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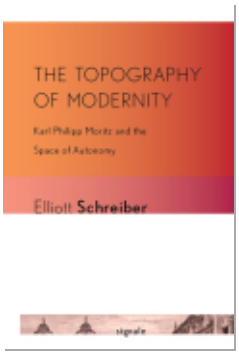
1. Toward an Aesthetics of the Sublime Augenblick: Moritz Reading Die Leiden des jungen Werthers



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Toward an Aesthetics of the Sublime *Augenblick*

Moritz Reading Die Leiden des jungen Werthers

One of the hallmarks of modernity is its restless and relentless pace of change, whose origins social historians have traced to the second half of the eighteenth century.[1] Already before the seismic shifts of the French Revolution, there emerged in Germany a conception of *Neuzeit,* a time that was felt to be always radically new.[2] The pace of change was first set in this period not by a political revolution, but rather by a revolution in text production and reading.[3] "Never before has more been written and more been read," marveled Christoph Martin Wieland in 1779 (quoted in Ward, *Book Production,* 59). Decried by critics of the time as a reading addiction (*Lesesucht*) or reading rage (*Lesewut*), a new, "extensive" reading mode on the part of the burgeoning *Bildungsbürgertum,* or educated middle class, increasingly displaced the traditional practice of "intensive" reading. The latter limited itself to a canon comprising a few authoritative texts, mostly devotional in nature, that were held to embody eternal values and were read repeatedly, often ritualistically according to the cycle of the religious calendar (Schön, *Der Verlust*

1. See Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air.*
2. See Koselleck, *Futures Past,* xxiv, 253.
3. Though for a consideration of the political implications of the new literary public sphere, see Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis.* For surveys of the reading and publishing revolution in Germany, see Engelsing, "Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte"; Kiesel and Münch, *Gesellschaft und Literatur;* Schön, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit;* and Ward, *Book Production.*

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der Sinnlichkeit, 40–41). The extensive mode of reading exploded the bounds of this canon and shattered the cyclical time of repetitive reading into a series of transient instants, or *Augenblicke*.[4] That is to say, faith in an eternity that envelops the here and now was eroded not only by *what* was read in the Enlightenment, but also by *how* the escalating number of texts were read.[5]

The new practice of extensive reading both fueled and was fueled by a dramatic rise in book production. It has been estimated that of the approximately 175,000 German titles produced in the course of the eighteenth century, fully two-thirds were published after 1760 (Kiesel and Münch, *Gesellschaft und Literatur,* 181). The emergence of a modern book market made it possible for the first time for German authors to emancipate themselves from their traditional patrons. They were, however, now beholden to the very market that liberated them. To meet consumers' soaring demand, the swelling ranks of authors worked against the clock to churn out texts. "If England's forte is race horses," quipped Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, "then ours is race pens" (quoted in Ward, *Book Production,* 61). Acceleration became the norm both for the consumers and for the producers of the mounting quantity of texts.

While the output of religious literature for the layman dropped precipitously, there was a surge in the production of imaginative literature, in particular the novel (Ward, *Book Production,* 33, 49). No genre stimulated the new extensive reading vogue as powerfully as the sentimental novel, whose popularity reached its height in the 1770s. Daniel Purdy has suggested that sentimental novels, by arousing readers' empathy with characters' ever-changing emotional states, drew them into a cycle of desire and momentary gratification that spurred further literary consumption.[6] The flood of emotionally gripping narratives thereby "restructured the time frame within which [the] individual reader's desires were developed, satisfied, and then replaced" (Purdy, *Tyranny of Elegance,* 39).

The most famous German sentimental novel, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (The Sorrows of Young Werther), immediately captivated and polarized the German and wider European reading public, like no other book of its day. Having appeared at the Leipzig book fair in September 1774, by the end of the following year, it had gone through no fewer than eleven German editions (most of them pirated) and ignited a fashion for all things Werther, from his epistolary style to his mode of dress to his personal mannerisms and even, most infamously, his

4. On the modern fragmentation of time into discrete moments through the reception of print media, see Engelsing, "Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte," 134–35; Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft,* 2:1001, 1008; and McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy,* 241.

5. On the imbrication of temporality and eternity in the premodern era, see Poulet, *Studies in Human Time,* 3–8.

6. Purdy, *Tyranny of Elegance,* 35.

suicide.[7] In his autobiography, Goethe attributes the astonishing success of his first novel to its timeliness: "weil es genau in die rechte Zeit traf" (because it appeared at exactly the right time).[8] Indeed, it struck like a lightning bolt into an age that was already electrified by the rage for reading sentimental literature. And it did so, arguably, because it gave precise expression to the modern sense of accelerating change that the reading revolution had helped create, particularly in its protagonist's powerful vision of the transformative *Augenblick* in his letter of August 18: "There is no moment that does not consume you and yours, no moment in which you are not, must be, a destroyer" (FA 1.8:106–8; Da ist kein Augenblik, der nicht dich verzehrte und die Deinigen um dich her, kein Augenblik, da du nicht ein Zerstöhrer bist, seyn mußt). From one moment to the next, nothing stays the same; the only constant of the modern age is perpetual change.

As Purdy has recounted, Goethe denounced the identificatory reading practices that his own novel aroused, and turned away from sentimentalism to embrace a "neo-classical aesthetics of artistic autonomy" with its "search for eternal laws of aesthetic form."[9] Credit for the first decisive articulation of this aesthetics goes to Karl Philipp Moritz, whom Goethe befriended in Italy. According to Martha Woodmansee, Moritz launched the concept of the autonomy of the artwork in an effort to distinguish true art from the works being mass-produced and consumed in his day at an unprecedented rate.[10] In short, the line of scholarship pursued by Purdy and Woodmansee portrays Goethe and Moritz as having sought refuge from the tumultuous waves of the revolution in reading and book production on the eternally peaceful shores of the autonomous artwork.

By contrast, I argue that Moritz inaugurated an aesthetics that at once seeks a vision of eternity, and hence a redemption from modernity's restless change, and yet recognizes that this eternity can be glimpsed only in the instant. He thereby makes one of the first and most consequential forays into what Bruno Hillebrand has identified as a particularly modern aesthetic sensibility, an "aesthetics of the instant" (*Ästhetik des Augenblicks*).[11] Moritz develops his aesthetics of the instant

7. See Boyle, *Goethe,* 1:175. Boyle here makes the intriguing suggestion that "*Werther* became a fashion because it was about a fashion," namely the fashion of reading. For an interesting recent discussion of *Werther-Fieber* as well as Goethe's response to it, see also Vaget, "Werther, the Undead." All translations from Goethe's works are my own. I have consulted the translations of *Werther* by Victor Lange and Burton Pike. I have also consulted the translation of Goethe's autobiography by John Oxenford.

8. Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke* [Frankfurter Ausgabe], 1.14:641. References to this edition of Goethe's works are henceforth noted with the abbreviation FA.

9. Purdy, *Tyranny of Elegance,* 47, 23. Chapter 2 of the present study discusses Goethe's turn to classicism.

10. Woodmansee, *Author, Art, and the Market,* 27. Woodmansee is not the first to read Moritz's concept of aesthetic autonomy as a refuge from the forces of the literary market. See in particular Fontius, "Der Autonomiegedanke bei Moritz."

11. Hillebrand, *Ästhetik des Augenblicks.* Hillebrand sees Goethe as formative for this modern aesthetic sensibility but completely disregards Moritz. For a sustained study of the role of the *Augenblick* in

as a reader through several stages of engagement with Goethe's *Werther.* In the first stage, Moritz's fictional alter ego, the teenage Anton Reiser, identifies intensely with Werther's description of the transformative *Augenblick* in his letter of August 18 precisely through a manner of reading that is itself transformative, that alters the very text it reads. Thus, though Anton's repeated reading of Goethe's novel would appear to represent a return to a traditional, intensive reading practice, it in fact merely underscores the impossibility of a stable, enduring text that the traditional practice presumes; the transformative moment of reading precludes exact repetition. In the second stage of his engagement with *Werther,* in a structural analysis of Goethe's novel, Moritz tries to overcome this transformative moment by sublating it within the timelessness of the autonomous artwork, or the work that is "complete in itself" (in sich selbst vollendet). He attempts this through a "perspectival" reading that regards the letter of August 18 as the central point around which Goethe's novel is formally structured, and that hence freezes the transformative *Augenblick* in space. In so doing, he negates the temporality held by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to be the defining feature of the verbal medium; like visual art according to Lessing, literature in Moritz's new reading of Goethe's novel is conceived as fundamentally spatial. This solution to the transformative moment, however, proves only temporary: in the third and final stage of his engagement with *Werther,* Moritz shifts the center of gravity of his aesthetics away from the autonomous work of art, situating it instead in the *Augenblicken* just before its completion, and thereby calls that completion into question. He does so in a remarkable reading of Werther's letter of May 10 in his essay "Über ein Gemählde von Goethe" (On a Painting by Goethe), revealing how in the very first instants of artistic production, the artist intimates the sublime, eternal totality of nature. But it is an eternal totality whose perception the very act of artistic representation ruptures, and that is thus paradoxically transient, vanishing in the blink of an eye. Moritz's later aesthetics thus prefigures Immanuel Kant's concept of "negative representation" in the analytic of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). In sum, Moritz moves from a concern with the transformative moment of reception to a formalist, "perspectival" aesthetics that attempts to contain that moment within the contours of the autonomous artwork to an aesthetics of open-ended artistic production that struggles to represent the absolute totality intimated in sublime, unrepresentable *Augenblicken.*

Moritz's concept of the autonomy of the artwork, then, far from proving a stable refuge from the sea change in temporal sensibility brought about by modern textual production and reception practices, ultimately undermines the possibility of such a refuge. It thereby launches arguably the first truly modern aesthetics, at once envisioning and radically subverting the possibility of transcending the perpetually new time of the *Neuzeit* through artistic representation.

Goethe's work, see Anglet, *Der "ewige" Augenblick.* For an excellent alternative analysis of the Goethean *Augenblick,* see Rennie, *Speculating on the Moment.*

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The Transformative *Augenblick* of Reception

Published in 1786, the second and third parts of Moritz's autobiographical novel, *Anton Reiser,* contain one of the most vivid accounts of the contemporary reception of sentimental literature, in particular of *Werther.* A little over a year before he lays eyes on Goethe's novel, in the summer of 1775, the teenage Anton is drawn into a reading frenzy that bears out Purdy's claim that sentimental literature restructures the time frame in which the reader's desires are aroused, gratified, and replaced. Anton's emotional upheaval during this *Lesewut* prepares the way for his identification with the character of Werther, particularly with his vision of the all-consuming *Augenblick.* This act of identification changes both Anton and the text in which he sees himself reflected; his reading of *Werther,* then, is itself a transformative moment.

Marginalized by his fellow pupils and neglected by his teachers, Anton finds an escape in reading novels and plays: "He went to a used book vendor [*Antiquarius*] and obtained one novel and one comedy after another, and began reading with a kind of fury" (Moritz, *Werke,* 1:254). The term *Antiquarius* is somewhat misleading, for he in fact supplies Anton with contemporary literature, particularly works in a sentimental vein, such as Lawrence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and Johann Gottlieb Schummel's *Empfindsame Reisen durch Deutschland* (Sentimental Journeys through Germany) (256). Such works quickly supplant the classical regimen of texts that is the mainstay of his *Gymnasium* curriculum; he thus secretly reads a novel in class while his classmates study the Roman historian Livy (263), and exchanges his schoolbooks for contemporary works (254)—an exchange that is representative of a period that saw a sharp decline in the printing of Latin texts and an upsurge in texts written in the vernacular, particularly novels (Ward, *Book Production,* 29).

This exchange feeds into Anton's escalating cycle of debt and desire: the *Antiquarius* extends him credit to borrow his books, and to pay down this debt, Anton sells the *Antiquarius* his schoolbooks, which earns him a new line of credit with which he attempts to fill his ever-growing hunger for reading. These transactions occur at a dizzying speed; "before he knows it" Anton has read himself deeply into debt; and the book vendor resells his schoolbooks immediately, in Anton's presence, turning a sixfold profit (*Werke,* 1:254–55).

Instantaneous transformation characterizes not only the financial transactions around Anton's reading, but also his emotional investment in the sentimental reading material: "He lived and breathed in the dramatic world—he often shed tears there while reading, and entered by turns into the violent, raging passion of anger, fury, and revenge, and into the mild emotions of magnanimous forgiveness, triumphant benevolence, and overflowing compassion" (*Werke,* 1:256). Just as he exchanges one book for another, so Anton replaces one emotion with another, each one intense but ephemeral. His exchange of emotions is made possible by the literature he reads, which functions as a kind of sentimental currency.

