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Imitation, Interest, and the Ethics of Imperfection in Karl Philipp Moritz's Aesthetics, 1786–1788 ^a

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Introduction

Karl Philipp Moritz was a forerunner in almost every field that he ventured into. His novels anticipated the great German tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, his journal *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* established the psychological case study, his widely read book *Götterlehre* provided a new approach to mythology, and his theory of language was distinctly modern (Saine 12). However, Moritz's most important contributions to posterity may be found within the field of aesthetics, to which he contributed numerous essays, often published in the many journals that he himself edited. More than anything else, he has been associated with the notion of aesthetic autonomy and thus with a distinctly modern notion of art. In fact, he is often considered its instigator in the German tradition. "Moritz ist der erste Ästhetiker überhaupt," Dieter Borchmeyer maintains in *Weimarer Klassik* (1992), "der – zwei Jahre vor Erscheinen der *Kritik der Urteilskraft* – mit voller theoretischer Klarheit den Gedanken der Autonomie der Kunst formuliert, das Schöne vom Nützlichen rigoros getrennt hat" (Borchmeyer 141). The idea of the work of art as complete in itself and as determined by inner purposiveness is a key element in this line of reasoning.

In his first important contribution to aesthetics, the 1785 essay "Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten," Moritz's main claim is that the aesthetic experience, or "das Vergnügen an dem Schönen," is of an object that is something "in sich selbst Vollendetes" (Moritz, *Schriften* 3).¹ Thus, unlike a useful object, which is made complete by man when he or she makes use of it, the beautiful object has "innere Zweckmäßigkeit" (6) and is consequently independent of external purposes. In the scholarly tradition this is taken as proof

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of Moritz's role as instigator of the concept of aesthetic autonomy and as a predecessor of Kant. Cord-Friedrich Berhahn labels the essay "das Gründungsdokument der Autonomieästhetik," which contains all "entscheidenden Ideen zur Autonomie des Kunstwerks, wenngleich terminologisch unscharf und unter dem Gang der Argumentation teilweise verschüttet" (Berhahn 114). Martha Woodmansee, correspondingly, maintains that Moritz's essay "gave the first unequivocal expression to what I have called our modern conception of the arts," that is art's disinterested autonomy: "Works of art [. . .] are 'self-sufficient totalities' produced simply to be contemplated 'for their own sake'—that is, 'disinterestedly,' purely for the enjoyment of their internal attributes and relationships, independently of any external relationships or effects they might have" (Woodmansee 11). Jonathan Hess follows suit: internal purposiveness constitutes "the fundamental law of this autonomous domain" that is art, thus "explicitly anticipating his [i.e., Kant's] theory of aesthetic autonomy" (Hess 157 and 162).

However, as I have shown in a recently published study, the concept of "des in sich selbst Vollendeten" does not denote aesthetic autonomy or a disinterested attitude of the judgment of taste toward art. Rather, Moritz's take on perfection in "Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten" points to a moral conception of the work of art and of the disinterested, that is, unselfish and impartial, attitude toward the world that Moritz promotes in the essay. Perfection, in short, is a struggle for moral elevation, and the means to attain this position is the work of art, which is also constantly evolving as a result of the subject's aesthetic experience. "Disinterestedness," the study concludes, "is an act of love that reveals a profound ethical interest permeating the entire aesthetic experience, which, in turn, is deeply rooted in man's existential project" (Pirholt, *Disinterested Love* 76).

What is striking, however, about the texts that Moritz published immediately after the seminal "Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten," is an ousting of the perfect work of art, which might seem peculiar at first glance but is in fact quite logical. Although the formula "in sich selbst Vollendetes" is repeatedly referred to throughout Moritz's work up to his early death in 1793, becoming something of a catchphrase of his (Moritz 16, 153, and 168), it is often used in passing and with minor bearing on the actual argument of the specific text. In the texts that were written in the aftermath of "Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten" and that led up to his main contribution to aesthetics, the booklet *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* (1788), imperfection is substituted for perfection as the key characteristic of the work of art and man-made products in general. In these texts Moritz focuses almost exclusively on the shortcomings of man, and especially on the fundamental difference between nature as the perfect creation and man's futile and feeble endeavors to imitate it. This paper will show that it is not the concept of the work of art as perfect in itself that is the driving force in Moritz philosophy—though perfection might be considered as a kind

of regulatory idea in the Kantian sense, constituting the ultimate and never reachable goal of all man's endeavors²—but rather the very opposite: the lack of perfection that epitomizes everything made by man. This is in contrast to nature itself, whose products are perfect and thus a model for imitation. This reinterpretation of the nature of the work of art as imperfect anticipates a speculative dialectic of creation and destruction that is fully developed in *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*. Ultimately, mankind's lack of perfection raises ethical questions about the struggle for morality and nobility. Man is never perfect but is, or should be, in a perpetual struggle for perfection.

The first section of the paper will outline the fate of the aesthetics of perfection during the latter half of the eighteenth century and its eventual demise in the works of Romanticism and German Idealism in the early nineteenth century. What follows in the second section is an analysis of Moritz's shorter texts from 1786 and 1787; texts that explicitly address the problem of imperfection and interestedness. The third section will scrutinize the dialectic of creation and destruction that epitomizes the last part of Moritz's *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* and that points to an ethical conception of the imperfect work of art. As will become apparent, if we consider the evolution of aesthetics during the latter half of the eighteenth century as the overcoming of the ideal of perfection, Moritz might be considered as both a traditionalist and a reformer. Anchored in the tradition from Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, he emphasizes the importance of perfection as an ethical aim, and as a forerunner, he anticipates the changing attitude toward the concept of perfection that is discernible in Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory and in Romantic and Idealistic philosophy of art of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The interested ethics that underpins Moritz's notion of man's imperfect production ultimately points to the radical reinterpretation of the concept of imitation (*Nachahmung*) and the dialectic of creation and destruction in *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*.

Perfection's End

Thomas P. Saine's *Die ästhetische Theodizee* (1971), the first really modern reading of Moritz's work, appropriately summarizes some of the key characteristics of Moritz's place in German intellectual history. "Moritz ist eine wichtige Gestalt des 18. Jahrhunderts," Saine claims, "nicht weil er etwa ein großes Genie wäre, sondern weil er, wie die Leibnizsche Monade, alles in sich vereinigt und widerspiegelt, was um ihn her vor sich geht" (Saine 12). But he was not only a mediator of contemporary trends, he also instigated and anticipated paradigmatic changes. Referring once again to Leibniz, Saine maintains that Moritz's aesthetics drew "die letzten Konsequenzen der Leibnizschen Metaphysik und liefert[e] der Kunstlehre der deutschen Klassik sowie der Romantik wichtige Begriffe" (Saine 11).³ As we will see, Saine's characteristic pertains to Moritz's notion of aesthetic perfection as well.

