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## On the Ruins of Babel

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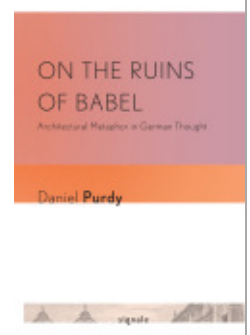
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## Goethe's Architectural Epiphanies

Right in the middle of his weighty history of ancient architecture (*Die Geschichte der Baukunst bei den Alten*), the Berlin professor Aloys Hirt pauses to ask: Who were the architects that designed the great buildings of the past?<sup>1</sup> Where and how did they learn to build? Were there ancient schools of architecture? Written sources provide no information on these points, he notes with sadness. The treatises composed by the many names Vitruvius mentions as his predecessors have been lost. Even worse, for long stretches of ancient history not one architect's name is known. Such a rich history of construction!—yet only a handful of names that have been passed down to the present.<sup>2</sup>

By the time Hirt raised these questions in 1822, Germans had been theorizing about Greek and Roman architecture for almost eighty years, and Hirt, a trusted informant for both Goethe and Hegel, had already spent over forty years studying antiquity.<sup>3</sup> In the 1780s he had already become quite well known among

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1. Aloys Hirt, *Die Geschichte der Baukunst bei den Alten* (Berlin: R. Reimer, 1822), 2: 138–139.

2. A similar elegiac wonder was expressed in the eighteenth century regarding the first humans to develop language. The marquis de Condorcet wrote in 1790 about the inventors of the first alphabets: “Des hommes de génie, des bienfaiteurs éternels de l’humanité, dont le nom, dont la patrie même sont pour jamais ensevelis dans l’oubli.” Nicholas de Condorcet, *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, ed. Wilhelm Alff (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1963), 34.

3. For a discussion of Hirt’s correspondences with Hegel and Goethe, see Rainer Ewald, *Goethes Architektur: Des Poeten Theorie und Praxis* (Weimar: Ullrich, 1999), 290–307; Joseph Rykwert discusses

German travelers for his pedantic tours of Rome. Hence it may have seemed a bit unusual for him, as he was writing his most important academic treatise, to raise the kind of questions a younger person first faced with Roman ruins might ask. The simplicity of the questions, however, prepares the ground for a theoretical attitude, an interrogative stance that forms the basis for Hirt's greater theoretical schemes. The absence of textual references about ancient builders gives Hirt the justification to rely on something other than historical knowledge to explain the beauty of ancient structures. The position of the individual standing before or within a ruin becomes more important than any lost treatise about that building. At first glance, Hirt claims, the anonymity of ancient architects suggests that no agent can be assigned to the building's creation. No personal intention behind the arrangement of columns and steps can ever be known. Hirt's mournful tone reinforces the sense that the modern viewer is left only with a vast unknowable emptiness.

Yet the anonymity of ancient architects was a problem for which Hirt already knew the solution; indeed, he argues that the loss of the builders' identities gave modern viewers the opportunity to formulate a theory of architecture that would never have been possible for ancients. The absence of names and intentions meant that moderns were free and, at the same time, compelled to reflect on the higher spiritual meaning lingering within ancient ruins. The lack of texts would be more than compensated for by hermeneutic contemplation.

Hirt's reverie before Rome's ruins was by no means the first fantastical reconstruction of a building. The eighteenth century is brimming over with hallucinatory restorations of crumbled buildings. In 1788 the English architect John Soane stated that "every man of genius" must reflect with "heartfelt regret" on "the loss of these numerous treatises, composed by men whose ambition was to elevate the science, and to inspire the rising artists with the same enthusiasm which they felt!"<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to the German translation of Mézières's *Genius of Architecture*, Gottfried Huth similarly bemoaned the lack of systematic theory to organize the fragmentary history of architecture:

The great architects built more than spoke; they raised more excellent buildings than that they wrote about. Thus it has come to pass that we have few written works about the correspondence between architecture and our sensations. All that remains are meager observations passed down, a few fundamental statements and principles tossed out in passing, but nothing complete that hangs together and is well organized.<sup>5</sup>

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Hirt's place between the two in *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architecture History* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 89–91.

4. John Soane, *Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Buildings* (London, 1788; repr., Farnborough, England: Gregg International Publishers, 1971), 2.

5. Gottfried Huth, ed., *Allgemeines Magazin für die bürgerliche Baukunst* (Weimar: Carl Ludolph Hoffmanns Witwe und Erben, 1789), 1: 98.