Instantaneous financial and sentimental exchange intersect most clearly in an instance (and an instant) in which Anton unexpectedly receives money. The scene takes place in the home of the school's rector, where Anton is lodging, and where a guest gives a tip to a maid as well as to Anton, as though he were no more than another household servant: "Reiser had a strange feeling as he took the money; it was as though he had been stabbed, and the initial pain suddenly wore off—for he thought of the *bookseller,* and in that moment [*Augenblick*] everything else was forgotten—with the money he could read more than twenty books—his injured pride had made one last protest, and was now defeated" (*Werke,* 1:264; original emphasis). In the instant (*Augenblick*) in which Anton accepts the money, he exchanges it in his mind for over twenty books. This prompts a further exchange, this time one of emotions, as his injured pride is suddenly replaced by relief. The mere thought of reading, then, triggers the rapid conversion of one sentiment into another. From this moment (*Augenblick*) on, the passage continues, "Reiser paid no more heed to himself. . . . By contrast, he sympathized warmly with the fate of a Miss Sara Sampson or a Romeo and Juliet" (264–65). Any sense of selfhood thus vanishes as Anton trades in his injured pride, losing himself in the sentiments of the characters with whom he identifies.

Anton believes he finds his entire range of alternating emotions reflected in Goethe's *Werther,* which he encounters in the summer of 1775, shortly after its appearance: "Reiser believed that he recognized himself in *Werther* with all his thoughts and feelings, except for the item of love" (*Werke,* 1:336). While unable to empathize with Werther's unrequited love, he identifies all the more with his other ideas and sentiments. Of these, Moritz highlights the notion of the transient and transformative *Augenblick.* Anton sees reflected in *Werther* precisely the instantaneous transformation that he experiences in the act of reading—not least, in his own transformative act of reading *Werther.*

The first quote from *Werther* that Moritz singles out articulates succinctly the idea of radical transformation: "Here he [Anton] found a continuation of his reflections on life and existence—"*Who can say, that is, when everything flees by like the wind?*"—That was the very thought that for so long had made his own existence seem like an illusion, a dream, a deception" (*Werke,* 1:334–35; original emphasis). The question cited here is drawn from Werther's letter of August 18, quoted below in its immediate context in the first edition of Goethe's novel:

> A curtain has been drawn from before my soul, and the scene of never-ending life is transforming before me into the abyss of the eternally open grave. Can you say: That is! when everything passes, when everything rolls by like the wind, and the strength of its existence so seldom lasts, is torn away, alas, into the torrent, submerged, and dashed against rocks. There is no moment that does not consume you and yours, no moment in which you are not, must be, a destroyer. (FA 1.8:106–8)

> Es hat sich vor meiner Seele wie ein Vorhang weggezogen, und der Schauplatz des unendlichen Lebens verwandelt sich vor mir in den Abgrund des ewig offnen Grabs. Kannst du sagen: Das ist! da alles vorübergeht, da alles mit der Wetterschnelle vorüber rollt, so selten die ganze Kraft seines Daseyns ausdauert, ach in den Strom fortgerissen, untergetaucht und an Felsen zerschmettert wird. Da ist kein Augenblik, der nicht dich verzehrte und die Deinigen um dich her, kein Augenblik, da du nicht ein Zerstöhrer bist, seyn mußt.

Werther here envisions a radical transformation from never-ending life to an eternally open grave. As indicated by the adjective "open," this transformation does not end in a closed, terminal state but rather opens into perpetual change. Thus, in the very instant one exclaims the words "That is!" the referent of the pronoun "that" is already passing. The same applies to the referent of the personal pronoun in the question "Can you say: That is!" In the split second it takes you to utter this exclamation, you are transformed, for there is no instant (*Augenblik*) that would not consume you. Indeed, not only "that" and "you," but *everything* is in the process of passing.

This process of transformation is articulated stylistically through a series of transformative repetitions. Goethe thus has Werther repeat a subordinate clause, but with a twist: "when everything passes, when everything rolls by like the wind" (da alles vorübergeht, da alles mit der Wetterschnelle vorüber rollt). While the clausal structure is repeated, the verb in the first clause ("passes" [vorübergeht]) itself goes by, overtaken by a verb phrase that indicates a far quicker passing ("rolls by [vorüber rollt] like the wind"). The series of transformative repetitions continues when the exclamation "Das ist!" (That is!) is echoed and at the same time altered in the first two words of the next sentence: "*Da ist* kein Augenblick, der nicht dich verzehrte" (There is no moment that does not consume you). Next, the second part of this same sentence repeats the antecedent and relative clause structure of the first part, while reversing the meaning: "no moment in which you are not a destroyer" (kein Augenblik, da du nicht ein Zerstöhrer bist). Here, the moment in which you are the victim transforms into one in which you are the perpetrator of destruction. Finally, even the copula ("are" [bist]) at the end of this clause is repeated with a difference in the modal construction ("must be" [seyn mußt]). No repetition occurs in this letter without a simultaneous revision. The language of Werther's letter thereby enacts the very process of transformation that it depicts.

Anton identifies with the idea of perpetual transformation expressed in Werther's letter: "That was the very thought that for so long had made his own existence seem like an illusion, a dream, a deception" (*Werke,* 1:334–35). Unexpectedly, his identification with the idea of ceaseless transformation offers a potential way out of it. A complete identification would mean that the referent of the pronoun "that" (das) in the phrase "That was the very thought" does not vanish in an instant; rather, the idea expressed in Werther's question would be repeated exactly in Anton's own

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thoughts. Moritz, however, casts doubt on the possibility of such an absolute identification. Thus, his narrator characterizes Anton's identification with Werther's ideas and emotions as a belief, not as a fact: "Reiser believed [*glaubte*] that he recognized himself in *Werther* with all his thoughts and feelings, except for the item of love" (336).

Furthermore, the narrator's reflections on the impact of Goethe's novel on Anton's generation suggest that this belief in the complete identity between Werther's ideas and sentiments and his own is misguided: "However, his [Anton's] too frequent re-reading of *Werther* greatly reduced his powers both of expression and of thought, for frequent repetition made him so familiar with this writer's turns of phrase and even with his thoughts that he often mistook them for his own, and even some years later, in writing essays, he had to contend with reminiscences of *Werther,* as is the case with a number of young writers who have been educated since then" (*Werke,* 1:337). Anton's repeated reading of *Werther* leads him to regard its author's turns of phrase and thoughts as his own. That is to say, as the narrator elsewhere states, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* did not simply reflect, but rather "intervened" (eingriffen) in all of Anton's ideas and emotions (334). Only after this intervention has transformed these ideas and emotions does there *seem* to be a perfect identity.[12]

Confronted with the ineluctably transformative *Augenblick,* though, Anton's repeated reading of *Werther* still seems to offer a consolation: in a world in flux, one can still repeatedly return to the text of *Werther.* In other words, one can turn from extensive to intensive, repetitive reading, the kind of reading that affirms the existence of eternally valid, authoritative texts.[13] At least of texts such as *Werther,* it would appear possible to claim, "That is!" But even the permanence of Goethe's text is called into question by the quote Moritz gives: "*Who can say, that is, when everything flees by like the wind?*" (*Werke,* 1:334; Wer kann sagen, das ist, da alles mit Wetterschnelle vorbeiflieht?). Moritz's text makes several changes to Goethe's original question, altering its wording and punctuation, and also compressing it. We have already noted the acceleration of the pace of change that occurs in the two clauses in the original letter, "when everything passes, when everything rolls by like the wind" (da alles vorübergeht, da alles mit der Wetterschnelle vorüber rollt). Moritz's quote further quickens this acceleration, substituting for these two clauses a single clause with a verb indicating even greater speed: "*when everything flees by*

12. Isabel A. White makes a similar observation: "*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* is the stated source of certain ideas which Anton Reiser supports, or, as he prefers to present the situation, Goethe's novel *reflects* thoughts which had already occurred to him" (" 'Die zu oft wiederholte Lektüre des Werthers,' " 100).