Drawing on an older tradition, he instinctively construes man and his products as partaking in the realization nature's and God's larger plan of perfection. At the same time, however, Moritz also points to a much more open-ended and preliminary conception of man and the world that will become the mark of the Romantics and the Idealists around the turn of the century. As we will see, a sense of infinite perfectibility—"Unendliche Annäherung," an idealistic-romantic formula that stands as a Leitmotif for Manfred Frank's comprehensive study of early German Romantic philosophy (see Frank)⁴—is as prevalent in Moritz as it is among the Romantics, whose main ideas, as Tzvetan Todorov pointedly argues, can be found already in Moritz's writings (Todorov 179).

To be sure, perfection is a key concept in Leibnizian metaphysics and those philosophers of the early Enlightenment that worked in this tradition: Christian Wolff, Alexander Baumgarten, Georg Friedrich Meier, and Johann Georg Sulzer, to name a few. For them, perfection constitutes a metaphysical concept that determines being. According to Leibniz's monadology, the monads, as imitations of God's absolute perfection, "ont en elles une certaine perfection," which consists of a continuous self-elevation that Leibniz associates with pleasure (Leibniz 609–10, 615, and 622).⁵ Wolff, too, considers pleasure to be the intuitive experience of perfection (Wolff, *Psychologica empirica* 389), which he in turn defines as "die Uebereinstimmung des mannigfaltigen" (Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken* 436). As a result, both his practical philosophy and his reflections on aesthetics draw on the concept of perfection which constitutes the basis of natural justice and virtue as well as of the pleasure experienced as one observes similarities (Hoffmann 1123). According to Baumgarten, the goal of aesthetics is the perfection of sensory knowledge that he identifies with beauty (Baumgarten 20–1), while Meier, Baumgarten's pupil, construes beauty as the "Uebereinstimmung mit den Regeln der Vollkommenheit" (Meier 2). As a result, perfection should be "ein Gegenstand der schönen Künste," Sulzer concludes in his *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*: "Doch ist sie es nur in sofern, als sie sinnlich erkannt werden kann" (Sulzer 582).

However, of much greater importance for Moritz was Moses Mendelssohn, with whose work Moritz was well-acquainted and to whom "Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten" was dedicated.⁶ For Mendelssohn, who clearly was inspired by Wolff, perfection is a metaphysical *Grundbegriff* with anthropological, ethical, and aesthetic implications. As a fundamental quality of the divine creation, genuine perfection is both "der höchste Grund" and "das höchste Gut" (Mendelssohn, *Rhapsodie* 166). Consequently, man is determined by an "ursprünglichen Trieb zur Vollkommenheit" (Mendelssohn, *Rhapsodie* 166), which contributes to continuous elevation of his being: "das allerhöchste Gut sey der ununterbrochene Fortgang von einer Stufe der Vollkommenheit zur andern" (Mendelssohn, *Rezensionsartikel* 112). Beauty is an indistinct, sensuous representation of perfection in which man takes pleasure, and it is the epitome of unity and proportion (Mendelssohn, *Über*

die *Empfindungen* 22–5). The essence of art, as a result, “besteht in einer künstlichen sinnlich-vollkommenen Vorstellung, oder in einer durch die Kunst vorgestellte sinnlichen Vollkommenheit” (Mendelssohn, *Hauptgrundsätze* 193). Imitation of nature (*Nachahmung der Natur*) is the preferred means to produce this sensuous perfection and thus to arouse pleasure. Finding its model in nature, skillful imitation as an expression of truth is inherently perfect and in turn affects man both mentally and physically:

Die angenehme Empfindungen ist in der Seele nichts anders, als das *klare, aber undeutliche Anschauen der Vollkommenheit*, und in so weit sie von einer sinnlichen Lust, von einer Behaglichkeit des Leibes, oder harmonischen Spannung der Nervenfäserchen begleitet wird, genießt die Seele auch eines sinnlichen, aber undeutlichen Anschauens von der Vollkommenheit *ihrer* Körpers. (Mendelssohn, *Rhapsodie* 166).⁷

In man's unending struggle for perfection, which is the true telos of creation, art plays an important role as a “Mittel zur Glückseligkeit” that is ultimately “d[ie] Vollkommenheit der Menschen” (Mendelssohn, *Briefe über Kunst* 93).⁸

With Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), the third installment of his Copernican revolution of philosophy, perfection was made an obsolete concept in aesthetics. Kant himself famously maintained that, since the judgment of beauty “eine bloß formale Zweckmäßigkeit, d. i. eine Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck, zum Grunde hat,” it is independent of perfection, which presupposes objective purposefulness. The purposeless purposiveness of aesthetic judgment is defined as internal objective purposiveness, in contrast to external objective purposiveness which constitutes usefulness (Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* 307). A formal objective purposiveness, on the other hand, which would be the apt definition of aesthetic perfection, is ultimately a contradiction in terms: “Eine formale *objective* Zweckmäßigkeit aber ohne Zweck (ohne alle Materie und *Begriff* von dem wozu zusammengestimmt wird, wenn es auch bloß die Idee einer Gesetzmäßigkeit überhaupt wäre), sich vorzustellen, ist ein wahrer Widerspruch” (Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* 308). As Paul Guyer has shown, the ousting of perfection from the realm of beauty enables Kant to explain the morality of aesthetic judgment: “aesthetic response can furnish us with something that morality requires but [...] cannot furnish itself, namely the experience of freedom”; an experience of the freedom of imagination, to be sure, which is “a ‘symbolic’ rather than ‘schematic’ (that is, literal) representation [...] of the morally good” (Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* 154). Freedom, although symbolic only, is “the most fundamental form of human value” that replaces “the objective perfection of the rationalist universe,” Guyer concludes (Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* 155).

To be sure, this separation of beauty and perfection did not go unchallenged. Johann Gottfried Herder, one of Kant's fiercest critics, tried to restore perfection as a relevant concept, claiming in his last published book, *Kalli-*

gone (1800), that the conception of beauty as “der sinnliche, zu empfindende Ausdruck einer Vollkommenheit,” is anything but contradictory; “sie ist auch wahr und hell und prägnant” (Herder 737).⁹ Herder defines the “Wesenheit des Dinges” as “innere Bestandheit und Einheit,” which are represented in real expressions and which are in harmony with the sensory organs of the recipient (Herder 737–8). Friedrich Schiller, too, even after his Kantian turn, embraced the idea of beauty as perfection of form, to be precise: “Die Vollkommenheit ist die Form eines Stoffes,” he explains in the so-called *Kallias* letters (1793), “die Schönheit hingegen ist die Form dieser Vollkommenheit” (Schiller, *Kallias* 278).¹⁰ However, in other texts from the same period, for instance in *Über Anmut und Würde* (1793) and *Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung* (1795–1796), Schiller distinguishes between objective perfection and subjective beauty, effectively removing perfection from the realm of aesthetics.¹¹

Herder’s critique, however, did not stick, and Schiller’s was not published until much later, in 1847. Their successors, drawing more on Kant than on Herder, had precious little to say about *Vollkommenheit*, at least when it comes to art. Sibille Mischer summarizes the tendency during the age of Romanticism and German Idealism, around 1800, as “Verengung und Verdrängung” of the concept of perfection, substituting fragmentation and the historicity of the aesthetic experience instead (Mischer and Früchtel 390). Among the German idealists, neither Schelling nor Hegel would give much thought to the concept in question, meeting it either with silence or disdain. According to Schelling, in his lectures on the philosophy of art, the level of completeness of the work of art “*beruht auf der Identität der bewußten und der bewußtlosen Thätigkeit*” that is the primary quality from which completeness is derived (Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst* 212). “Mit solchen leeren Prädikaten,” Hegel maintains, referring to the notions of the perfection of artistic beauty and the imperfection of natural beauty, “ist nichts getan” (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I* 190).¹² Furthermore, since Hegel understands beauty and art as pertaining to the spirit’s history of realization, “Jede Kunst hat ihre Blütezeit vollendeter Ausbildung als Kunst—und diesseits und jenseits ein Vor und Nach dieser Vollendung” (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II* 246). Completion—Hegel talks of *Vollendung*, not *Vollkommenheit*—is not final but transitory, a passage in history.