Hirt's history of ancient architecture responds to this absence by attempting to synthesize Enlightenment theories of architecture with the subjective aesthetics of taste. Vitruvius himself had already complained about the many fragments left to him by earlier writers, and he had endeavored to construct an orderly account in his own treatise. For Hirt, a German living in Rome during the last decades of the eighteenth century, the problem of how to order the fragments of antiquity was even greater. While systematic theory sought to compensate for the lacunae in historical knowledge that ancient buildings presented, Johann Wolfgang Goethe presented a highly subjective interpretation of architectural history in his 1772 essay "On German Architecture."<sup>6</sup> Like Hirt, French theorists had sought for decades to reconcile the emotions a building inspired with the geometrical rationality of the traditional orders, yet these two strands never found a comfortable fit.<sup>7</sup> In Goethe's essay, they are purposively set off against each other directly. In the place of a systematic theory of architecture, Goethe formulates a heroic aesthetic of the solitary artist whose works can be understood only through a sympathetic phenomenological engagement. Goethe insists on experiencing buildings as distinct places through a radically subjective engagement with the spirit that resides there. His reveries before the Strasbourg cathedral break with Vitruvian efforts at ordering architecture. From the start, Goethe sets out deliberately to celebrate a single building and a solitary architect, in defiance of Mediterranean traditions. His essay posits a new form of pleasure in the Gothic, thereby suggesting a new relationship to the object. The cathedral holds out a phantasmic promise of satisfaction that arises from Goethe's claim to have discovered a long undetected wholeness in the facade, a feature he insists eighteenth-century criticism has suppressed. Central to his pleasure in the cathedral's harmony is the conviction that he has singularly discovered it. To enjoy the church, Goethe needs to assert that it has been denigrated by others, most notably by French classicists, and, as we shall see, by extension, by his father, Johann Caspar Goethe.

Already in 1943, Ernst Beutler, the founding director of the Goethe Museum in Frankfurt, noted the curious fact that the young author's first independently published prose piece was an essay on architecture.<sup>8</sup> Between spring 1771 and fall 1772, Goethe composed a rhapsody to the massive Gothic cathedral in Strasbourg, titled "On German Architecture," which appeared initially as a slim pamphlet in November 1772. However, not until it was republished in Herder's collection *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* in 1773, did the essay receive public notice. Although the essay clearly belongs to the youthful Sturm-und-Drang movement of the 1770s,

6. Goethe, HA 12: 7–15.

7. See Rudolf Wittkower, "Classical Theory and Eighteenth-Century Sensibility," in *Palladio and Palladianism* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 193–204—still one of the clearest surveys.

8. Ernst Beutler, *Von deutscher Baukunst: Goethes Hymnus auf Erwin von Steinbach; Seine Entstehung und Wirkung* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1943), 23.

architectural historians now look past its rebellious rhetoric to concentrate on what are considered its basic theoretical claims. Its spirited defense of the Strasbourg cathedral is generally credited as the first step in the German Gothic revival.<sup>9</sup> Huth, the editor of Germany's first architectural journal, *Allgemeines Magazin für bürgerliche Baukunst* (General Magazine for Civil Architecture), reprinted Goethe's essay again in 1789.<sup>10</sup> It became known again decades later, in 1806, when Goethe discussed it in his autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*. The original essay makes another appearance in 1823 when the aged Goethe was persuaded to allow its republication and to provide a preface comparing his mature views with those of his youth. In the decades following its first appearance, "On German Architecture" was read after the fact as a dramatic intervention in the architectural debates of the age. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel praises Goethe somewhat heavy-handedly as the first to challenge the French classicist dismissal of the Gothic style.<sup>11</sup>

Goethe's assertion that the Strasbourg cathedral should be understood as distinctly German has become the essay's most famous and controversial thesis. He goes on to claim that the church was designed according to principles entirely different from those applied to Italian or French classical buildings.<sup>12</sup> By claiming a Gothic cathedral as German, Goethe is quite simply affirming the old Italian complaint that northern European architecture was barbaric, filled with disguising ornamentations and lacking all sense of proportion. In defending the cathedral as distinctly northern, he also rejects Marc-Antoine Laugier's claim that architecture originated with a primitive hut made of four posts and a slanted roof. Laugier proposed that this simple building served as the model for the classical Greek temple's columns, entablature, and pediment and was the standard that all subsequent buildings should imitate. In 1753, Laugier argued: "All the splendors of architecture ever conceived have been modeled on the little rustic hut. . . . By approaching the simplicity of this first model . . . fundamental mistakes are avoided and true perfection is achieved."<sup>13</sup> Among other views, Laugier is highly critical of ornamentation, considers the wall an inessential component, and sees the pilaster

9. Klaus Jan Philipp, *Um 1800: Architekturtheorie und Architekturkritik in Deutschland zwischen 1790 und 1810* (Stuttgart: Axel Menges, 1997), 72–73; W. D. Robson-Scott, *The Literary Background of the Gothic Revival in Germany: A Chapter in the History of Taste* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 78, 84.

10. Huth, *Allgemeines Magazin*, 1: 81–91.

11. "In more recent times it was chiefly Goethe who took the lead in bringing [Gothic architecture] into honour again when he looked on nature and art with the freshness of youth and in a way opposed to the French and their principles." G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lecture on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 684.

12. Modern art historians, of course, trace the origin of the Gothic style back to the ambulatory of the St. Denis cathedral outside Paris. Eighteenth-century connoisseurs were unfamiliar with this lineage. Goethe simply reverts the widespread Italian prejudice that the Gothic was all architecture from the fall of Rome until at least the fifteenth century. He affirms that which was so often called barbaric. Marvin Trachtenberg, "Gothic/Italian 'Gothic': Toward a Redefinition," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 50.1 (March 1991): 22–23.

13. Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, trans. Wolfgang Herrmann and Anni Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977), 12.

as a bad imitation of a column. The idea that architecture began with the simple hut had already been mentioned by Vitruvius, and so was well known. Laugier elevated it to the standard by which all structures should be evaluated. In response, Goethe argues that the wall, not the column, is the constituent element in German architecture. The cold climate and the need for security made it the basis for all subsequent northern European building. The massive facade of the Strasbourg cathedral reflects this fundamental difference between the Mediterranean temple and the German stronghold.

