by the ancient Greek conception of *historia*, where narration and perception are inextricably joined. This co-implication of story-telling and perception is rooted in aesthetic experience, when the aesthetic object itself is a paradoxical *presence of the past*, where seeing and remembering seem to coalesce. Here Winckelmann complicates and deepens a Platonic insight. One of the most peculiar traits of beauty is that it baffles us with its oscillation between the novel and the familiar. As is well known, Plato accounted for that phenomenon by construing sensuous beauty as an intimation of the Idea. It was novel for being a *sensuous* intimation of the Idea, while familiar for being a sensuous intimation of

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<sup>28</sup>Here I lean upon Henrich Dilly: "Winckelmann's concept of history and theory of artistic description culminate in the construction of a two-part treatise, and in the declaration that he takes the word 'history' in its Greek sense. For him, retrieving the Greek meaning of the word means above all *to report that which one has seen for oneself*" (Dilly 96).

the *Idea* (which the soul knew in its pre-embodied state). But for Plato, the only past that beauty evokes is the soul's 'transcendental', suprahistorical past. There is no sense of a beauty in which one feels the affective presence of a *historical* past. For Winckelmann, instead, beauty stages the folding of idealized time and historical past into the present.

The *ekphrasis* of the *Torso* provides a good example of this. Its beauty seems a resuscitated fragment of ideal temporality: beauty as expression of a preternaturally integrated temporality. Beauty is felt also as a resurrected fragment of lost history: plastic beauty as the expression of the ancient artist's *kalokagathia*, itself an indifference of sense (*kalos*) and logos (*agathos*).<sup>29</sup> (I hasten to add that Winckelmann here is not reducing aesthetics to ethics, the beautiful body to the virtuous self. Ethics presupposes a nature that needs to be re-aligned with a norm. But the beautiful statue is an imaginative embodiment of a mythical state prior to those fissures).

Now, if the art-historian turns away from an ancient sculpture to enter the archives of ancient literature, history, numismatics, it must be—Winckelmann is adamant about this—with the intention of increasing the *thereness* of the aesthetic object. Narrative reconstruction must in the end turn into a *perception* that 'breaks time': i.e. the artwork's beauty must come across as the affective *living presence* of what—from a narrow historical standpoint—is merely the past.<sup>30</sup> By way of illustration, consider this surprising aside on the *Torso*, which Winckelmann chose to omit from his celebrated 1758 *ekphrasis*, and which he published only in 1767.

It was much harder for me to discover the beautiful, when it exceeded my cognitions. I did not look at artworks like someone who, upon first seeing the sea, [merely] remarked that it was beautiful to look at. *Athaumasia*, i.e. immunity to surprise is something I value in morality only, not in art: here indifference is detrimental. In this endeavor, I have sometimes benefited from the universal fame [hardened into prejudice] that some artworks enjoy—I forced myself to recognize in them at least some persuasively beautiful [feature]. As an example, [consider] the torso of Hercules . . . which I described. Upon first sight,

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<sup>29</sup>Gianni Carchia has incisively underscored the tension between mythic and historic past in Winckelmann, although—as I see it—he mistakenly takes the latter as a mere trope of the former. For Carchia, the felt *antiqueness* of beauty is merely a schema that allows us to conceive the gap between a mythical *arché* and the 'fallen' time of embodied existence: "Antiquity in Winckelmann is precisely this world of the soul, the space of a recollecting inwardness; in this past lives the unpronounceable. Therein lies the connection (which has seemed absurd to most interpreters) between Platonism and history, reason and concrete experience" (Carchia 2003, 262). As I see it, Carchia's reading of Winckelmann's historical distance as a cypher of lost mythical time is unduly reductive. To be sure, the *ekphrases* of the *Torso*, of the *Belvedere Apollo*, of the *Medici Niobe* are all inflected by what we could call a 'pathos of religious distance': their felt *historical* distance may work as a trope of the ontological gap between god and the human animal. But—as we have seen in the end of his *Torso* reading—Winckelmann's nostalgia is also for lost history *as such*, for what he saw as the age of *kalokagathia*.

<sup>30</sup>Here I radicalize Dilly's thesis. For him, Winckelmann simply requires art history to be *based* upon actual, first-hand knowledge of artworks. Winckelmann, claimed to have a knowledge of things garnered through perception, which had to be the foundation of any art-historical writing" (Dilly 96). As I see it, this acquaintance is only the first step. The artwork must sublate into a living *present* the historical reconstruction of its reconstructed *past*.