13. As Vaget points out, many in the first generation of readers of Goethe's novel treated it as a devotional text to be read repeatedly: "Among the readers of *Werther,* we find virtually all the hallmarks of the typical devotional reader's response: repeated readings, quasi-religious immersion in the text, eagerness to regard the book as a source of consolation, readiness to identify with, and to imitate, Werther" ("Werther, the Undead," 20).

[vorbeiflieht] *like the wind.*" In Moritz's own transformative repetition, then, it is impossible to say of Goethe's original text, "That is," for its reproduction and its revision coincide in the same *Augenblick*.[14]

In brief, Anton identifies with Werther's vision of the transformative *Augenblick* in the August 18 letter precisely through the transformative experience of reading. The instantaneous conversion of one emotion into another marks his reception of sentimental literature and sets the stage for this act of identification. Yet this identification does not lie in Anton's viewing this experience of continual conversion precisely mirrored in Goethe's text; rather, it lies in the reciprocal transformation of Anton by the text, which intervenes in his thoughts and emotions, and of the text by Anton—a possibility that is at the very least opened by Moritz's own permutation of the text in his quotation. In *Anton Reiser,* then, Moritz provides a vivid and complex account of how the escalating production and reception of sentimental literature in the late eighteenth century contributed to the sense of perpetual change that marks modernity.

The Timeless Perspective of the Autonomous Artwork

Moritz published the second and third parts of *Anton Reiser* that contain this account in 1786, the same year that he befriended Goethe in Rome. Following his extended sojourn in Italy, Moritz was Goethe's guest in Weimar for December 1788 and January 1789, a period that coincides with a new stage of his engagement with *Werther.* He attempts to overcome the transformative *Augenblick* through a reading of Goethe's novel as a timeless, autonomous artwork. In effect, he spatializes the *Augenblick,* fixing it firmly at the center of the novel, which he now regards as a self-contained whole. In the process, he departs from his earlier emphasis on the transformative moment of reception and in its place formulates an aesthetics that envisions the timeless structure of an artwork that is complete in itself.

To illuminate the structure of the literary work of art, Moritz adopts a concept from the domain of optics and visual art, namely perspective. A fascination with this concept runs through his entire literary career.[15] He deepened this interest while in Rome in 1788, embarking on a study of perspective as it relates to visual art, in the hope of receiving a professorship at the Academy of Arts and Mechanical Sciences in Berlin, a position that materialized the following year.[16] A letter from Caroline Herder to her husband on Christmas Day 1788 records the way he applied the concept of perspective to literary works, citing his discussion of

14. On this point, my reading differs from that of Robert Stockhammer. Stockhammer claims that Anton is "inhabited by foreign texts that he can't transform into his own" (*Leseerzählungen,* 199). By contrast, I see a reciprocal process of transformation taking place between Anton and Goethe's text.

15. On the theme of perspective in Moritz's work within the framework of Leibniz's theory of monadism, see in particular Kestenholz, *Die Sicht der Dinge.*

16. For biographical details, see Eybisch, *Anton Reiser,* 150.

Werther as a prominent example. She reports that Moritz recently visited her over coffee, and their discussion turned to Goethe's works: "He told me how through the study of perspective he had learned to search for the central point [*Mittelpunkt*] in a piece; one must search for it not at the end of a piece, but rather in the middle, just as all radii [*Radien*] depart from the central point and lose themselves in the beginning and in the end" (quoted in Moritz, *Schriften,* 345). In contemplating a literary work, the task of the reader is thus to find a central point from which the work radiates out. Her allusion to Moritz's study of perspective suggests that this task is comparable to locating the vanishing point in a visual artwork composed in central perspective, a point toward which all the orthogonal lines (those viewed as perpendicular to the plane of the picture) in the work incline. She continues by noting that Moritz pinpointed just such a *Mittelpunkt* in Goethe's novel in Werther's letter of August 18.

Caroline Herder's account of this application of the theory of perspective to literary works is supported in the biography of Moritz published by his companion and former pupil, Karl Friedrich Klischnig. Like Caroline Herder, Klischnig reports that Moritz conceived of each masterpiece as structured around a *Mittelpunkt* in which all of its parts converge, like the radii of a circle.[17] He further elaborates that Moritz viewed such a central point of a literary work as furnishing the proper "vantage point" (Gesichtspunkt) from which "the purposiveness of the whole" (die Zweckmäßigkeit des Ganzen) can alone be judged. Klischnig, too, notes that Moritz located precisely such a central point in Werther's August 18 letter, specifically citing the passage quoted by Moritz in *Anton Reiser* (*Mein Freund Anton Reiser,* 139).

As paraphrased by both Caroline Herder and Klischnig, Moritz's theory of perspectival structure represents a further development of his groundbreaking aesthetic treatise, "Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des *in sich selbst Vollendeten*" (An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of *That Which Is Complete in Itself,* 1785).[18] In this short essay, Moritz posits the radical autonomy of the artwork, conceived as a totality that is entirely "complete in itself" (in sich selbst vollendet). Countering the theory proposed by Moses Mendelssohn that the purpose of art is to give pleasure, Moritz claims that the work of art is not a means to an end but is rather an end in itself, possessing an "inner purposiveness" (*Schriften,* 6; innere Zweckmäßigkeit)—a term that resonates with Klischnig's reference to "the purposiveness of the whole."

Commentators have frequently remarked that Moritz's concept of inner purposiveness anticipates Kant's famous explanation of the beautiful in the *Critique of*

17. Klischnig, *Mein Freund Anton Reiser,* 139.

18. See my English translation of this essay in *PMLA* under the title "An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of *That Which Is Complete in Itself*."