While Goethe goes out of his way to contrast the ornate facade of the Strasbourg cathedral with the pillars of Mediterranean temples and palaces, the real innovation in "On German Architecture" lies in its account of architectural contemplation. Goethe opens his celebration of Gothic architecture with a search for the lost memory of the person who designed the cathedral. When he cannot find the gravestone of the "noble Erwin," the man Goethe believed had designed the cathedral, he asserts that it is not necessary to build a memorial to him, because the cathedral is just that. Here we find one of the many passages in which Goethe echoes his opponent Laugier, who writes: "[A beautiful building] stirs in us noble and moving ideas and that sweet emotion and enchantment which works of art carrying the imprint of a superior mind arouse in us. A beautiful building speaks eloquently for its architect."<sup>14</sup> The spirit of Erwin remains in the cathedral he made, just as the presence of God lingers in the natural world he created. If contemporaries have forgotten the historical architect who designed the cathedral, then, Goethe writes, he shares the same fate as God, who is also forgotten by those who crawl on his creation. In Sturm-und-Drang manner, Goethe celebrates the builder as a creative genius whose sublime works are comparable to nature. From the opening paragraph, he compares the cathedral first to a tree made by God, then to soaring cliffs. The divine is equated with the creation of sublime nature. God is the architect who raised mountains that reached the clouds. When he praises Erwin for the vision of Babel in his soul ("einen Babelgedanken in der Seele"), he is not making a critical statement; rather, Goethe means to place the architect in the pantheon of great artists.<sup>15</sup> In this essay, the biblical story of Babel's tower functions very much like the myth of Prometheus in Goethe's lyric poetry: it is a story of singular accomplishment.

14. Laugier, *Essay on Architecture*, 8.

15. For the Renaissance precedents for a celebratory account of the Babel legend, see Ulrike Wegener, *Die Faszination des Maßlosen: Der Turmbau zu Babel von Pieter Bruegel bis Athanasius Kircher* (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 1995); Robert Mode, "Masolino, Uccello, and the Orsini 'Uomini Famosi,'" *The Burlington Museum* 114.831 (June 1972): 324. Schadaeus in his 1617 list of man-made wonders of the world has no trouble comparing the Strasbourg cathedral with the Tower of Babel. Oseas Schadaeus, *Summum Argentoratensium Templum: Das ist Außführliche un Eigenentliche Beschreibung deß viel Künstlichen, sehr Kostbaren, und in aller Welt berühmten Münsters zu Strassburg* (Straßburg, 1617), iii. Enlightenment critics of absolutism tended to read the Babel story differently. Ludwig Martin Träger in his *Metaphysik* (Halle, 1770) warns against philosophical "Planmacher," who, like politicians, start huge projects, never to finish them.

The god brings about the union of humans and architecture. In his "Prometheus" fragment, as well as his more famous ode, Goethe credits the god with teaching humans to build houses.<sup>16</sup> In the Strasbourg essay, Goethe combines Prometheus with Babel. The essay's rebellious force is directed against the medieval church for its supposed restrictions on the cathedral project, and not, as in the ode, against the ruling deity, who in the essay functions as the foil for artistic genius. Goethe imagines the design and construction of the cathedral as an act of defiance against the church's institutional power, rather than as its supreme manifestation. For him, the architect Erwin, the spirit of the place, exists apart from the social organization of space.

Modern scholars provide a much more complex history of the cathedral, and even in his 1823 amendments, Goethe acknowledges the collective character of cathedral building. Among other inaccuracies, the celebration of Erwin overlooks the role of guild traditions. Despite having overrated the importance of a single man, Goethe's 1772 celebration of Erwin marks the changing status of the architect within aesthetics. Whereas patrons had long been credited with the erection of great buildings, Goethe's hymn to Erwin commences a shift in the German architectural discourse wherein the architect is increasingly held accountable for a building, because of his artistic abilities, rather than the patron, whose money and politics produce it. Whereas in the recitation of the church's development the older chronicles give far greater prominence to the succession of bishops in Strasbourg, Goethe addresses Erwin directly as the artist responsible for the finished work, thereby emphasizing conceptualization over execution, and presuming the existence of a single plan from a single person. In every case his attribution to Erwin depends on a distinctly new form of backward-looking, teleological projection from the gravestone to the building. Even the older sources that reference the inscription of Erwin's grave within the cathedral do so only to credit him as the master builder of the nave, not as the overall architect.<sup>17</sup>

Within Goethe's new aesthetic ideology, the architect is no longer a master craftsman who carries on the secret knowledge and building practices of his lodge; instead he transfers his singular vision into stone. His profession emerges in the eighteenth century from behind the authority of the patron, much as the modern poet becomes recognized as possessing a unique voice, rather than as mastering rhetorical techniques.<sup>18</sup> The French Academy of Architecture had been founded in 1671 in order to train architects under royal supervision.<sup>19</sup> A hundred years later

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16. Matthias Luserke, "Goethes Prometheus-Ode: Text und Kontext," in *Goethe Gedichte: Zweiund-dreißig Interpretationen*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1996), 50.

17. Schadaeus, *Summum Argentoratensium Templum*, 14.

18. Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17.4 (1984): 426 ff.

