

Leonardo Pica Ciamarra

## Goethe and the Ancient as a Therapy for the Modern



Laboratorio dell'ISPF, XX, 2023

[7]

DOI: 10.12862/Lab23PCL

1. Goethe's confrontation with the young Romantic movement in post-Napoleonic Germany embodies quite a peculiar case of conservative use of antiquity. In this context, Goethe's reference to the *Antike* is indubitably a conservative reference – but it is not a regressive one: rather, it serves anti-reactionary purposes. This is the case of “ambiguity of the ancient” that I'd like to outline in the following: i.e., antiquity as the lintel of an approach whose aim is a conservation of values more ‘enlightened’ than the new ones it opposes.

In order to do this – and in the context of a discussion on the eighteenth century, a historical period that I'm going to touch on in its “longer” sense – it is necessary to briefly recall the classicist project initiated in Jena in the last decade of the century by Goethe and Schiller, together with Wilhelm von Humboldt and Heinrich Meyer. This project was both the theoretical definition of an aesthetic, humanistic and anthropological canon and the practical attempt to revive the classical model for the benefit of a new German cultural identity. It was a matter of configuring a new objectivity and a new order, and thus an alternative national individuality to the disconcerting impulses coming from revolutionary France (the main example being Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea*, 1797<sup>1</sup>).

To summarise the essential features of this project, we can refer to the book that Goethe, with the collaboration of Meyer and Friederich August Wolff, dedicated to the founder of German classicism at the beginning of the new century: *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*.

By a highly symbolic coincidence, the publication of this “final” monument of German Classicism falls at the same time, 1805, as the death of Schiller. It is well known that Schiller's relationship with Goethe was at the heart of the *Weimarer Klassik*. Not equally known, perhaps, is that such relationship was in fact a constant tension between two ways of thinking separated, as Goethe would later say, by an «immense abyss»<sup>2</sup>.

The common problem was that of a renewed integrity of human being. For Schiller, however, this problem took shape in response to Kantian thought, and thus on the subjective side, as the issue of the composition between sensibility and reason. For Goethe, on the other hand, it was a matter of drawing on a fulfilled objectivity that lies before any activity and freedom of the subject, and places it in the totality.

Both of them were well aware of this opposition. Schiller's essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-96) is also the long-suffering attempt by a modern

<sup>1</sup> Cf., among others, S. Barbera, *Un Prometeo tedesco? Osservazioni su 'Hermann und Dorothea'*, in «Archivio di storia della cultura», XXII, 2009, pp. 59-76. In a broader perspective, cf. G. Baiocchi, *Classicismo e rivoluzione. Goethe e la rivoluzione francese*, Guida, Napoli, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> J.W. von Goethe, *Glückliches Ereigniß* (1817), in *Goethes Werke*, 'Weimarer Ausgabe', Weimar, Bohlau, 1887-1919, section II, vol. 11, pp. 3-20, p. 16. Henceforth I cite this edition in footnotes with the abbreviation WA followed by the Roman section number and the Arabic volume number (where needed followed by a lowercase letter referenced to the tome) and page number. Translations are my own.

poet, by one who ‘stands far’ from perfection, to explain to himself Goethe, i.e. the phenomenon of the only poet of modern age who had access to such immediate ‘Greek’ objectivity. Goethe understood without hesitation this essay as something his friend wrote «to defend himself against me»<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, Schiller’s ideas – especially those of the *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1794), where the mark of the modern man is caught in the mutilation of one part of its being in favour of the disproportionate prevalence of another – strongly resonated in Goethe’s essay on *Winckelmann and his century*, which was also a way for Goethe to draw the conclusions of this kind of tug-of-war.

2. The difference between the ancients and the moderns, says Goethe in his essay, is that for the ancients «feeling and reflection had not yet been separated, that almost irreparable separation in the healthy energy of man had not yet taken place», so that «for them only what happened had value, just as for us only what was thought and felt seems to have any value». Therefore,

if modern man plunges into infinity in almost every consideration, only to return to a limited point if he is lucky, the ancients [...] felt at ease within the graceful limits of the world in all its beauty. This was [...] where their activity found its place and their passion its object and nourishment<sup>4</sup>.