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Judgment as "purposiveness without an end" (Zweckmäßigkeit . . . ohne Zweck) while noting that a crucial difference from Kant lies in Moritz's locating inner purposiveness in the object rather than in the subject.[19] This view, however, is slightly misleading, for on the point of objectivity his essay is not entirely consistent. Early in the essay, it is the recipient who endows the work with its inner purposiveness by regarding it *as* complete in itself: "But when regarding the beautiful, I roll the end [*Zweck*] back from me into the object itself: I regard it as something that is not complete in me, but rather as something that is *complete in itself*" (*Schriften,* 3; original emphasis). In the course of the essay, though, the dynamic between recipient and artwork is reversed, such that the beauty of the artwork now attracts the recipient to itself (5). The beauty of the object, that is to say, its inner purposiveness or completion in itself, is no longer merely attributed to the object by its recipient but is instead found in the "beautiful object" itself (5).

Moritz's later remarks on the perspectivally constructed literary artwork solidify this shift toward objectivity: the recipient of the literary work, according to Caroline Herder's account, must discover an actually existing central point around which the work is structured. Klischnig's version, too, accentuates this objectivity: the work itself furnishes the proper vantage point from which it can be seen as a whole that is complete in itself. Moritz underlines this objective vantage point in an outline of his aesthetic theory that was likely written during or immediately following his two-month stay in Weimar.[20] In the final point of this outline, he contends that in order for a beautiful work of art to be seen as a whole unto itself, it is necessary to discover "in the work itself" the "vantage point" (Gesichtspunkt) from which each component of the work presents itself in a necessary relation to the whole (*Schriften,* 122).

Moritz's theory of the artwork conceived as objectively complete in itself implies the timelessness of the work of art, as Seraina Plotke observes in her commentary on Moritz's 1785 essay. This timelessness, she argues, signalizes eternity: "The artwork as 'something that is complete in itself' thus expresses eternity; or rather: eternity *manifests* itself in the artwork" ("Der ästhetische Trost," 426–27; original emphasis). With the withdrawal in the Enlightenment of a religious sense of eternity, the work of art is thus able to offer its recipient an aesthetic consolation (422). The literary work of art that is constructed perspectivally in the manner later conceived by Moritz during his stay in Weimar is all the more emphatically timeless. It replaces the wheel of time with the timeless wheel of art, whose spokes radiate out

19. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft,* 135. On the similarities and differences between Moritz's objective concept of "inner purposiveness" and Kant's subjective concept of "purposiveness without an end," see Szondi, *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie,* 97; Costazza, *Schönheit und Nützlichkeit,* 142; Plotke, "Der ästhetische Trost," 426.

20. See "Bestimmung des Zwecks einer Theorie der schönen Künste" (Determination of the Purpose of a Theory of the Fine Arts), in Moritz, *Schriften,* 122. Moritz's original, posthumously published piece was untitled.

from a central axis. Particularly in the context of Moritz's reading of *Werther,* this timelessness of the perspectivally constructed artwork bears with it far-reaching consequences. By viewing the letter of August 18 as the central point of an artwork that is complete in itself, Moritz sublates this letter's vision of the transformative *Augenblick* within a timeless whole, thereby both literally and figuratively containing its transformative power. The instant in time that devours everything becomes frozen into the *Mittelpunkt* of the novel.

By emphasizing the spatial structure of the novel, Moritz negates the temporality of the verbal medium as posited by Lessing in his *Laokoon* (1766)*,* and thereby erases Lessing's famous distinction between visual and verbal media. According to Lessing, works in the verbal medium (or *Poesie*) are temporal in nature, comprised of "articulated sounds in time" (*Werke und Briefe,* 5.2:116). Hence, it is the medium best suited to imitating objects whose parts follow one another, that is, actions (114). Visual art (or *Mahlerei*), by contrast, consists of "figures and colors in space" and is hence best able to imitate objects whose parts exist side by side, that is, bodies (116). In his theory of the perspectivally constructed artwork, Moritz expands Lessing's definition of visual art as spatial to subsume literary works such as *Werther* and thus annuls the temporality of their medium. And he adds a further crucial twist: the space of the literary artwork does not imitate outside bodies but rather is entirely closed in on itself.

There remains a third fundamental difference between Moritz and Lessing, who each accord a different role to the *Augenblick* within the space of the artwork. Lessing complicates the clear distinction that he draws between verbal and visual art by pointing out that the latter imitates bodies existing not only in space, but also in time: "They [bodies] persist in time, and in each moment [*Augenblicke*] of their duration they can assume a different appearance or stand in a different combination" (*Werke und Briefe,* 5.2:116). While visual art cannot directly represent a body as it changes from moment to moment within what he terms "ever-changing nature" (22), it can suggest such change by selecting the most "pregnant" or suggestive moment: "Visual art can use only a single moment [*Augenblick*] of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most pregnant and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible" (117). This pregnant moment liberates the imagination of the viewer: "But only that is fruitful which allows the imagination free play" (23). Lessing is thus crucially concerned with how the spatialized *Augenblick* of the visual artwork activates the viewer's imagination to transcend the very confines of that moment by envisioning the moments that precede or succeed it. In other words, he is interested in how the seed of the *Augenblick* embodied in a work of art bears fruit in the imagination of the viewer.

In his perspectival reading of Goethe's novel, Moritz neutralizes the fertility of that seed, viewing it as entirely static and securely contained within the shell of the literary artwork. It does not prompt the reader to transcend it, but rather to admire it in its self-contained beauty. He thus triply negates Lessing's distinction between verbal

and visual media: first, by subsuming the former within the space of the latter; second, by regarding literary space in and of itself, not as an imitation of outside bodies; and third, by recasting Lessing's pregnant *Augenblick* such that it is entirely enclosed within the bounds of the artwork. In this second stage of Moritz's engagement with *Werther,* then, the transformative *Augenblick* of reception—as conceived by Lessing, but also by Moritz himself in his description of Anton Reiser's reception of Goethe's novel—gives way to the *Gesichtspunkt* objectively inherent in the work itself.

The Sublime *Augenblicke* of Production

The second stage of Moritz's engagement with Goethe's novel accords well with the claim that the theory of the autonomous artwork arose as a reaction formation to the accelerated literary production and consumption habits of the late eighteenth century. Yet this theory was not itself static, frozen in time, and certainly not for Moritz. Rather, he went on to radically innovate it, and his continued engagement with *Werther* played a pivotal role in this development.