19. Antoine Picon, *French Architects and Engineers in the Age of Enlightenment*, trans. Martin Thom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.

Goethe argues against the standardized classicism of the Academy. He uses Erwin to illustrate that the poetic architect should not be confined by conventions. Any similarity between the cathedral and smaller churches in the region Goethe explains as Erwin allowing himself to be inspired by local forms, not as his conformity to convention. The cathedral is quite literally a monstrosity that is sponsored by the existing ecclesiastical building traditions in Strasbourg but cannot be localized to the indigenous context. The Strasbourg Muenster fits the Sturm-und-Drang notion that the "genius" reshapes traditional forms. This eighteenth-century characterization of a building as monstrous for its adaptation of the familiar reappears in more recent architectural theories that define the new in architecture "as being unattributably different yet continuous."<sup>20</sup> Just as Goethe's poet has broken with the rhetorical traditions of lyric poetry, so too has the inspired architect stepped away from the craft-bound role of an artisan working within a received tradition. The rupture, which Sturm-und-Drang poetry is supposed to embody for German literature, is projected onto architecture, albeit with the single example from Strasbourg. Goethe does not provide a revised history of architecture; rather, he incorporates the experience of a building into his own poetic form. Architecture for Goethe culminates in rapture. The parallel between author and architect is a corollary of the originary experience of the subject's confrontation with the building.

By postulating a single architect and by further ascribing psychological traits typical of the Sturm-und-Drang representation of the poetic genius, Goethe imagines the cathedral as a medium between himself and its architect.<sup>21</sup> It becomes a manifestation of artistic vision that invests its meaning in material form. The spiritual character of the architect is juxtaposed to the building and ultimately is praised as the cause of which the facade is an effect. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche criticizes this organization of meaning as a doubling of a single event in which every thing exists as an effect and then a cause is attributed to it afterward.<sup>22</sup> Goethe posits an artistic spirit as the source of the cathedral, and then when he cannot find a sign of that cause, he posits that the cause has turned into the effect by arguing that the architect's memory lives through his building. The building serves as a material confirmation of the architect's spirit.

The classicist Étienne-Louis Boullée, writing during the Revolution, makes a similar argument in his essay on architecture. Like Goethe, Boullée constructs the building as a doubled cause and effect. Writing against Vitruvius's definition

20. Greg Lynn, "The Renewed Novelty of Symmetry," in *Folds, Bodies, and Blobs: Collected Essays* (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, 2004), 65.

21. In order to recuperate the essay from the charge of narcissism, Reinhard Liess stresses the tension between Goethe as observer and the cathedral as object; however, in doing so, Liess feels obliged to defend Goethe's art historical statements about the building. Reinhard Liess, *Goethe vor dem Straßburger Münster: Zum Wissenschaftsbild der Kunst* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1985), 94.

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 45.



of architecture as the art of building, Boullée insists that before construction can begin, a building needs to be designed: "In order to execute, it is first necessary to conceive. Our earliest ancestors built their huts only when they had a picture of them in their minds. It is this product of the mind, this process of creation, that constitutes architecture and which can consequently be defined as the art of designing and bringing to perfection any building whatsoever."<sup>23</sup> The mechanics of construction are for Boullée quite secondary. Boullée almost goes so far as to argue that buildings exist foremostly as artistic intention; whether they are ever finished remains secondary. Like Goethe, Boullée grounds architecture on the inspiration of individuals, who are motivated but not bound by tradition.

### Architectural Epiphanies

Even though he celebrates the cathedral's architect as an autonomous artist, Goethe does not treat the church as a completely secular place. As the "Third Pilgrimage to Erwin's Grave" makes explicit, Goethe's early writing about the cathedral reformulates biblical tropes and redeploys the liturgical organization of the cathedral for his own canonization of the artist.<sup>24</sup> The eighteenth century was by no means the first era to design buildings with the goal of changing the perceptions and emotions of those within. In her treatise on medieval memory techniques, Mary Carruthers argues that monastic buildings were laid out as meditational engines that guided both the movement and the devotion of monks.<sup>25</sup> The emotional effect that cathedrals had on ordinary Christians was well understood in the Middle Ages. Architectural historians have long posited that the play of light and the proportions of the cathedral's design were perceived by medieval Christians as a reflection of God's architectural order in the cosmos.<sup>26</sup> The liturgical stations of the church belonged to an architectural rhetoric that inspired devotion in the believer. The cathedral's tropes posited a comparison between the particular building and the heavenly city.<sup>27</sup> Not

23. Étienne-Louis Boullée, "Architecture, Essay on Art," in *Boullée and Visionary Architecture*, ed. Helen Rosenau (New York: Harmony, 1976), 83.

24. Robson-Scott notes that Goethe has none of the religious awe found in later romantic writing about cathedrals; however, it overstates the case to claim that he saw no mystical or irrational qualities in the Gothic. Robson-Scott, *Gothic Revival*, 88.

25. Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 269.

26. Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951; repr., New York: Signet, 1976), 44 ff.; Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (1957; repr., New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 21–58. Peter Kidson argues that no documented relationship exists between the first formulation of Gothic design at St. Denis and the mystical writings so often used to explain the architecture. Peter Kidson, "Panofsky, Suger, and St. Denis," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 50 (1987): 1–17.