Correspondingly, the Romantics, who embraced the idea of the fragmentary, incomplete, and progressive nature of art and of poetry in particular, relegated perfection to antiquity or the future, replacing it with perfectibility. To put it briefly, modern art, as opposed to the art of antiquity and the ultimate art of romantic progressiveness, is epitomized by a lack of perfection. “Im strengsten Sinne des Worts,” Friedrich Schlegel asserts in *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* (1797), “hat auch nicht ein einziges modernes Kunstwerk, geschweige denn ein ganzes Zeitalter der Poesie den Gipfel ästhetischer *Vollendung* erreicht” (Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*

92).¹³ In one of his many fragments, Schlegel elaborates further, paradoxically stressing the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the “Geist der klassischen Poesie” and the ultimate “Harmonie der Kunstpoesie und Naturpoesie” and, on the other hand, “der ewig unauflöslichen Trennung der Kunst und der rohen Schönheit”:

Eine eigentliche Kunstlehre der Poesie würde mit der absoluten Verschiedenheit der ewig unauflöslichen Trennung der Kunst und der rohen Schönheit anfangen. Sie selbst würde den Kampf beider darstellen, und mit der vollkommenen Harmonie der Kunstpoesie und Naturpoesie endigen. Diese findet sich nur in den Alten, und sie selbst würde nichts anders sein, als eine höhere Geschichte vom Geist der klassischen Poesie. Eine Philosophie der Poesie überhaupt aber, würde mit der Selbständigkeit des Schönen beginnen, mit dem Satz, daß es vom Wahren und Sittlichen getrennt sei und getrennt sein solle, und daß es mit diesem gleiche Rechte habe; welches für den, der es nur überhaupt begreifen kann, schon aus dem Satz folgt, daß Ich = Ich sei. Sie selbst würde zwischen Vereinigung und Trennung der Philosophie und der Poesie, der Praxis und der Poesie, der Poesie überhaupt und der Gattungen und Arten schweben, und mit der völligen Vereinigung enden. (F. Schlegel, *Athenäums-Fragmente* 129)

Friedrich Schlegel's older brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel, conjures up a similar paradox. In his 1801 lectures on aesthetics he speaks about the essence of the real work of art (*das echte Kunstwerk*) as something, “was in sich vollendet ist” (A.W. Schlegel 20). Nevertheless, he seems to construe both a theoretical and a historical relativism pertaining to the concrete work of art. Theoretically, “Jede einzelne Kunsterscheinung müßte also in einer unbestimmbar weiten Erfernung von der höchsten Vollkommenheit vorgestellt werden,” and historically, the work of art “braucht nicht ein absolutes Höchstes zu erriechen, es ist vollendet, wenn es ein Höchstes in seiner Art, in seiner Sphäre, seiner Welt ist” (A.W. Schlegel 19, 20). Thus, the work of art is essentially separated from the highest and absolute perfection and can only be perfect in a more pragmatic sense, “in seiner Art, in seiner Sphäre.” In conclusion, there is an absolute and infinite aspect to the Romantics' conception of perfectibility that distinguishes them from Mendelssohn for whom perfection, though a goal for man, is present in God's creation.

Against this background, Moritz constitutes an interesting case, as he once again situates himself on the threshold between an older metaphysical and a newer, critical tradition. On the one hand, he draws on the works by Mendelssohn, understanding imitative art as a part of the metaphysics of perfection that assigns to man the task of perfectibility. On the other hand, pre-empting the Romantics, he also emphasizes an understanding of the lack of perfection, in works of art in particular, that is essential to man's endeavors in a much more radical way than Mendelssohn does. As we will see, Moritz makes the perfection of nature the point of departure for a discussion of imitation as lack of perfection and this in turn points to a morality of selfless love and disinterestedness.

Imitation and Imperfection

As in the writings of Moses Mendelssohn, the idea of perfection in Moritz's works is closely related to another central concept in eighteenth-century aesthetics, namely imitation. The concept in question supposedly lost its appeal during the latter half of the eighteenth century and was eventually abandoned by the early Romantics. Summarized under the slogan "Abkehr vom Grundsatz der Naturnachahmung," this narrative suggests that the concept of dependent, reproductive *mimesis* was replaced by the concept of independent, productive *poiesis* (Preisendanz; see also Behler 13–6, and Engel 5–6). The problems pertaining to this simple, if not simplistic, dichotomy of production and reproduction are indeed numerous, and it has been questioned by recent scholarship (see Pirholt, *Metamimesis*). Especially if you consider Moritz's writings—the most famous is the small booklet published in 1788 entitled *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* whose influence on the purportedly anti-mimetic Romantics is indubitable—the productivity of the concept of imitation becomes apparent.¹⁴

Interestingly, the concept of imitation was quickly brushed away in "Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten," where it is only mentioned one time in the third paragraph as part of a general comment on the status of the aesthetics of his time.¹⁵ However, already in 1786, it makes a surprising comeback in an essay entitled "Das Edleste in der Natur" which was published in the first issue of the journal *Denkwürdigkeiten, ausgezeichnet zur Beförderung des Edlen und Schönen* that Moritz edited together with Karl Friedrich Pockels. For Moritz the relationship between man and nature is both one of production and one of imitation which coincide in the concept of *Nachahmung*, thus effectively undermining all notions of an opposition between *poiesis* and *mimesis*.¹⁶ On one hand, man, or the spirit of man to be more precise, is a product of nature, indeed the noblest of its products, "Edleste in der Natur." It is the purpose of nature to work relentlessly toward the perfection (*Vervollkommnung*) of man's spirit and thus for nature to surpass itself. On the other hand, nature's *telos* is attained first and foremost in man's innate desire to imitate creation, as he "ruft in der Schöpfung, die ihn umgiebt, eine neue Schöpfung hervor" (13). This is actually an anthropological definition of the concept of imitation which dates back to Aristotle's poetics and which defines man as essentially an imitative being, a *zoon mimetikotaton*.¹⁷ In turn, the aim of imitation is also an aesthetic one, namely to surpass and to beautify already perfect and beautiful nature, although on a much smaller scale: "Der schöpferische Geist ahmt die große Natur im Kleinen nach; bestrebt sich, durch die Kunst ihre Schöheiten im verjüngten Maßstabe dazustellen, und wähnt wohl gar, sie zu übertreffen und zu verschönern" (14). Thus, art is the result of man's natural tendency—in the strongest sense of the word natural since it is nature's *telos*—to imitate and to perfect the creation that surrounds him; a creation that is paradoxically already perfect in

itself. Clearly, Moritz seems to elaborate on some of the key themes in “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten” in which he describes the work of art as epitomized by a “inner Vollkommenheit” (4) that is complex (*zusammengesetzt*) rather than simple (8).