According to Klischnig, Moritz informed Goethe about his perspectival reading of *Werther,* and Goethe encouraged him to work out and publish his ideas (*Mein Freund Anton Reiser,* 140). While this project never came to fruition, Moritz did publish a fascinating essay in 1792 devoted to a single letter in *Werther.* Entitled "Über ein Gemählde von Goethe" (On a Painting by Goethe), this piece illuminates the perspectival structure of Werther's second letter, that of May 10—in other words, the precise counterpart to the letter of August 18. Again, this kind of perspectival reading of a poetic work as a self-contained whole implies its timelessness. Surprisingly, however, counter to his attempt to contain the force of the transformative *Augenblick* by spatializing it as the *Gesichtspunkt* at the center of the novel, Moritz now shifts the center of gravity away from the central point of the letter's poetic picture, and toward the very first moments of its production. It is these sublime *Augenblicke,* he contends, that the poet ceaselessly seeks, but always fails, to capture. In reading the letter of May 10 as a perfect description of this process, Moritz mobilizes crucial insights of his second key aesthetic treatise on the autonomous artwork, "Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen" (On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful). In so doing, he moves from a protoformalist aesthetics of the artwork conceived as a whole that is complete in itself toward an aesthetics of production, one that emphasizes the open-ended process of creating art. Rather than culminating in a timeless refuge from the ephemeral instant, this process unfolds in an endless series of *Augenblicken.*

Moritz claims that in the letter of May 10 the poet presents a perspectivally structured poetic picture in the long middle sentence:

> When the lovely valley mists around me, and the high sun rests on the surface of the impenetrable darkness of my forest, and only isolated rays steal into the inner

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> sanctuary, and I then lie in the tall grass by the falling brook, and closer to the earth I notice a thousand blades of grass; when I feel closer to my heart the teeming of the small world among the blades, the countless forms of the little worms, the little insects, and feel the presence of the Almighty who created us in his image, and the breeze of the All-Loving One which sustains us, as we float in eternal bliss; my friend, when it grows dim before my eyes, and world and sky rest completely in my soul, like the form of a beloved, then I often yearn and think, oh, if only you could breathe into the paper all that lives so fully and warmly in your soul, that it would become the mirror of your soul, as your soul is the mirror of the living God! (Quoted in Moritz, *Schriften,* 143)

After citing this sentence in full, he analyzes its component parts and displays how each part is structured around a central point. Thus, the poet first draws a circumference or contour (*Umriß*) with the image of the surrounding valley ("When the lovely valley mists around me"), then gradually descends to the blades of grass on the ground, focusing on the "smallest field of vision" (dem kleinsten Gesichtskreise des Auges), which comprises the "center" (Mittelpunkt) of the picture (143). From here, the scope of vision widens again, until it reaches the "large circumference" (großer Umriß) in the subordinate clause "when it grows dim before my eyes, and earth and sky rest completely in my soul, like the form of a beloved." Finally, Moritz claims that, in the sentence's main clause, beginning with the adverb "then," "a sensation encompassing the whole" completes (*vollendet*) the picture (143). In short, as portrayed by Moritz, the poet presents the reader with a perspectivally structured poetic picture that is entirely complete in itself. Consequently, it not only expresses a sense of being suspended in eternal bliss, but, as an autonomous artwork, itself manifests eternity.

What distinguishes this poetic picture in Moritz's eyes is not simply its paradigmatic quality as a perspectivally constructed artwork, but the way it simultaneously depicts the process of artistic representation from which it arises: "One won't easily find a work of poetry in which the representational drive [*Darstellungstrieb*] also represents itself so faithfully as in this poetic picture" (*Schriften,* 147). His analysis of this self-representation of the representational drive in the poetic picture owes much to his own earlier examination of the process of artistic production in his seminal essay on the formative imitation of the beautiful, which he published in 1788 and which, according to Goethe in his *Italian Journey,* arose out of their conversations in Rome.[21] Three years later, Moritz brings the most subversive insights of this essay to bear on his discussion of Goethe's poetic picture—that is, precisely those reflections

21. Goethe writes of Moritz's essay: "It arose out of our conversations, which Moritz used and developed in his own way" (FA 1.15:572–73). However, as Mark Boulby argues, "it would be wrong to conclude that Moritz was merely a passive vehicle for the canalisation of Goethean insights in aesthetics" (*Karl Philipp Moritz,* 164).

that undermine the possibility that an autonomous work of art can embody the end point of the process of formative imitation it describes.

It may seem paradoxical to view the autonomous artwork as being formed through imitation. After all, the traditional concept of mimesis presupposes that the work of art represents something external to itself, such as the bodies or actions that Lessing sees as the objects imitated by visual and verbal art respectively. But Moritz's concept of formative imitation departs sharply from the traditional understanding of mimesis by positing as its object neither particular objects in nature nor ideal forms, but the beautiful as such.[22] Moritz identifies this absolute beauty with nature as a whole, or "the one, true totality" (*Schriften,* 72; das einzige, wahre Ganze). The act of formative imitation of the beautiful produces an artwork that is a microcosm of this whole: "Each beautiful totality emerging from the hands of the artist who forms it is thus an impression on a small scale of the highest beauty in the great totality of nature" (73). By imitating the highest beauty in the great totality of nature, the artist produces a work that is itself a beautiful, autonomous whole, constructed according to the "same eternal laws" as the whole of nature (73).

Moritz elucidates this process of the formative imitation of the beautiful through an optical metaphor. To produce a beautiful totality, the artist's soul or mind (*Seele*) must possess a dynamic force or faculty (*thätige Kraft*) that is infinitely receptive: it thus must offer an endless number of contact points to nature, and hence be capable of collecting "the *outermost ends* of the relations of nature as a whole" (*Schriften,* 76; original emphasis). At this stage, the totality of nature is only obscurely intimated; the dynamic power collects side by side the extreme points of the rays that it emits (76). The more distinct faculties, such as the faculties of thought, imagination, and sense perception, demand that this obscure intimation of the whole of nature become perceptible to them. Toward this end, in the next phase, the dynamic faculty must now function as a kind of lens, tapering the rays emitted by the whole of nature into a focal point: "It [the dynamic faculty] must gather together into a focal point [*Brennpunkt*] all those relations of the great whole, and in them the highest beauty, as though at the ends of its rays [*Strahlen*]" (76). Finally, the work of art must then round itself out from this "focal point" and display to the more distinct faculties the perfect relations of the whole of nature within its small circumference (76).

Moritz wrote his essay on the formative imitation of the beautiful in the same period in Italy during which he engaged in his study of perspective, and the optical metaphor underlying his theory of formative imitation shares significant structural features with his theory of the perspectival construction of the artwork. In both theories, rays (*Strahlen, Radien*) are envisioned as converging in a single point

22. On Moritz's radical departure from the traditional concept of mimesis, see Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol,* 148–64.

(*Brennpunkt, Mittelpunkt*). His essay on the formative imitation of the beautiful suggests, furthermore, a causal relation between the two theories, as the process of condensing the whole of nature into a *Brennpunkt* is the precondition for creating a work of art that is oriented on all sides toward a *Mittelpunkt* (*Schriften,* 73).