27. It was a well-established trope of sacred architecture that the monumentality of a cathedral's archways and towers was intended to evoke a city gate in keeping with the reference to Augustine's city of God. For a review of the different interpretations of the westwork at Corvey, see Charles McClendon, *The Origins of Medieval Architecture: Building in Europe, A.D. 600–900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 191.

only did the passage through a cathedral's massive westwork give the sense that one had entered into the city of God, the internal arrangement of the church allowed the experienced practitioner to revisit, both physically and spiritually, devotional sites.<sup>28</sup> As a medieval monk might use the cathedral to inspire thought, so too Goethe uses the Strasbourg cathedral as a technology of recollection. However, he redefines the Christian understanding of the building as memory site. Rather than reading the design as a device to contemplate the divine creation of the cosmos, Christ's passion, or the lives of the saints, he understands the cathedral as serving as a memorial to its human architect. Goethe does not perceive the intricate details of the cathedral as recreating the divine order; instead he asserts that the cathedral produces emotions in the viewer comparable to experiencing the sublime in nature, an effect that, in the first paragraph, Goethe associates with the divine.

Goethe's approach to architecture is fully in keeping with the eighteenth-century expectation that a building reveal its aesthetic quality by creating an emotional response in the viewer. However, unlike most contemporary architectural critics, he adopts a mystical tone in describing his reactions. The Strasbourg essay turns the Enlightenment's contemplative approach to judging architecture into a melancholic invocation of the dead architect's spirit. Goethe's later encounters with Italian architecture are understood in much the same mournful manner. In both venues, Strasbourg and northern Italy, Goethe interprets buildings by constructing dialogues with the ghost of the architect. In Venice he remarks that the meaning of architecture rises before him like a spirit from a grave: "The art of building rises up like an old ghost from the grave, calling on me to learn the rules of a dead language, not to practice them or to take joy in them, but instead to quietly honor the venerable past age that has disappeared forever."<sup>29</sup> Although Goethe is here referring to his discovery of Roman architecture, the awakened ghost metaphor describes his earlier approach to the Strasbourg cathedral, as well as his Italian "conversations" with Andrea Palladio. In every case, the dialogue with the imaginary architect entails a critical exchange, in which the faults of buildings are examined along with their best features. The spectator is likewise open to learning from the building—a gesture that separates Goethe's encounters from romanticism's introverted monologues on ancient cathedrals.<sup>30</sup> The narrator in Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar* dreams of a night visit to a picture gallery in which the ghosts of great painters stand in front of their masterpieces; however, he is too frightened to address Raphael, his Italian ideal, and is struck dumb as he turns to Dürer. For Wackenroder, as for Goethe, aesthetic contemplation queries the artist's intentions, though early on, in the second Raphael essay, the romantic

28. Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 261.

29. Goethe, *Italienische Reise* [12 October 1786], in *Werke*, 92.

30. Jens Bisky, *Poesie der Baukunst: Architekturästhetik von Winckelmann bis Boisserée* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 2000), 192.

critic suggests that the secrets that structure artistic meaning are themselves unknowable.<sup>31</sup>

With almost every important encounter with a building, from Strasbourg to Vincenza to Rome and Paestum, Goethe described how he approached the building, how his expectations were contradicted by his experience before it, and how the contemplation of the building altered his self-understanding as an artist. This basic narrative underlies even those passages where Goethe recounts disappointment with a building or city, as he does in southern Italy. The religious tone of his encounters is easily discerned.<sup>32</sup> In each telling, he nears a renowned building as a pilgrim eager for an epiphany. In the Strasbourg essay, he cites Peter's vision in the book of Acts, chapter 10, to explain his respect for Erwin.<sup>33</sup> While in Venice reading Palladio, Goethe uses expressly religious and visual terms to describe his new understanding of architecture: "The scales have fallen from my eyes, the fog rises, and I can recognize objects."<sup>34</sup> This sudden insight into architecture in Italy follows the pattern already set out in Germany. The one major difference is that in Strasbourg Goethe rejects his father's classicism, whereas in Italy he affirms it so as to exceed his father. However, in every instance these moments are described as epiphanies that arise from the visual contemplation of the building from the outside. As sudden, seemingly uncontrolled emotions, the epiphany objects to the reflective integration of systematic philosophy. Goethe's repeated insistence on feeling a response to a building rather than thinking or measuring it out makes clear how important it was for him not to immediately refer to the classical tradition in judging a structure.

That the essay imitates the style of a mystical epiphany does not mean that it reduces the experience of contemplating the cathedral to a single moment. Epiphanies stretch out as a dialogue, even as they posit an instance of recognition. More important than the speed with which an insight arrives is its location. The poet always returns to the place to find confirmation that enriches the initial insight. Goethe's illumination before the cathedral is more profane than sacred. He alludes to biblical passages but only in order to describe his encounter with the human.

Goethe presents a spectatorial relationship between building and observer that is very much in keeping with developments in eighteenth-century architectural theory. Within the terms of the discourse, the viewer's emotional response to the building compares to his or her reaction to a person's private being. Understood

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31. Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1925), 69–70.

32. Beutler states that the rhythm of so much of Goethe's Sturm-und-Drang prose has the quality of a sermon. Not until his Italian journey does he lose this manner. Beutler, *Von deutscher Baukunst*, 47.