Despite identifying mankind as nature's ultimate aim and celebrating man's beautifying creative power, Moritz soon brings the futility of man's ambitions to the fore. In the very same text where he defines man as “das Edleste in der Natur,” he describes man's products, especially works of art, as ephemeral and subject to a much more powerful nature:

[A]ber die Natur sieht lächelnd seinem Spiele zu, und läßt ihn [i.e., man] eine Weile seine kleine Schöpfung anstaunen – dann verschemmt sie, was er schuf, in dem Strome der Zeiten, und läßt wieder neue Werke der Kunst unter fremden Himmelsstrichen emporsteigen, um sie auch dereinst wieder in Vergessenheit zu begraben. (14)

Here, the concept of play (*Spiel*) undoubtedly indicates the futility of man's endeavors, which at first glance seems to be at odds with how the concept is presented in Schiller's aesthetics and elsewhere in Moritz's own writings. The play drive (*Spieltrieb*), Schiller maintains in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1796), unites the sense drive (*Stofftrieb*), which engages with life, and the form drive (*Formtrieb*), the rational formality of the *gestalt*, into the living *gestalt* (*lebende Gestalt*); “ein[en] Begriff, der allen ästhetischen Beschaffenheiten der Erscheinungen und mit einem Worte dem, was man in weitester Bedeutung Schönheit nennt, zur Bezeichnung dient” (Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung* 609). From a historico-philosophical point of view, the play drive will eventually deliver itself from the realm of necessities, and “das Schöne wird für sich allein ein Objekt seines [the drive's] Strebens” (Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung* 672). In his *Kinderlogik*, which was written shortly before “Das Edleste in der Natur,” Moritz anticipates Schiller's conclusion and construes play as a self-contained activity with no external purposes (Moritz, *Kinderlogik* 169–70). It is a definition that clearly echoes his understanding of art as it is defined in “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten”: complete in itself (*in sich selbst Vollendetes*, 3) and epitomized by inner purposefulness (*innere Zweckmäßigkeit*, 8). The quote from “Das Edleste in der Natur” suggests that man's play, although creative and resulting in “kleine Schöpfungen,” is essentially futile since the material outcomes of this play are subject to time. Man marvels at his own creations for a moment, before he tires of them as nature allows “wieder neue Werke der Kunst unter fremden Himmelsstrichen empor[zu]steigen.” As a result, we are compelled to reinterpret the definition in “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten” of the supposedly perfect work of art which, against this background, appears less perfect and serious.

Ultimately, what underpins this apparent tension between perfection and the ephemeral quality of man's products in general and works of art in par-

ticular, is the human propensity to err. In fact, “daß wir irren können,” Moritz writes in an essay entitled “Gesichtspunkt,” published also in 1786 in *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, is “einer unsrer edlesten Verzüge,” since it “giebt unserm Denken Freiheit” (10).¹⁸ More so, it renders “unsrer Denkkraft Selbstthätigkeit” (10), which enables us to “immer nach Wahrheit streben” (10). As the key word of the essay, “Gesichtspunkt,” reveals, man can never fully comprehend nature and his conception of the world is determined by a specific point of view, which prevents him from grasping the totality of world—he “muß aus dem Mannichfaltigen einen Gegenstand herausheben, den [er] zum Mittelpunkt der übrigen macht” (11)—and which at the same time enables his struggle for truth. As Elliott Schreiber explains in *The Topography of Modernity* (2012), Moritz emphasizes that “our tendency to move in the direction of ‘the right point of view’ merely results in a proliferation of mutually incompatible perspectives”; a tendency that “Moritz’s thought itself enacts,” seeing as he constantly “changes perspectives, positioning now one institution, now another as the central vantage point from which all others are to be regarded” (Schreiber 3–4).

Consequently, when Moritz compares the physical with the moral world, the differences between them become palpable. In nature everything, “vom Größten bis zum Kleinsten, ist [. . .] ordnungsvoll und planmäßig, voller Licht und Klarheit, wie die allesbelbenden Sonne” (31), whereas in the moral world, “alles [ist] Verwirrung, Unordnung – zweckloses Streben – Bauen um zu zerstören – wechselseitiges Aufreiben, mit *Absicht* und *Vorsatz* – innere Mißbilligung – thätige Äußerung – Sünde – Verbrechen – Laster” (32). Worth noting are the syntactical and typographical differences between the two descriptions. Whereas nature is described in a long, beautiful and grammatically correct sentence, the description of the moral world is broken up, using disruptive dashes to forcefully join together isolated nouns; a technique that embodies the lack of harmony and perfection of the moral, that is, human world.

And what is more, imitation in the world of morality is ultimately interpreted as a pathological outgrowth or a miscarriage in the perfection of nature: “Ist denn die ganze moralische Welt mit allen ihren Verbindungen und Einrichtungen etwa ein bloßer Auswuchs des wohlgeordneten Ganzen—eine Mißgeburt dieser sonst so herrlichen Schöpfung?” (32). On the other hand, “was ist edler als der Mensch” (32), Moritz asks rhetorically, thus indicating that this lack of perfection, although essential to man, is not the end of the line, but rather a necessary and perhaps inescapable step in man’s struggle for nobility and perfection in himself as well as his understanding of truth. Man’s nobility, then, lies paradoxically in his lack of nobility, a characteristic which however demands that he should struggle for nobility. Morality, as a result, must encompass both of these extremes: sin and crime, on the one hand, and nobility and perfection, on the other. Or as Moritz puts it in “Verbreitung des Edlern durch das Unedlere,” another of his many texts

published in 1786, this one in the journal *Denkwürdigkeiten*: “Das weniger Edle muß also immer die Grundlage des Edlern seyn, und das erste muß durch das letztere bis zu höchsten Stufe der Verfeinerung vorbereitet werden” (19). Again, it is the ability to err and to go astray that constitutes the foundation of morality and of man’s creative endeavors.