Thus in Greek civilisation the «healthy nature of man», that «acts as a whole and feels itself in the world as a whole, great and beautiful, worthy and full of value»<sup>5</sup>, shapes

a state of human being which corresponds so much to the intentions of nature itself that here, in the highest moment of enjoyment no less than in the deepest moment of fall, even of ruin, we perceive the presence of a health that resists every attack<sup>6</sup>.

But all this – together with the artistic ability to «eternalise such a present»<sup>7</sup> – is «compatible only with a pagan sense of life», Goethe stresses. Winckelmann himself owed the greatness of his own vision precisely to his «detachment, even aversion, to every kind of Christian feeling»<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, for Goethe, as for many of his contemporaries, Christianity marks the breaking point of the ancient classical balance of man and the world in favour of the predominance of the inner, subjective, sentimental element – precisely the element which is at

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the conversation with J.-P. Eckermann, 21 March 1830, in *Anhang an Goethes Werke: Abteilung für Gespräche*, hrsg. von W. von Biedermann, Leipzig 1889-1896 (henceforth *Gespräche*, followed by the Roman volume number and the Arabic page number), vol. VII, p. 277.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. von Goethe, *Winckelmann* (1805), in WA, I, 46, 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

the root of the Romantic attitude<sup>9</sup>. It was Winckelmann's freedom from this imbalance towards inwardness – says Goethe therefore – that allowed him to share that Greek «health that resists every attack», i.e. a health capable of absorbing the pure joy of the fulfilled coincidence between fact and ideal as well as tragic ruin, and therefore of withstanding the negative, «the downfall», with incomparable strength: as an intimate participation in the cosmic rhythm, in the fullness of presence. Evil can fall upon this fullness at any moment, but from the outside, as Winckelmann himself died – from a knife wound, perhaps not unconnected with his love of beauty – «raptured» to life «in the completeness of life», so that «in the memory of posterity he now enjoys the privilege of appearing eternally alive and vigorous»<sup>10</sup>.

3. Perhaps it is arbitrary to think that Goethe, in describing this death in completeness of life, was comparing it with Schiller's declining health: always ill, finally consumed, as Goethe would say mercilessly many years later, by an abstract «ideal» of freedom that «made demands on his physical nature that were too violent for his strength»<sup>11</sup>. It may be an arbitrary hypothesis, but in this case it may also be useful, to highlight the coincidence in Goethe's vision between Greekness and health and the persistent “untimely”<sup>12</sup> (in Nietzsche's sense) critical value that Greekness assumes for him in relation to modernity. If Schiller evidently embodies for Goethe, albeit at the noblest level, the lacerations of modernity, Winckelmann attests to the possibility of a therapy of modern subjectivism – a constant feature of Goethe's idea of antiquity, ever since his youthful polemic against Wieland's rococo classicism<sup>13</sup>, which remains steadfast even at this time of distrust in the residual possibilities of the classicist project.

Such a distrust is certainly an effect of Schiller's death, with which, Goethe says, «I have lost half my existence [...] I should begin a new life; but at my age there is no way of doing so»<sup>14</sup>. But more than that, it is due to historical changes that seem to leave no room for the anthropological project of classicism.

The reaction to the humiliations inflicted by Napoleon gave rise in Germany to new nationalist sentiments, to a search for identity that was no less opposed to French culture than to the rationalist and cosmopolitan universe of

<sup>9</sup> The point is clearly perceived as an attack by Christian-Romantic readers. «The old rascal has therein professed his paganism in a completely public way» writes Friedrich Schlegel to his brother August Wilhelm on 15 July 1805 (in J. Körner, *Krisenjahre der Frühromantik: Briefe aus dem Schlegelkreis*, 2nd edition, Bern, Francke, 1969, p. 214). Cf. also V. Riedel, *Zwischen Klassizismus und Geschichtlichkeit. Goethes Buch Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, in «International Journal of the Classical Tradition», 13, 2006, pp. 217-42.