33. Beutler uses the reference to connect the essay with Goethe's visit to Sesenheim, where he is wooing a *Pfarrerstochter* and may have heard a sermon on the passage. Beutler notes that the passage is used after Easter and Ascension. Beutler, *Von deutscher Baukunst*, 28.

34. Goethe, *Tagebuch der italienische Reise*, FA 15.1: 686.

spatially, a building's facade presents an image that allows insight into its interior, where the soul, the psyche, or the moral character resides. The exterior serves really only as a conduit to the more important hidden identity of a building. The facade is crucial for its signifying function, but its importance as beautiful image is demoted. French eighteenth-century theorists had already put forward the argument that buildings should be judged by their character. Goethe extends this standard to all art, while insisting on the singularity of each work. The sight of the great building, be it a Gothic cathedral or a Renaissance palace, commences an imaginary, indeed almost hallucinatory, exchange of conversations and glances between building and observer that constitutes a sense of place that Goethe insists ought not be abstracted into principles of architecture.

Goethe turns the French focus on discerning character into a gothic tale by using the ancient notion of a "genius loci" to give buildings a human voice. The physiognomic metaphor implicit within the aesthetics of "character" becomes an uncanny tale of spirits in buildings. An anecdote Goethe recounts in *Poetry and Truth* shows just how easily academic discourse turns ghostly. A few months after arriving in Strasbourg, he joined a party that happened to be in a house on the sloping bank of the Rhine across from the cathedral. The dinner guests could all enjoy a clear view of the Muenster, and so they fell into polite architectural conversation. Goethe tells how he mentioned to one guest that the cathedral's one completed tower had not been finished according to its design. In discussing the missing details, the guest asked who would have told him this, and Goethe answered: "The tower itself." Upon this the guest revealed that he was the porter to the cathedral tower and that he could show Goethe archived plans that confirmed his judgment.<sup>35</sup> The claim that the tower told the poet what was missing from its structure was pragmatically meant as a statement about interpreting the facade of a building. Taken at its literal and most fantastic meaning, the poet's answer also means that the building speaks. Goethe transforms this ancient motif, stones that speak, into a ghostly story wherein the dead architect rises from his own building to explain its structure. Goethe refers to "the genius of the ancients" that rose "from the grave."<sup>36</sup> The genius loci that Alexander Pope mentions in his epistle to Lord Burlington appears in Goethe's essay as a spirit. Pope was advising the English patron of architecture not to rely on Italian, most notably Palladian, models, but to design according to the local conditions, and presumably traditions:

Consult the genius of the place in all;  
That tells the waters or to rise, or fall;  
Or helps th' ambitious hill the heav'ns to scale,

35. Goethe, FA 14: 544.

36. Goethe, "On German Architecture," in *Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Ellen von Nardroff and Ernest von Nardorff (New York: Suhrkamp, 1986), 4; Goethe, FA 18: 111.

Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;  
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,  
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,  
Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending lines;  
Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.

The genius loci has no voice in Pope. While Pope ascribes diverse activities to the genius loci, he does not give him a voice. Pope does not spell out how Burlington, or any other builder, would actually consult with the spirit of a place. Goethe, on the other hand, turns to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the alchemic theories of the sixteenth century so that he might conjure up the spirit.

In Strasbourg, Goethe's genius loci is not the spirit that brings nature and architecture into an idyllic union. Only in Italy will he discover the Palladian harmonies Pope considered so inappropriate to England. Beauty is not the first impression the Gothic cathedral gives off; rather, Goethe is shocked by its monstrous appearance, and even after he has resolved his disturbed feelings, he never forgets the struggle with horror and repulsion that lies at the heart of eighteenth-century sublime. The invocation of the architect's ghost is part of Goethe's struggle to recover from a shattering architectural perception.

Throughout his career, Goethe makes sense of buildings, some of which trouble him initially as repulsive forms, by engaging in a hermeneutic process wherein he reflects on his own historical and aesthetic position as spectator, and then poetically addresses the building and its architect so as to formulate a critical judgment of the structure's aesthetic and historical significance. This engagement with architecture has a specular quality similar to the patterns David Wellbery describes in Goethe's early lyric poetry.<sup>37</sup> The contemplation of a building with its attendant dialogues between spectator and structure ends up constituting a more certain identity for both the subject and his object of reverie. In the case of the Strasbourg cathedral, both poet and cathedral begin the dialogue from an uncertain position: the Muenster because of its devalued Gothic appearance and Goethe because of his uncertain identity as an artist. Beauty is not the only standard; indeed at one point in the essay, Goethe pushes beauty aside in favor of art that is "characteristic" of a historical era. Art that reflects certain truths, even if they are ugly, seems, at the middle point of the essay, to be better than all too harmonious and agreeable forms, though ultimately Goethe reconciles beauty and character in a higher form that the cathedral is said to embody.