Consequently, man’s moral activities—his “Leben und Wirksamkeit,” as one entry in *Fragmente aus dem Tagebuche eines Geistersehers* (1787) is entitled—are guided by a fundamental interest. “Soll das Leben erträglich werden,” it says at the very beginning of the short text, “so muß erst Interesse hineinkommen, eben so wie in ein Schauspiel, wenn es uns nicht unausstehliche Langweile machen soll” (50). Here, we are confronted for the first time with an important concept in Moritz’s work, namely *interest*. Undeniably, Moritz’s theory of the work of art has often, especially in English-speaking contexts, been associated with the very opposite of interest, namely *disinterest* which, in turn, is associated with Kant’s definition of taste as “das Beurteilungsvermögen eines Gegenstandes oder einer Vorstellungsart durch ein Wohlgefallen, oder Mißfallen, *ohne alles Interesse*” (Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* 124). According to this line of reasoning, referred to briefly in the introduction, Moritz is a champion of aesthetic disinterestedness and thus of aesthetic autonomy. Martha Woodmansee, in particular, when analyzing “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten,” uses the concept of disinterestedness in the Kantian sense of the word, that is, as pertaining to the autonomy of aesthetic object. Kant’s transcendental conception of disinterestedness, however, has very little to do with Shaftesbury’s notion of man’s unselfish attitude toward the world. Moritz, in turn, seems to simultaneously draw on Shaftesbury, construing aesthetic pleasure as an unselfish “*angenehme Vergessen unsrer selbst*” (5), and to anticipate Kant, seeing as he also construes beauty and the inner purpose of art to be a result of aesthetic judgment, that is, disinterested, contemplative observation (Pirholt, *Disinterested Love* 66).¹⁹

The theme in “Leben und Wirksamkeit,” however, is not disinterest but the opposite: interest. Man’s most profound interest, Moritz argues, is the perfection of him- or herself:

Dein großer Plan sey, täglich auf deine innere Vervollkommnung hinzuarbeiten; nicht Glückseligkeit von außen in dich hinein zu zwingen, sondern aus dir selbst um dich her zu verbreiten; so kann es dir nie fehlen; so muß ein immerwährendes Interesse alle deine kleinsten Begebenheiten durchflechten. (53)

What is perfection, then? Moritz’s definition belongs to a metaphysical tradition that dominated the seventeenth and eighteenth century as was outlined in the first section of this paper. For Moritz, the most immediate source of inspiration was Mendelssohn, who defines perfection, both in nature and in art, as the harmonious correspondence between parts and the whole. Unsurprisingly, this is also Moritz’s definition of beauty as it is articulated in the

essay on formative imitation (71). However, in the earlier text, “Leben und Wirksamkeit,” Moritz associates this correspondence between parts and the whole with an interest in a particular aim: “Interesse erhält es [i.e., life] aber allein dadurch, wenn alles Einzelne darin zu einem Ganzen übereinstimmt, und wenn selbst das Kleine und Unbedeutende Mittel zu irgend einem großen Zweck wird” (51). Man’s ultimate aim is, in short, the interested struggle for perfection which is the harmonization of the small and trivial with the whole. In this perpetual struggle for perfection, “die *virtuelle* Möglichkeit menschlicher Vollendung,” as Annette Simonis aptly describes Moritz’s “Perfectibility-Theorem” (Simonis 497, italics added), art plays a crucial role as an imperfect means. Art is an inferior imitation of nature’s perfection, but at the same time it is an imitation that aims at surpassing its model, thus pertaining to the perfection of mankind. This is the ultimate purpose of human existence and the fundamental object of man’s interest. Thus, just like Mendelssohn, Moritz construes art as a means to attain a certain goal, namely perfection.

What we have concluded so far then is: firstly that man, despite being nature’s most noble creation, is fundamentally flawed and incomplete and secondly that man’s own creations, despite being imitations of nature’s perfection, are equally flawed and incomplete. It lies in man’s moral interest to attempt to perfect himself progressively, from a lower level of nobility to a higher, and to harmonize parts with the whole and vice versa. This is essentially an act of morality and of interest, a continuous struggle for the moral high ground, so to speak.

Imitation and Destruction

Based on these conclusions, we must ask ourselves: to what extent is it reasonable to consider Moritz’s writing on aesthetics as an exponent both of a disinterested attitude toward art—in the Kantian sense of denoting the formally subjective nature of aesthetic judgments²⁰—and also ultimately as the instigator of the theory of aesthetic autonomy? Mankind’s products, works of art in particular, are, due to man’s propensity to err, fundamentally flawed and ephemeral and thus anything but perfect in themselves; a quality that is often construed as a key feature of aesthetic autonomy (see Köster 68).

Let us focus on Moritz’s most important contribution to the history of aesthetics, *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*; the small book that Goethe quoted enthusiastically and that was a profound source of inspiration for Schiller.²¹ Here, where supposedly Moritz’s theory of the autonomy of art either originates or culminates (Berghahn 123–6; Engel 220–1; Schrimpf 94; Szondi 90), he develops many of the themes first articulated in “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten.” The opposition between beauty and usefulness, particularly in morality, can be traced back to his first essay. Moritz deliberates extensively on this in the first part of the book, which seems

to unequivocally confirm this interpretation. The proximity—according to the “Zirkel von Begriffen” that Moritz fashions—of the concept of beauty to the concept of uselessness (*das Unnütze*), which “gar keinen Zweck, keine Absicht ausser sich hat,” means that beauty too “keines Endzwecks, keiner Absicht, warum es da ist, ausser sich *bedarf*, sondern seinen ganzen Werth, und den Endzweck seines Daseyns in sich selber hat” (69). Moritz goes so far as to claim that we can only recognize beauty “in so fern wir es dem Nützlichen entgegenstellt” (70–1). As a result, rephrasing the conclusions in “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten,” an object must be, “um nicht nützlich seyn zu dürfen, nothwendig ein für sich bestehendes Ganze,” which means that “also mit dem Begriff des Schönen der Begriff von einem für sich bestehenden Ganzen unzertrennlich verknüpft ist” (71). Nature constitutes an organic totality which, “als Ganzes betrachtet, hingegen [...] weiter keine Beziehung auf irgend etwas außer sich zu haben [braucht]” (71). Art imitates nature’s larger totality in the form of a miniature imprint (*Abdruck*): “Jedes schöne Ganze aus der Hand des bildenden Künstlers, ist daher im Kleinen ein Abdruck der höchsten Schönen im grossen Ganzen der Natur; welche das noch *mittelbar* durch die bildende Hand des bildenden Künstlers nacherschafft” (73). As has often been noticed, Moritz’s radically reinterprets the concept of imitation (*Nachahmung*) which no longer refers the heteronomous reproduction of nature but rather to the autonomous production of it.²² “[D]er *lebendige* Begriff von der bildenden Nachahmung des Schönen,” Moritz argues, can only “im Gefühl der thätigen Kraft, die es hervorbringt, im ersten Augenblick der Entstehung statt finden” (77).

However, we should keep in mind the ephemeral nature of man’s creations that is repeatedly emphasized in the texts that immediately precede *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*. Moritz’s definition of the work as formative imitation of beauty, as the title reads in English, points to difference and deficiency at the core of the concept of imitation. The work of art, just like all other man-made products, is fundamentally inferior to nature. Nevertheless, as an imprint of nature’s perfection, which is ungraspable, it gives us a taste of perfection and is an impetus in the continuous struggle for morality. As a result, Moritz construes the “der *lebendige* Begriff von der bildenden Nachahmung des Schönen” as both inferior reproduction and superior production.