<sup>10</sup> Goethe, *Winckelmann*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Conversation with Eckermann, 18 January 1827, in *Gespräche*, VI, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R. Koselleck, *Goethes unzeitgemässe Geschichte*, Heidelberg, Manutius, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J.W. von Goethe, *Götter, Helden und Wieland* (1773), in WA, I, 38, 11-36. On this confrontation cf., among others, H. Trevelyan, *Goethe and the Greeks*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 69 sgg.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to C.F. Zelter, 1 June 1805, in WA, IV, 19, p. 8.

classicism. This reaction is rather rooted in the suggestions of the Christian-Germanic Middle Ages and, even further back, in those of the individual freedom of ancient non-Latin peoples (which was evoked, in particular, by the so-called Heidelberg Romanticism: Creuzer, Görres, Arnim...). The titanism of subjectivity – well known to the author of *Prometheus* and *Werther* – now became a celebration and religious cult of the irrational depths of its freedom and power. And there was nothing more alien to Goethe's own cultural and political programme than the «unbridled and inebriated character of so-called Romantic poetry»<sup>15</sup>, ready to sacrifice every advantage of form – all its determinacy, completeness, identity – to a dream of infinity.

Goethe (an isolated admirer of Napoleon) was faced with this new atmosphere, whose young protagonists saw him as a kind of survivor, and indeed someone to be overcome. His stiffening was a kind of reaction that embarrassed even his friends. In a letter to his wife in 1812, Humboldt described him as

petrified and hardened, and also terribly intolerant and mannered in conversation [...]. He assured me that, apart from Meyer and myself [the other two survivors of the 'Jena quartet'], there was no one in all Germany with whom he really wanted to and could speak freely<sup>16</sup>.

An exaggerated statement, perhaps, but telling of the sense of siege that Goethe felt at the time. «I call the Classical the healthy, and the Romantic the sick» sounds a maxim coined in those years<sup>17</sup>.

4. It is in this context that Goethe – at the end of the writing of *The Italian Journey*, i.e. the revision of his own most important personal contact with antiquity – became involved in reading the debate on Greek mythology between the two greatest philologists of the time: Gottfried Hermann, the leader of Enlightenment philology, a point of reference for classicism, and Friedrich Creuzer, the great Romantic philologist from Heidelberg, author of *Symbolism and Mythology of the Ancient Peoples* which was revolutionising the classical image of the Greeks<sup>18</sup>.

Creuzer's thesis was that Greek religion, not unlike other religions, was an expression of the fragmentation of an original Oriental monotheistic religion

<sup>15</sup> Conversation with F.W. Riemer, 28 August 1808, in *Gespräche*, II, 216-217.

<sup>16</sup> Letter of 17<sup>th</sup> June 1812, in W. und C. von Humboldt, *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen*, hrsg. von A. von Sydow, Berlin, Mittler, 1906-1916, vol. IV, pp. 8-9. More on this relationship in L. Pica Ciamarra, *Humboldt e Goethe*, in *Wilhelm von Humboldt duecentocinquant'anni dopo*, ed. by A. Carrano, E. Massimilla, F. Tessitore, Napoli, Liguori, 2017, pp. 113-135.

<sup>17</sup> J.W. von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, hrsg. von M. Hecker, Weimar, Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1907, nr. 1031.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. G. Hermann - F. Creuzer, *Briefe über Homer und Hesiodus, vorzüglich über die Theogonie: mit besonderer Hinsicht auf des Ersteren 'Dissertatio de mythologia Graecorum antiquissima' und auf des Letzteren 'Symbolik und Mythologie der Griechen'*, Heidelberg, August Oswald, 1818.

into various popular cults, and that myth was to be understood as a reference to an infinite totality that is beyond the reach of individual religious representations. Classicist philology rose up against this idea, asserting the incomparable ideal value of Hellenic forms of representation, whose clarity was not to be obscured by any residue.

Goethe was on their side. He didn't fail to understand the depth that Creuzer's not naively rationalist view of Greekness could offer (in truth – but that's a whole other topic that cannot be touched upon here – Goethe is extremely sensitive and curious about the stimuli coming from those 'romantic' authors and themes whose stature he well recognises, as is the case with Creuzer). Nonetheless he saw the danger involved in his attack on the classical canon, on its exemplary value of achieved completeness. Goethe's participation in the debate, then, did not take place on the terrain of the interpretation of Greekness as such – an area in which he had no professional philological expertise – but in a few philosophical writings, including his only outline of a philosophy of history: *The Epochs of the Spirit, according to Hermann's most recent communication* of 1817.