I remained unimpressed by this work. I could not reconcile its most delicately traced parts with its strongly accented counterparts in other statues of Hercules, especially the *Farnese*. I remembered vividly the great esteem for this piece felt by Michaelangelo and other artists—an esteem that should have been like an article of faith to me. And yet I [still] could not give groundless applause to this piece. I was plagued by doubt because of the interpretation that Bernini and the whole tribe of artists had given to this fragment: they saw it as [a representation] of Hercules spinning.<sup>31</sup> Finally, after prolonged, detailed contemplation; after I became convinced that the current interpretation was mistaken, and that what was really portrayed was rather a quiescent Hercules, with his right arm resting on his head, as if engaged in the contemplation of his finished labors; [after all this], I thought I had found the reason for the difference between this Hercules and the other statues. Its posture and build showed me a Hercules become one of the gods, resting from his previous labors . . . no human Hercules appears in the famous torso, but the divine one (*der Göttliche*) (AGK v-vi).

In this example, we see how Winckelmann's art-historical reconstruction begins and ends with aesthetic experience. It starts with a perception of beauty that seems incomplete, even self-contradictory. The proof of the validity of historical reconstruction is in the pudding of aesthetic experience. The conjecture that the torso is a fragment of the statue of the divinized (as opposed to laboring) Hercules is confirmed in an intensified aesthetic perception, in a greater affective *presence* of ecstatic temporality. Now, it could very well be that Winckelmann's 'discovery' might be a philological fiasco. Indeed, according to the most recent interpretation, the *Torso* is a fragment of a sculpture of Ajax contemplating suicide (Rigdway 84). But if we have to choose between dry philological accuracy and an experience of the artwork that invests us more deeply, then I would claim that Winckelmann's possible error is the lesser of two evils.

This is not to deny that Winckelmann's aesthetic experience is not also inflected by the *absence* of mythic and historical pasts. But lucid grief is only a part, not the whole of Winckelmann's aesthetics. His celebrated *ekphrases* testify that even in their fragmentary state, the sublime beauty of ancient sculpture could still speak powerfully to us—and not simply as a dead *document* of a lost culture, but as a *monument*, that is, an artefact that addresses us with a living voice, asking us questions about the sense and direction of our lives. In this respect, the acknowledgment of loss is a necessary condition for a non-trivial engagement with the past, where the study of antiquity is part and parcel of our taking a responsible stand towards our present and future. Once the viewer realizes the irretrievable loss of a past that nonetheless does not cease to inspire him or her, he or she will shun attempts (both futile and impossible) to clone the past, and strive instead for a palingenesis of past values that is at once a substantial metamorphosis.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> According to a myth found in Horace (*Fasti* 2.305), the Delphic oracle enjoined Hercules—as a penance for his murder of Iphitus—to spend a year as a slave of Omphale, daughter of the King of Lydia. Spinning was one of the typically female tasks taken up by Hercules under Omphale's rule.

<sup>32</sup> Here I lean upon Henrich Dilly: "Posthumously, Winckelmann was understood and celebrated as the Greek amidst barbarians, as the resurrector of antiquity. [But] he was far removed from praising ancient artworks as something eternally paradigmatic. It was absolutely clear that this epoch and

In this respect, Winckelmann himself proudly presents his *History* as a token of such repetition-as-renewal:

After the firstborn of my Roman labors in the German language . . . I appear with riper fruits of art, which, as the first of their kind, sprang from the womb of antiquities and the arts and were nurtured and completed under an auspicious sky (HAA 70).

This is art-history as a discourse that is itself *artistic*, i.e. itself motivated by ancient beauty. Its discourse “sprang from the womb of antiquity”. At the same time, the *Geschichte* is no mere clone of ancient beauty: its pages are “fruits of art which [are] the first of their kind”.

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its art were gone, and that history had become irreversible. Only when one had recognized its pastness, could it [history] become paradigmatic . . . A new art could not rise from the immediate imitation of single works, but had to instead think through the totality [of historical development]” (Dilly 104).

Marc Fumaroli is right to point out how Winckelmann's love for the *Anciens* was also motivated by his hope that they could spark a regeneration of his own present. But the problem with Fumaroli's reading is that it ignores the dialectic between palingenesis and metamorphosis: it is neither possible nor desirable to transplant unalloyed ancient values into modern soil. “The time came in which . . . the moral and political revolution of Rousseau coincided with the antiquarian battle for the regeneration of taste. Winckelmann, a brilliant and eloquent heir of eighteenth-century antiquarians, is—in his own way—a Rousseauian when he builds the edifice of his *History of Art of Antiquity* according to the pathetic schema of Longinus' *On the Sublime*. [In that work, Winckelmann] opposes the grandeur and heroic freedom of ancient republics to the physical and moral weakening of the ‘inhuman’ eighteenth-century world” (Fumaroli 2005, 225–6). Winckelmann's moments of mourning strongly suggest that he was not the all-out sanguine *antiquarien* that Fumaroli takes him to be.

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The Age of Figurative Theo-humanism

The Beauty of God and Man in German Aesthetics of  
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