The genius’s creation, that is the work of art, constitutes an imprint of the highest form of beauty which Moritz, who never abandoned the traditional interpretation of the concept of *Nachahmung* as imitation, identifies with the large totality of nature. However, the relationship between these two totalities is in no way unproblematic, since Moritz, as Jürgen Fohrmann has suggested, assume “eine[] Differenz zwischen Artefakt und Natur” (Fohrmann 182): nature is only “*mittelbar* durch die bildende Hand des bildenden Künstlers nacherschafft,” and thus art belongs “unmittelbar nicht in ihren grossen Plan” (73). Thus, despite being a totality (*Ganze*) that imitates nature’s organic relation-

ship between parts and whole, the work of art is literally an artificial addition to nature's totality. The artistic image, Moritz concludes, is a mediated reflection created by the artist: "Von dem reellen und vollendeten Schönen also, was unmittelbar sich selten entwickeln kann, schuf die Natur doch *mittelbar* den Widerschein durch Wesen, in denen sich ihr Bild so lebhaft abdrückte, daß es sich ihr selber in ihre eigene Schöpfung wieder entgegenwarf" (74). This reflection, a "verdoppelte[r] Widerschein sich in sich spiegelnd" (74), which hovers and flutters above nature, is a "Blendwerk, das für ein *sterbliches*" – the word is emphasized by Moritz—"Auge noch reizender, als sie [i.e., die Natur] ist" (74). The reference to man's mortality in this context is important. Not only does it draw on the earlier writings, commented on above, but it also anticipates the concluding reflections in *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*. As we have already seen, man's ephemeral being and his products is a central theme in Moritz's writing after "Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten,"²³ and the incidental references to the work of art as "Widerschein" and "Blendwerk" and to man's "Sterblichkeit" confirm this tendency. There is, then, a fundamental (ontological) gap between nature as an eternal totality and art as a deceptive reflection.

Moritz, however, is in no way judgmental about this, on the contrary. In contrast with nature, whose totality transcends our mental and perceptive capacities, the work of art, if interpreted as a microcosmic imitation of nature, makes nature graspable through our imagination and our senses. It is by means of man's creative powers (*Tatkraft*), which discerns "in der Dinge Zusammenhang, und was sie faßt, will sie die Natur selbst ähnlich, zu einem *eigenmächtig* für sich bestehenden Ganzen bilden" (74), that he is at all capable of fathoming nature:

Die Natur konnte aber den Sinn für das höchste Schöne nur in die Thatkraft pflanzen, und durch dieselbe erst mittelbar einen Abdruck dieses höchsten Schönen der Einbildungskraft faßbar, dem Auge sichtbar, dem Ohre hörbar, machen; weil der Horizont der Thatkraft mehr umfaßt, als der äussere Sinn, und Einbildungskraft und Denkkraft fassen kann. (75)

In other words, man is basically unable to fathom the totality of nature, but the creative genius is capable of forming an imitation of it that makes nature accessible to imagination and thought. As beautiful imitations of the ungraspable totality of nature, man's creations are complete in themselves, copying the harmonious relation between part and whole in nature. "The idea that through *Tatkraft*," Edgar Landgraf argues, "the artwork forms itself, according to itself, out of itself, leads Moritz to note the paradoxical simultaneity of being and not-being, knowing and not-knowing that marks the origin of the autonomous work of art" (Landgraf, *Self-Forming Selves* 168).²⁴ However, works of art are also reflective "Blendwerke" that expose man's mortality and also ephemeral imprints of nature's totality that are transient and heteronomous.

This fundamental distinction between nature and art points to a metaphysical worldview with ethical implications that is at the center of attention in the obscure final part of Moritz's book.²⁵ Here, the author argues that we cannot have creation (*Bildung*) without destruction (*Zerstörung*). Nature is organized as a hierarchical system in which a higher being, man for instance, devours lower beings, such as plants and animals, in order to grow (82–3, 86). As a result, as man stands “auf dem höchsten Punkt seiner Wirksamkeit,” there is “der Krieg, die Wuth, das Feldgeschrei, das höchste Leben,” which is also “nah an der Grenzen seiner Zerstörung” (83). On the other hand, destruction is necessary for the act of creation: “So geht die um sich greifende, zerstörende Thatkraft, sich auf sich selber stützend, in die sanfte schaffende Bildungskraft durch ruhiges Selbstgefühl hinüber und ergreift den leblosen Stoff und haucht ihm Leben ein” (83–4). More so, in a beautiful work, both visual arts and poetry, the two extremes, creation and destruction, coincide (91), which means that “die bildende Hand des Künstlers” (73) is also a “zerstörende[] Hand” (87). Although ingeniously developed in *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*, this reorientation toward a metaphysics of destruction was anticipated in the long-overlooked *Kinderlogik*, which was published in either 1785 or 1786.²⁶ Here, Moritz argues that nature “zerstört nur, um zu bauen,” continuing: “Das Bauen, das Bilden ist ihr Zweck, die Zerstörung ist nur Mittel” (22).²⁷ On the other hand, as quoted earlier, in man's moral world, there is only “Bauen um zu zerstören” (32).

As Hans-Edwin Friedrich has noted, destruction is the “unumgängliche Durchgangsstation von einer Existenzform in eine höhere” (Friedrich 82).²⁸ Thus, destruction is a fundamental prerequisite for man's creative activities, since art must destroy nature in order to create things of a higher order. However, according to Friedrich, works of art are capable of transcending this fundamental dialectic of destruction and creation—“Kunstwerke trotzen der Zerstörung” (Friedrich 85)—and as a result, art solves the question of destruction by suspending the ethical aspects: “Die Frage nach den Grenzen von Zerstörung wird allein von ästhetischen Beweggründen bestimmt, die moralische Reflexion aber suspendiert” (Friedrich 89). For Alessandro Costazza, conversely, the dialectic of creation and destruction forms a metaphysical bond between art and nature, which shows that “das ‘Schöne der bildenden Künste’ im Grunde eins mit der Natur ist” (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 332). This identity, Costazza argues, becomes visible in the process of destruction:

Auch wenn es nicht ausdrücklich gesagt wird, so ist diese Zerstörung [in art] offensichtlich nichts anderes als eine Widerspiegelung bzw. eine Fortführung jenes hier noch kaum angedeuteten Prozesses der Bildung und Zerstörung bzw. Bildung durch Zerstörung, der dem natürlichen Bereich von der leblosen Materie bis zur Pflanze und zum Tier eigen ist. (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 331)

Like Friedrich, Costazza emphasizes the dissociation of art and morality, claiming that Moritz made a stand “gegen jede moralische Indienstnahme der Kunst” (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 13). However, difficulties arise when, like Friedrich, one considers art as a permanent remedy for the experience of destruction or, like Costazza, identifies nature’s dialectic of creation and destruction with the flawed and ephemeral essence of man’s products. On one level, of course, they correspond: the work of art, as a formative imitation of nature’s unfathomable beauty, reflects the processes in nature which elevate man to a higher form of existence. “Beide Prozesse haben zuerst das gleiche Ziel,” Costazza maintains: both “streb[en] nämlich nach der Vollkommenheit des Schönen” (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 381). However, whereas the processes in nature are eternal and ultimately beyond our grasp, the processes in the work of art, as a man-made, artificial product, are in themselves transient.²⁹ Nature’s dialectic of formation and destruction is eternal, whereas as the corresponding dialectic in the arts is transitory. In other words, although art imitates nature, including the latter’s destructive aspects, it only imitates imperfectly, which in turn constitutes the very foundation of Moritz’s ethical attitude toward art as contributing to man’s struggle for perfection.