This essay describes a cyclical pattern of civilisation, which, starting from the origins, develops in a delicate balancing act between adherence to the objectivity of nature and immersion in the mystery beyond it, where the growing affirmation of a subjectivity that proves itself beyond the immediate data initially finds its counterweights, but ultimately produces a true morbid disintegration, in which «qualities that once developed naturally from each other now act against each other as contrasting elements»<sup>19</sup>. This last epoch includes the fury with which a subjectivity that has become self-sufficient but still seeks direction «mixes priestly, popular and primordial beliefs, clings here and there to traditions, sinks into mysteries, substitutes fables for poetry and elevates them to articles of faith». Here is the time when «man's need, aroused by the destinies of the world, leaps back from the guidance of the intellect»<sup>20</sup> (the Enlightenment epoch) and seeks refuge in obscure identities of the origin.

Goethe does not introduce himself at any point in such a framework. On the one hand, this schema asserts the principled ahistoricity of a position according to which man does not belong first of all to the realm of history – and therefore even less to national roots. It exists a point of view, Goethe says implicitly, from which all the present cultural disorder and political mysticism can be regarded as «already past»<sup>21</sup>. The scheme of the *Geistesepochen* follows a cyclical form, its scansion is in principle destined to repeat itself – everything is, from a cosmic point of view, already past, «astonishing and always renewed»<sup>22</sup>. Goethe's apparent avoidance of militant engagement within his own epoch

<sup>19</sup> J.W. von Goethe *Geistesepochen, nach Hermanns neueste Mittheilungen* (1817), in WA, I, 41a, 128-131, p. 131. More on this essay in L. Pica Ciamarra, *Il saggio di Goethe sulle 'Epoche dello spirito'*, in «Archivio di storia della cultura», XVI, 2003, pp. 32-71.

<sup>20</sup> Goethe *Geistesepochen*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to van Reinhard, 7 October 1810, in WA, IV, 21, 395.

<sup>22</sup> J.W. von Goethe, *Geschichte der Farbenlehre* (1810), in WA, II, 3, 246.



thus corresponds to the stubborn proposal of what he considers the most radical Greek tenet, as the only therapy for the illness of the epoch: our belonging to a cosmos that does not change, alongside to a historical world that is turning in on itself according to the basically desperate pattern outlined in this sketch.

On the other hand, this belonging to an existence that is not torn apart is not just an 'ideal', an abstraction from our reality. Our reality is also a historical one by its very constitution, and the Greek experience shows an existence that is not divided, that is not sick, as a historically realised possibility – that is, something that can happen: not only in the cyclical scheme of history but also in our personal life. We must be always able to think this. And that's why the deconstruction of Hellenic exemplarity cannot be tolerated: because it threatens to rob us of such a vital force.

5. At the same time as Goethe was writing this essay (and a few others that we have not time to mention), the first book-burning in modern Germany was being prepared by the student fraternities of German universities at nearby Wartburg Castle. Among the works which were consigned to the flames for their «anti-German spirit»<sup>23</sup> amid the chanting of the *Burschenschaften*, no one dared include Goethe's ones. But Goethe was well aware – and indeed far more than the Restoration authorities, who may have loved him even less than the young Romantic nationalists<sup>24</sup> – of the danger of the emerging cult of the dark, irrational, primordial aspects of life, when combined with the idea of nationhood, and of the fact that the destruction of classicism was a necessary step for the political mysticism of the new era. Hence his vehement opposition to Creuzer's derivation of the exemplary Hellenic art of discernment from an inscrutable Oriental mystery wisdom. Because for him, historical representation must serve life and the present.

A few years earlier, Goethe had objected to Niebuhr's just-published *Römische Geschichte*, saying that using historical criticism on legendary heritage was tantamount to «tearing to shreds» narratives that «seize the imagination and the feeling, fill the soul, strengthen the character and stimulate the act»: something a scholar may appreciate, but «the people in life do not want, and rightly so»<sup>25</sup>. Even if it were true, even if antiquity were not exactly the realised ideal that sustains us – he still commented again as an old man – «What are we to do with such a miserable truth?»<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> D.G. Kieser, *Das Wartburgfest am 18. October 1817 in seiner Entstehung, Ausfuhrung und Folgen: nach Actenstücken und Augenzeugnissen; nebst einer Apologie der akademischen Freiheit und 15 Beilagen*, Jena, Frommann, 1818, p. 46. More on Goethe's view about this episode in L. Pica Ciamarra, *Goethe, un rogo e le nuvole*, in «Pagine Inattuali», 6, 2016, pp. 125-144.