The facade of the building is the flash point for Goethe to connect a historical moment with the present. Borrowing in an unconventional manner from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, one can suggest that Goethe's essay on the Strasbourg

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37. David Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 27.

cathedral is an example of a dialectical image. Goethe posits his own brief history of German architecture based on his immediate apprehension of the cathedral's facade. Out of the sublime sight of the cathedral's towering westwork, Goethe constructs a historical thesis, namely, that the building's facade, long denigrated as hideous and barbaric, stands as a rebuke to classical aesthetics and to the assertion of French national style. As Reinhard Liess notes, Goethe never postulates a history of Gothic architecture. He does not even generalize about "the Gothic" as a style or manner; rather, he organizes his thoughts in relation to a single vision, an instant that he draws out and repeats.<sup>38</sup> The essay is organized as a set of contrasts, between wall and pillar, between a theory of French classicism and the experience of looking at the cathedral, between rationality and feeling. These juxtapositions never rise to the level of historical narrative. Unlike Laugier, who seeks to abstract away from the experience of buildings in order to elaborate principles of architecture, Goethe's essay refuses quite deliberately to move beyond the place before the cathedral: "Principles are even more damaging to the genius than examples. Individual artists may have worked on individual parts before him, but he is the first from whose soul the parts emerge grown together into an everlasting whole."<sup>39</sup> The process of making judgments, with all the subjective twists and turns that constitute architectural contemplation, is more important for Goethe than for Laugier. The moment in Strasbourg is never really singular; indeed, for some months Goethe replicates his encounter, and nevertheless it is dependent on the specific location. He returns over and over again to the same place so as to confirm and expand upon his first impression. For Goethe the sight of the building grants him insight into history. That Goethe's historical thesis differs from, even contradicts, Benjamin's matters little. Both writers rely on the image as an entry into a lost moment in the past. Benjamin's dialectic at a standstill affirms that the present constructs, or shapes, our understanding of the past. For Goethe the historical moment of the dialectical image is a deeply personal and empowering engagement. He couples this epiphany with the late eighteenth-century condition of German politics: the lack of a distinctive German identity, and the fragmentation of sovereignty into princely interests. More so than that of Benjamin, Goethe's writing makes evident that the perception of the dialectical image cannot be disentangled from the psyche of the observer or the particular experience of place.

Any reading of the epiphany before the cathedral needs to consider the unconscious as well as the socially critical energies contained within it. The epiphany in Goethe differs from the profane illuminations of Benjamin's work because Goethe presents it as lived experience, rather than as historical method. Goethe's moment of insight revives a dead authority, a forgotten brother from whom the poet learns.

38. Reinhard Liess, *Goethe vor dem Straßburger Münster: Zum Wissenschaftsbild der Kunst* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1985), 20.

39. Goethe, "On German Architecture," 4; Goethe, FA 18: 112.

Benjamin's dialectics are less heroically individual. Goethe still writes in the religious tradition of a personal conversion, whereas Benjamin awaits a messianic transformation of society. Goethe confronts the fraternal shade, but in challenging him, he also seeks, as does Benjamin, to revive a repressed and scorned mode of representation—in this case, the Gothic facade. Like Benjamin, Goethe revives an arcane mysticism as the linguistic medium for his epiphany. For Benjamin it is the Kabbalah; for Goethe the alchemy of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>40</sup> Just as Faust wishes to learn from the Erdgeist while controlling it, so Goethe in his architectural encounters wishes to both study and overcome the spirit of ancient architects. Within the cosmology of sixteenth-century alchemy, the spirit of a place embodies and brings about its material existence. In his critical commentary on *Faust*, Erich Trunz provides extensive documentation that the early modern hermetic tradition (a source for Goethe's *Faust*) would use the term *archeus* to describe that spirit that organized the elements, setting each in its proper position.<sup>41</sup> Zedler's dictionary definition of *archeus* notes two meanings of the term: first, a spirit that manifests itself as the cause for the natural order; or, for those who find the causation for things in the mechanical operations of the body, the term refers to the soul, which sets the body in motion.<sup>42</sup> Of these two meanings, Goethe's essay depicts the artist or *archeus* as a spirit that brings the material things into existence. The scene in which the poet confronts the demonic spirit plays itself out differently, depending in large part on how readily an identificatory relationship can be established between the two figures. The invocation of Erwin does not threaten to overwhelm the poet, whereas the Erdgeist denies any similarity with the mortal Faust. The ghost of Erwin serves more as a teacher and guide, closer to Dante's invocation of Virgil or, perhaps more ominously, Hamlet's conversation with his father's spirit, both scenes that Goethe used in later works. The moment of confrontation in the Strasbourg essay ends peacefully, as the relation shifts quickly to a brotherly union between artists, a resolution that never occurs in *Faust*.

## Addressing the Architect

Aside from brief references to Goethe's enthusiasm, architectural criticism tends to overlook the rhetorical forms that shape the identifications and polemics of "On German Architecture," yet the essay's modes of address are crucial to Goethe's

40. Goethe describes reading Arnold's *Kirchen- und Ketzergeschichte*: "I busily studied the various opinions, and since I had heard it said often enough that in the end every person has his own religion, it seemed perfectly natural to me that I could form my own and did this with great satisfaction. The new Platonism lay at its foundation, the hermetic, the mystical, and the cabbalistic each contributed their part and thus I constructed my own world, which looked strange enough." Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, FA 14: 382 (Deutscher Klassiker edition, end of bk. 8).