Still, as a reflection of nature’s all-encompassing process of life and death, the work of art can educate man about this essentially ungraspable ontology. Which brings us back to the concept of interest and the ethics that is the consequence of Moritz’s metaphysical dialectic of formation and destruction and that in no way is suspended by aesthetics, as Friedrich claims. Despite being the very opposite of useful, the experience of the work of art, especially tragedy that represents “individuelle[s] Leiden,” teaches us something about the nature of man and permits us to surmount above our restricted individuality:

Das individuelle Leiden in der Darstellung geht in das erhabnere *Mitleiden* über, wodurch eben das Individuum aus sich selbst gezogen und die Gattung wieder in sich selber vollendet wird.

Höher aber kann die Menschheit sich nicht heben als bis auf den Punkt hin, wo sie durch das Edle in der Handlung und das Schöne in der Betrachtung, das Individuum selbst aus seiner Individualität herausziehend, in den schönen Seelen sich vollendet, die fähig sind, aus ihrer eingeschränkten Ichheit in das Interesse der Menschheit hinüberschreitend, sich in die Gattung zu verlieren. (88)

As we contemplate the work of art, then, the interest—indeed a disinterested interest—in mankind is substituted for individual self-interest, which means that we essentially extinguish our subjectivity for the benefit of mankind.³⁰ This is an important insight that Moritz shared with Kant, who suggests in the essay “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht” (1784) that man’s “Naturanlagen [. . .] nur in der Gattung, nicht aber im Individuum vollständig entwickeln [sollten]” (Kant, *Idee* 35). We encountered this line of thought in the previous section, where we concluded that man’s

endeavors are ultimately determined by an interest in perfection. Moritz had made similar remarks already in “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten,” where he claims that man should strive to forget “unser individuelles eingeschränktes Dasein” and strive for a “höhere[s] Dasein” by lovingly embracing the “uneigennützig[e] Liebe” (5). In *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*, correspondingly, love is interpreted as the elevation of man: love is “die höchste Vollendung unsres empfindenden Wesens,” just as “die Hervorbringung des Schönen” is “die höchste Vollendung unsrer thätigen Kraft” (87), and as such it unites “Aufhören und Werden, Zerstörung und Bildung” (92).³¹ The dialectic of passive sentient love and active creative power, then, aims at elevating mankind above individual, limited existence. This, which is humanity’s ultimate *interest*, is accomplished by means of *Mitleid*. Although one might distinguish an analogy between mankind and nature in this respect—Costazza, for instance, describes artistic production as a continuation (*Fortsetzung*) of the processes in nature (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 339)—destruction in nature does not provoke pity and is consequently not associated with interest. Costazza rightly claims that Moritz embraces a tragic conception of history as well as of art (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 354–96), a conception that can be summarized in the words: “Bauen um zu zerstören.” Nature, on the other hand, “zerstört nur, um zu bauen”; a notion of nature that is essentially not tragic.

Indeed, mankind’s ethical interest is the core of man’s disinterested (that is, unselfish) engagement with art. As I have tried to show, disinterested interestedness presupposes a work of art that is not complete in itself *sub species aeternitatis* but only complete in a transitory sense, that is, as an artificial, man-made product, doomed to be destroyed, like everything else man makes; it adds to the eternal process of creation and destruction that takes place in nature. The transitory nature of the complete work of art is a reflection (*Widerschein*) of nature’s eternal process which can only be grasped indirectly by the means of art. In order to reach a position of disinterested love and to substitute restricted self-interest with an interest in mankind, we must make use of the work of art, that is, take an interest in the work of art, which is understood as having no purpose. On the other hand, the all-encompassing vantage point of God, “der allein mit seinem Blick das Ganze umfaßt” (154), just like nature’s, transcends man’s restricted point of view. Man, not even the creative genius, is hardly the “gottähnliche[] Gestalt” that Seraina Plotke sees in him (Plotke 436).³² God’s perspective is described as “das erhabnere *Mitleiden*” that “tränennd auf die Vollendung selbst herab[blickt]” and that that “Aufhören und Werden, Zerstörung und Bildung in eins zusammenfaßt” (92). Man’s sense of pity, facilitated by the work of art (tragedy), cannot reach beyond the perfection of the work of art but nevertheless aims at transcending it. This is the core of the aesthetic theodicy that Saine analyzes in his seminal book, where he argues that art, in the form of a fictional “Gegenentwurf,” is able to transcend a deficient nature (Saine

ch. 7). As we have seen, however, works of art are even more deficient than nature since, as man-made products and imitations of a more supreme beauty, they are essentially transient. Moreover, God's sublime pity remains beyond man's reach, since all he is able to produce are mediated reflections and illusions—that is the tragedy of man's aesthetic endeavors!

Thus, the aesthetic experience of the work of art, which is both perfect (*in sich selbst Vollendetes*) and imperfect (*Widerschein, Blendwerk*), is also an ethical experience. Its purpose is a loving relationship with the other that unites the productive and destructive forces, without ever dissolving the conflict between them. The formation of this relationship is facilitated by the work of art, and as an impression of nature as God's perfect creation, the work also gives us a taste of an even more elevated point of view, toward which we may only strive but may never reach. Drawing on the metaphysical tradition of perfection and anticipating the romantic notion of infinite perfectibility, Moritz sets man on an eternal struggle for perfection, a struggle propelled by imperfection, which is indicative of the moral world, where we find only “Verwirrung, Unordnung – zweckloses Streben – Bauen um zu zerstören.” However, the defects and shortcomings of the moral world are also the impetus to morality, namely man's struggle to overcome his self-interest and to disinterestedly focus on the wellbeing of mankind and this is the purpose of art.

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¹Although quoting the original version, I will for the sake of brevity give the shorter form of the title, which appears in the second abbreviated edition, published in 1793: “Über den Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendetes.” All further references to Schrimpf's edition will refer to page number only.

²According to Kant, the direction of our intellect (*Verstand*) toward a particular goal, the desire to seek unity and completeness in nature, for instance, constitutes a regulative principle of reason (*Vernunft*) (Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* 2 563–82).

³The latter distinction is scrutinized by Annette Simonis, who notices, among other things, the peculiar return to an ontological conception in *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*, compared to the more critical (Kantian) approach in the earlier writings (Simonis 494).

⁴The phrase “unendliche Annäherung” appears in a letter from Hölderlin to Schiller, dated September 4, 1795 (Hölderlin 595), and in F. W. J. Schelling's 1795 book, *Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen* (Schelling, *Vom Ich als Prinzip* 91).

⁵See also Hoffmann 1123–4.

⁶The dedication to Mendelssohn, however, has also been interpreted as an open and critical letter from Moritz to his predecessor. See Hess 155; Saine 125.

⁷See also Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* 138–41.