<sup>24</sup> For Prince Metternich, e.g., Goethe is an author without «moral and religious principles», who should not be read: cf. H.H. Houben, *Der polizeimidrige Goethe*, Berlin, G. Grote, 1932, p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to B.G. Niebuhr, 22 November 1812, in WA, IV, 23, 162-163.

<sup>26</sup> Conversation with Eckermann, 15 October 1825, in *Gespräche*, V, 233.

A new level of ‘ambiguity of the ancient’ emerges here. On the one hand, classical antiquity attests, in Goethe’s eyes, to the historically real possibility of a life ahead of the modern split between fact and ideal. On the other hand, antiquity is maintained by Goethe in a kind of stylisation that protects its all-enlightened image from historically resolving itself into the unseen colours and shadows of the actual forms produced by the ancients.

One can try to resolve such an ambiguity, which seems to be at the heart of the (neo)classical ideal as a critique of modernity, by recalling again Goethe’s fundamental conviction that human being – as «the offspring of two worlds»<sup>27</sup> – not only belongs to history but also has an essential cosmic belonging. In this light, the Greek experience of life, its ability to «eternalise such a present»<sup>28</sup>, would be the effective reflection of a truly ontological fact. On the level of historical reflection, it could be added, this conviction of a double belonging animates Goethe’s predilection for that – dawning – «most beautiful point in the whole tradition [...] where history and legend border on each other»<sup>29</sup>.

Yet, to stay on the ground of our investigation into the meaning of antiquity as a therapy for modernity, it is perhaps more productive to allow that ambiguity to be a tension, a living opposition between two different ways of hinting at the same thing. Actually, the variation of points of view, of the *Vorstellungsarten*, the simultaneous consideration of things in multiple, even contradictory ways, is a basic principle of Goethe’s methodology, in his nature studies, but not only in them. For him, it is precisely the rare, «delicate»<sup>30</sup>, ability to find a balance between divergent considerations that gives access to truths that cannot be represented unilaterally. And the ancient for Goethe is these two things together, the historical and the supra-historical. Therein lies its inexhaustible productivity, its ability to sustain life in a fullness beyond splitting, and thus beyond that particular and extreme form of splitting, which is modern subjectivism, and with it the irremediable chaos of history with nothing beside it.

<sup>27</sup> Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, cit., nr. 429.

<sup>28</sup> Goethe, *Winckelmann*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Goethe, *Geschichte der Farbenlehre*, cit., p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, cit., nr. 565.





**Leonardo Pica Ciamarra**

ISPF-CNR, Napoli

picaciamarra@ispf.cnr.it

**– Goethe and the Ancient as a Therapy for the Modern**

Citation standard:

PICA CIAMARRA, Leonardo. Goethe and the Ancient as a Therapy for the Modern. *Laboratorio dell'ISPF*. 2023, vol. XX [7]. DOI: 10.12862/Lab23PCL.

Online: 29.12.2023

**ABSTRACT**

This brief article presents a synthesis of Goethe's idea of antiquity and of its meaning within the tension between Classicism and Romanticism in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, a literary but also political tension. Goethe's reference to the *Antike* – it is argued – is indubitably conservative, but not regressive: rather anti-reactionary.

**KEYWORDS**

J.W. Goethe; Ancient; Modern; Classicism; Romanticism

**SOMMARIO**

*Goethe e l'antico come terapia del moderno.* Questo breve contributo propone una sintesi della rappresentazione goethiana dell'antichità e del suo significato all'interno della tensione – letteraria ma anche politica – tra classicismo e romanticismo nella Germania dei primi anni dell'Ottocento. Il riferimento di Goethe all'*Antike* è indubbiamente conservatore, ma non regressivo: piuttosto anti-reazionario.

**PAROLE CHIAVE**

J.W. Goethe; Antichità; Epoca moderna; Classicismo; Romanticismo