Having traced this trajectory that leads via the formative imitation of the beautiful to the autonomous artwork, though, Moritz begins to undermine it. Already his repeated use of the modal verb *müssen* (must) to qualify each of his assertions about artistic production makes it possible to read them not as simple assertions, but as imperatives.[23] He shows what *must* be done to create an autonomous work of art, thereby raising the question of whether it *can* in fact be accomplished. He addresses this question of possibility shortly after describing the path that leads through the formative imitation of the beautiful to the autonomous artwork:

> The *living* concept of the formative imitation of the beautiful can only take place in the feeling of the dynamic faculty that produces it, in the first moment of production, in which the work appears suddenly in dark intimation before the soul, already complete, having advanced through all the stages of its gradual becoming; and in this moment [*Augenblick*] of its first production, it is, as it were, present before its *actual* existence, thereby giving rise to that unnameable charm that drives the creative genius to perpetual formation [*immerwährenden Bildung*]. (*Schriften,* 77; original emphasis)

There is, then, only a single point when the formative imitation of the beautiful really takes place, and hence when the totality of nature is encompassed in microcosm: the focal point into which the dynamic power concentrates this totality. And even this *Brennpunkt* is not a fixed point in space; rather, this "burning point" combusts instantly. In other words, the focal point turns out to be a single, ephemeral point in time, or *Augenblick*. This momentary *Brennpunkt* gives rise not to a timeless, autonomous artwork, but rather to the process of its "perpetual formation" (immerwährenden Bildung).

Moritz further develops this critique of his own theory of artistic production in his essay on Goethe's poetic picture. As noted, following his detailed structural analysis of the perspectival form of the poetic picture, he turns his attention to the

23. "All of the relations of that great totality that, in the dynamic faculty, are merely darkly intimated, *must* necessarily in some manner . . . become graspable; and in order to become so, the dynamic faculty in which they slumber *must* form them after itself, out of itself.—It *must* gather together into a focal point all those relations of the great whole, and in them the highest beauty, as though at the ends of its rays.—A delicate yet faithful image of the highest beauty *must* round itself out from this focal point, in accordance with the eye's range. . . . Now, because this impression of the highest beauty *must* necessarily be fixed to something, the formative faculty selects . . . some visible or audible object, or at least one that the imagination can grasp, to which it transfers the reflection of the highest beauty on a reduced scale" (Moritz, *Schriften,* 76; my emphasis).

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way it depicts the process of its own production. He sees this process articulated with particular clarity in the text of the letter that precedes and follows the poetic picture proper, and that hence forms a kind of frame around it.[24] The purpose of a frame, according to a short essay entitled "Der Rahmen" (The Frame) that he published a year later, is to accentuate the autonomy of the work of art: "The picture presents something complete in itself; the frame draws a further border around that which is complete in itself" (*Schriften,* 210).[25] Moritz's discussion of the May 10 letter, however, illuminates how the border drawn by the textual frame around the poetic picture does precisely the opposite: rather than underscore its autonomy, the frame foregrounds the very impossibility of that autonomy.

As in his essay on the formative imitation of the beautiful, in his essay "Über ein Gemählde von Goethe" Moritz views a period of keen receptivity toward the totality of nature, which he here terms *Empfindung* (sensation), as a prerequisite for artistic production (*Schriften,* 146–47). This stage, he remarks, is expressed in the first part of the textual frame, in which Werther describes his sense of being "*so immersed in the feeling of tranquil existence,*" to the point where his art suffers. Nevertheless, Werther writes, although he couldn't sketch a single line, he expresses that he has never been a greater painter "than in these moments" (146; als in diesen Augenblicken). In his commentary, Moritz extrapolates a general insight about artistic production from these introductory remarks: "He will best describe nature who senses how it constitutes a whole, as it were, with himself, as he immerses himself in it and intensely feels himself interwoven with it. . . . In the moments in which such a description is to succeed, the individual self-consciousness must lose itself, as it were, in the *co-consciousness* of the great totality of nature that streams through the thinking and sensing organ" (147; original emphasis). The sensation that Moritz here describes recalls his depiction of the first phase of the process of the formative imitation of the beautiful, in which the dynamic faculty obscurely intimates the great whole of nature (76). As I have remarked, in that earlier essay Moritz describes the second phase of formative imitation of the beautiful, that of

24. The first part of the frame consists of four sentences that open the letter and precede the sentence containing the poetic picture proper: "A wonderful serenity has taken possession of my entire soul, like the sweet spring mornings which I enjoy with all my heart. I am so alone, and rejoice in my life in this place, which was created for souls like mine. I am so happy, my dear friend, *so immersed in the feeling of tranquil existence,* that my art suffers. I could not draw now, not a line, and yet I have never been a greater painter than in these moments" (Moritz, *Schriften,* 146; original emphasis). The second part of the textual frame comprises a single sentence that follows the poetic picture and closes the letter: "I run aground over this, I succumb beneath the power of the magnificence of these apparitions" (146).

25. Goethe makes a strikingly similar observation in his autobiography regarding the binding of his manuscript of *Werther:* "The manuscript that was now finished lay before me in draft form, with few corrections and alterations. It was bound at once: for the binding is to a written work about what a frame is to a picture: one can see much better if it exists in itself" (FA 1.14:639). In this manner, Goethe follows the neoclassicist version of Moritz's reading of *Werther* as an autonomous whole, and in so doing, distances himself from the identificatory manner of reading exhibited by the masses who became swept up in the *Werther-Fieber.*

the *Brennpunkt,* as a momentary phenomenon; he leaves open, however, the possibility of a continual state of the obscure intimation of the whole of nature. But in the passage above from his essay on Goethe's poetic picture, the *Brennpunkt* has vanished altogether, and the state of obscure intimation of nature's totality becomes compressed into *Augenblicke.* The process of formative imitation, then, becomes intensely accelerated in the later essay.

If the sensation of the whole of nature is momentary to begin with, Moritz sees its momentariness further accelerated by the representational drive: "Art really suffers under the plenitude of pleasure, and because it is subordinate to this pleasure, the representational drive, in order not to interrupt the pleasure for too long, as it were, strives for the easiest and most immediate expression through language: the contours transform into words; the draftsman or painter becomes a poet" (*Schriften,* 146–47). The sensation of nature's eternal totality—or what Moritz here describes as the "plenitude of pleasure"—while a prerequisite for artistic representation, also precludes that representation; hence, in the moments of receptivity toward the whole of nature, art suffers, as noted in the first part of the textual frame. Conversely, this sensation suffers through the act of representation, which interrupts it. Moritz claims that poetry here has an advantage over graphic art: the more immediate expression of language does not cause as long an interruption as does graphic representation. For this reason, the visual artist becomes a poet, and the visual contours or circumferences (*Umrisse*) transform into verbal ones. But this does not solve the dilemma that language, too, cuts short the sensation of nature's totality that the artist attempts to represent, for even if language does not interrupt this sensation for too long, how could even the swiftest verbal expression not rupture the fleeting *Augenblicke* in which this sensation is present?