⁸ See also Pollok ch. 2.

⁹ For a discussion of Herder's critique of Kant, see Guyer, *Free Play* 364–6.

¹⁰ For an overview of Schiller's use of the term *Vollkommenheit*, see Horst.

¹¹ See Schiller, *Über Anmut und Würde* 339–40 and Schiller, *Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung* 722–4.

¹² See also Hegel's *Enzyklopädie* where he defines perfection as an “unbestimmte Schlagwort” (Hegel, *Enzyklopädie* 12–3). As Mischer suggests, perfection in Hegel's thought belongs primarily to the realm of reason “und eben deshalb nicht zu den wesentlichen Bestimmungen der Schönheit” (Mischer and Früchtel 393).

¹³ Furthermore, the Romantics refer to perfection more often in discussions of non-aesthetics matters. Thus, it is a key concept in Schlegel's early political essay, “Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus” (1796), where he talks about, among other things, “der absoluten Vollkommenheit (des Maximums der Gemeinschaft, Freiheit und Gleichheit) des Staats” (F. Schlegel, *Versuch über den Republikanismus* 59). Novalis, correspondingly, employs it in his various scientific annotations from the late 1790s, construing the scientific process of simplification and reduction as a perfection of science (Novalis 375, 469).

¹⁴ See for instance A. W. Schlegel's positive judgment in his lectures on aesthetics (A. W. Schlegel 91–2). For a comprehensive study of the Romantics' relation to Moritz, see Hubert.

¹⁵ “Man hat den Grundsatz von der Nachahmung der Natur als den Hauptendzweck der schönen Künste verworfen und ihn dem Zweck des Vergnügens untergeordnet, den man dafür zu dem ersten Grundgesetze der schönen Künste gemacht hat” (3).

¹⁶ Sabine Schneider embraces a rather narrow conception of imitation, arguing that Moritz articulates “seine Autonomietheorie deshalb auch als Produktionsästhetik. ‘Bildung’ und ‘Gestalt’ kann nicht erkannt und nachgeahmt werden” (Schneider 183).

¹⁷ See Aristotle 20 (1448b): “Representation comes naturally to human beings from childhood, and so does the universal pleasure in representations.”

¹⁸ The essay was later renamed “Der letzte Zweck des menschlichen Denkens: Gesichtspunkt.” In his comments Schrimpf quotes an elucidating letter from Caroline Herder to her husband, Johann Gottfried Herder, of December 25, 1788: “da sagte er [Moritz] mir, wie er durch das Studium der Perspective darauf gekommen sei, den Mittelpunkt in einem Stück aufzusuchen” (345).

¹⁹ This standard interpretation of Kant's concept of disinterestedness leaves much to be desired. For nuanced readings of the interest of disinterestedness in Kant, see Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* 97–116 and Gasché 155–88.

²⁰ Paul Guyer translates Kant's expression *uninteressiertes Wohlgefallen* as *disinterested satisfaction*, whereas *Wohlgefallen, oder Mißfallen, ohne alles Interesse* is translated as *satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest*. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 91, 96.

²¹ Goethe included a section of the text in the third part of his *Italienische Reise* (*Zweiter römischer Aufenthalt*, 1829), something that has led scholar to exaggerate Goethe's influence on Moritz, who had in fact developed many of his ideas before meeting Goethe in Rome in 1786. See Costazza, *Schönheit und Nützlichkeit* 16–26. Schiller's copy of *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* contains, as Schrimpf comments, an unusual amount of markings and notes (the editor's comments in Moritz, *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik* 361).

²² See, e.g., D'Aprile 65–8; Hess 163–4; Landgraf, *The Psychology of Aesthetic Autonomy* 217; Szondi 93. For a more general discussion, see Abrams.

²³ Published in 1792, Moritz's travelogue *Reise eines Deutschen in Italien in 1786 bis 1788*. In *Briefen* draws on, as the title reveals, the experience the author made during the period that we are investigating in this paper. Unsurprisingly, destruction is a key characteristic in his descriptions of works of art in Rome. Comparing the Laocoon group with the Niobe group, he argues that in the former “alles umbebende Zerstörung vom Feuer, von Wasserfluthen [ist], die keine Flucht erlaubt,” whereas in the latter one sees “nur die Wirkung der Zerstörung, aber nicht die Zerstörung selbst” (249). In Raphael's “Die Schlacht des Konstantin,” correspondingly, “ist die Zerstörung selbst verewigt” (227).

²⁴ See also Landgraf, *The Psychology of Aesthetic Autonomy* 222–3; and Plotke 434–6.

²⁵ At this point, Cord-Friedrich Berghahn notes, Moritz's text becomes itself poetry or image: “Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen verlässt die diskursive Regularität einer philosophischen Abhandlung—daher ihre Dunkelheit, ihre Bilderwut, ihre Tendenz zum Bild” (Berghahn 127).

²⁶ According to Saine, *Kinderlogik* is “[die] ausführlichste Darstellung von Moritz’ Ideewelt vor seiner Reise nach Italien” (Saine 40).

²⁷ Clearly unaware of the existence of *Kinderlogik*, Schrimpf quotes in his edition the version printed in *Denkwürdigkeiten* (1786), where it is entitled “Das Skelet.” See Saine 15–6.

²⁸ A radical approach to the theme of destruction, in Moritz’s essay “Die Signatur des Schönen” to be precise, is provided by Krüger-Fürhoff, in her book *Der versehrte Körper* (2001), which emphasizes the “Zusammenhang zwischen Körperverletzung, Zweckbezug und Kunstschönheit” (Krüger-Fürhoff 131). Schneider, correspondingly, investigates in “Kunstautonomie als Semiotik des Todes?” the traumatic connection between art and death in Moritz.

²⁹ Although he rightly distinguishes between the eternal beauty of nature and the individual beauty of art, Costazza considers art and nature as subject to the same tragic law (*tragisches Gesetz*): “So wie die natürliche Entwicklung nur durch immerwährende Zerstörung und Bildung dem ‘ewigen Schönen’ nachstrebt, so kann nämlich auch der Künstler seinen Endzweck, der in der ‘individuellen Schönheit’ der Kunst als ‘Abdruck des höchsten Schönen’ besteht, nur durch eine vorübergehende Zerstörung bzw. Auflösung der Wirklichkeit erreichen, indem seine ‘Tatkraft’ [sic] die einzelnen Dinge zuerst aus ihrem natürlichen bzw. aus dem Zusammenhang der Ideen des Künstlers reißt, um ihnen erst in einem zweiten Moment eine neue innere Zweckmäßigkeit zu verleihen und dadurch zu einem in sich vollendeten Ganzen zu machen” (Costazza, *Genie und tragische Kunst* 382).

³⁰ On the social value of art in Moritz, particularly in the novel *Anton Reiser*, see Erlin 139–74.

³¹ As Hans Adler puts it: “Die Zerstörung des Individuellen durch Auflösung in der Gattung, dem (nächst)höheren Ganzen, ist das, was Moritz ‘Bildung’ nennt” (Adler 202).

³² As Schneider has emphasized, man’s point of view is determined by death (Schneider 174).

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