A potential compensation for this dilemma presents itself not so much in the choice of a graphic or a verbal medium as in the possibility of producing, in either medium, an autonomous artwork, one that is capable of reproducing on a smaller scale the eternal totality of nature as it is momentarily sensed. It is just such a possibility that the poetic picture would seem to realize as a perspectivally constructed work of art that is complete in itself. But Moritz reveals that its completion is broken at two crucial points: at the point at which the poetic picture achieves its "charming closure" (*Schriften,* 145; reizende Vollendung); and in the second part of the textual frame, with which the letter draws to a close directly after the completion of the poetic picture.

According to Moritz, the poetic picture ends with "a sensation that encompasses the whole": "Then I often yearn and think, oh, if only you could breathe into the paper all that lives so fully and warmly in your soul, that it would become the mirror of your soul, as your soul is the mirror of the living God!" (*Schriften,* 143). But, as he also highlights, the feeling that encompasses the whole of the

poetic picture is not one of fulfillment, and hence closure, but rather of yearning: "This is the yearning to breathe immediately into the paper that which is vividly present in the soul, and which vanishes beneath the letter only too easily" (145). According to Werther, the whole of nature rests in his soul: "World and sky rest completely in my soul." As Moritz sees it, the soul that reflects this totality disappears beneath the very letters that are intended, in turn, to reflect the soul. Unable to present a microcosm of this totality, the artwork cannot itself form a complete, autonomous whole. Consequently, the *reizende Vollendung* (charming closure) embodied in the final clause of the autonomous poetic picture turns out to be a *reißende Vollendung,* a closure that ruptures the very timeless, autonomous artwork that it completes.[26]

Rather than draw a border around the poetic picture that would contain this rift and perhaps establish a greater unity, the second part of the textual frame, as Moritz reads it, even more radically subverts the completion of the poetic picture: "The true representation is hence, as it were, a *struggle* [*Ringen*] with nature, which is, however, always more powerful, and which can be brought by the human spirit neither into words nor into contours; hence the truest feature of our poet's painting: 'I run aground over this, I succumb beneath the power of the magnificence of these apparitions' " (*Schriften,* 146; original emphasis). The process of true representation is never complete, for it is impossible to draw either verbal or graphic contours (*Umrisse*) around the eternal totality of nature, which always exceeds these confines ("which is . . . always more powerful"). True representation is thus a *Ringen* in two ways: it is an attempt to draw a ring around this totality; and in so doing, it is a struggle with nature, and one that it invariably loses. The truest feature of Goethe's poetic picture hence lies in its textual frame, which shows the contour of the artwork to be a mere trace of an interminable *Ringen*.

If Moritz's depiction of the inner purposiveness of the beautiful artwork that is complete in itself resembles the notion of the "purposiveness without end" that Kant views as characteristic of the beautiful, then his discussion of the ceaseless struggle to represent the totality of nature within the contour of the artwork may be seen as comparable to Kant's treatment of the "negative representation" (negativer Darstellung) of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft,* 201). Kant regards the sublime as a sensation arising from the subjective play of imagination and reason (182). This play begins when the imagination is confronted

26. See, by contrast, Pickerodt, "Das 'poetische Gemählde.' " Pickerodt argues that by viewing Werther's wish as the completion *(Vollendung)* of the poetic picture, Moritz thereby eliminates the disproportion between the experience of nature and the ability to express this experience with graphic, or visual, means (1366). I maintain, on the contrary, that Moritz thereby highlights precisely the impossibility that the artwork can be commensurate with the experience.

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by something in nature that overwhelms it, for instance through its vastness. But this only awakens in the subject a sense of something even greater, namely reason's idea of an "absolute totality" (172; absolute Totalität). The subject strives to represent this idea by means of the imagination, but to no avail: its representations serve only to indicate their own incommensurability with reason's idea of totality (166); they are perceived solely as negative representations of something unrepresentable (201). Once again, the principal difference from Moritz lies in his objective conception of the sublime as comprising nature in its totality. Reason's idea of totality plays no role here, as it does with Kant, but rather only the obscure, momentary intimation of an objective totality, one that the artwork is forever incapable of representing within its contours.

Moritz introduced this conception of the sublime (explicitly terming it a "Begriff des *Erhabenen*" [*Schriften,* 73; original emphasis]) in his essay on the formative imitation of the beautiful, two years before the appearance of Kant's Third Critique, and provided his most probing analysis of an instance of the sublime in his discussion of Goethe's poetic picture. The most the artist can do—and this is the true achievement, in his eyes, of Goethe's poetic picture, including its textual frame—is struggle to represent the totality of nature, and at the same time indicate its incommensurability. Indeed, as Moritz views it, Goethe manages to do both in a single stroke: to draw a contour (*Umriß*) that demolishes itself—*umreißen* in both senses of the word.

I have tried in this chapter to keep pace with Moritz in his lifelong engagement with *Werther*—as he flees the transformative *Augenblick* of reception, seeks refuge in the fixed point of view of the perspectivally constructed work of art that is complete in itself, and then undermines this completion, revealing the impossibility of circumscribing in an autonomous artwork the totality of nature as intimated in the very first, sublime *Augenblicken* of artistic production. By affording a glimpse into the impossibility of arresting and framing that instant in perpetuity, Goethe's *Werther* is "the only possible epos of our times that is still true" (die einzige noch wahre mögliche Epopee unsrer Zeiten), as Moritz described it in 1793, the year of his untimely death at age thirty-six.[27]

I have argued that the times to which Moritz here refers were filled with a sense of upheaval, brought about by a revolution in reading and text production. It is tempting to view the final stage of his reading of *Werther* as the most modern, most in touch with the pulse not only of his time, but of our own, prefiguring a fascination with the sublime instant in contemporary avant-garde art.[28] Yet this would be to isolate and hypostasize merely one moment of his reading and of his ongoing

27. Moritz makes this claim in his essay "Der Dichter im Tempel der Natur: Ein Fragment" (The Poet in the Temple of Nature: A Fragment), in *Schriften,* 161.

28. See Jean-François Lyotard's essay on Barnett Newman, "Newman: The Instant," in *The Inhuman.*

aesthetic thought. What is, in the end, most modern about the aesthetics of the *Augenblick* that he formulates through his reading of *Werther* is its very lability, its resistance to being permanently circumscribed. Like the *Neuzeit* itself, his aesthetics proves to be perpetually new, transforming beneath the reader's gaze from one moment to the next.