41. Goethe, HA 3: 519–520.

42. Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (1732–1754) (<http://mdz.bib-bvb.de/digbib/lexika/zedler>), 1211.

attempt to define the architect as artist.<sup>43</sup> The essay begins with the poet speaking to Erwin in the first person. In a mood of disheartened expectation, the opening line lays out the semiotic triangle that Goethe will use repeatedly in his efforts to understand buildings: "As I was wandering over your grave, noble Erwin..." The grave is the cathedral, the memorial for the artist. The first-person speaker cannot find the gravestone, which he is certain, must be near. He already knows its inscription from a booklet by Heinrich Behr in 1744.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, travel books had long mentioned Erwin's gravestone. Goethe might just as well have read about a similar inscription in Oseas Schadaeus's handbook of 1617.<sup>45</sup> Schadaeus gives the reader good reason to anticipate a visit. A patriotic Alsatian, Schadaeus brags that the Strasbourg cathedral has a tower taller than every other church in Christendom. Indeed he rates the cathedral as the eighth wonder of the world, behind the seven that had been known since antiquity.<sup>46</sup> Goethe's more biblical language reiterates the visit of the two Marys to Jesus's tomb after his crucifixion. When he fails to find Erwin's gravestone, his dejection is quite spiritual: "I was saddened to the depth of my soul."<sup>47</sup> At first he thinks to design a grander grave, but then decides that it matters not if Erwin has been forgotten by the ants who crawl over his creation. His recuperative gesture compares Erwin with God. Both have been forgotten, but contemplating their work can restore the memory of both, whereupon Goethe presents a string of comparisons between the church and natural phenomena. The text states explicitly that a plastic work of art makes up for the absence of a text, the cathedral substitutes for the gravestone, implying similarly that nature replaces the Bible as the historical documentation of God's presence and death.

Although the essay's opening struggle to recuperate Erwin's memory posits the cathedral as a sufficient memorial, Goethe ends the passage with the promise to preserve Erwin's name on the bark of a tree. The parallel between trees and

43. Rykwert, *On Adam's House*, 89.

44. The full title reads: *Straßburger Münster- und Thurn-Büchlein oder Kurtzer Begriff der merkwürdigsten Sachen, so im Münster und dasigen Thurn zu finden* (Straßburg, 1744); cited in Goethe, FA 18: 1108.

45. Schadaeus, *Summum Argentoratensium Templum*, 14; Paul Frankl, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 329–331. Schadaeus gives a slightly different version of the tombstone: "Ervvinus von Steinbach war Bawmeister/ wie solches die Inscription uber der Schappel oder MittelMünsterthüren außweißt/ die also lautet: Anno Domini 1277. In die Beati / Urbani hoc Gloriosum Opus / inchoavit Magister Erwinus de Steinbach."

46. Schadaeus, *Summum Argentoratensium Templum*, 2: "Sonsten wird es bey den Gelehrten inn Lateinischer Sprech die genenne Summum Templum, der höchste Tempel oder die fürnembste Kirch/ nicht allein daumb/ dieweil dieser Baw höher ist als andere Kirchen und Gebew der Statt/ und deß gantzen Europae; denn weder der Wienerische/ Landshutische/ Antorssische/ oder Freyburgische Thurn dieseminn der höhe zu vergleichen.... Und zwar wann wir zwischen dem Münster alhie zu Straßburg und densieben Wundern der Welt eine comparation un vergleichung anstellen/ unnd solche secundum quatuor causarum genera examinieren unnd auff die schaw führen wollen/ werden alle recht verständige den jenigen nicht widersprechen können/ die es entweder dem mehrertheil der Sieben Wunder vorziehen/ oder doch zumwenigsten das Achte derselben sein unnd paßieren lassen."

47. Goethe, "On German Architecture," 3.



the cathedral tower is reiterated as the speaker childishly promises to carve Erwin's name with an offering of leaves and grass.<sup>48</sup> The grove functions as a site of meditation and the place from which the poet speaks. It serves as a deliberately nonarchitectural memory theater wherein Goethe preserves his poetic inspirations. Nature serves in Goethe's early writing as the antithesis of architecture, as the escape from urban society and patriarchal authority. In "On German Architecture" and then even in *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe performs the strange move of situating the cathedral in the forest, a combination that Caspar David Friedrich will make to startling effect decades later. The opening address to Erwin is uttered not in front of or within the cathedral, but in a secret forest retreat. Erwin has been conjured into this hidden grove presumably because of the aesthetic sympathies between Gothic ornamentation and the German forest.<sup>49</sup> Goethe addresses Erwin as "trefflicher Mann," which a dictionary would translate as "excellent man," but when the phrase is read in an overly literal and etymological manner Erwin is literally the man who has been met. Given that Goethe in later years would bemoan his youthful enthusiasm for coded symbols in this essay, it is not too much to speculate that "trefflich" can refer back to its etymology as "treffen." The pilgrim Goethe, who has raced to Strasbourg, fleeing his paternal home, has met his ideal, the architect whom he later calls a brother. Erwin is "trefflich" because Goethe has encountered him through the cathedral, he appears as a spirit to whom the poet addresses the essay, and yet further he is the artist who has made the place, he constitutes the space that is the cathedral.

Goethe responds to Erwin's place with one of his own. The text's deictic terms situate the moment of communication through the use of the familiar *Du* imperative to "see here in this grove" (siehe hier in diesem Hain). Goethe and Erwin are conversing in the forest about his cathedral, leaving the reader to be drawn in through the command to "look here." The moment and the place are imaginary; they exist in writing or in the mind of the reader, like the memory theaters that preserve thoughts in a mental space. Already in its brief opening paragraphs, the essay has constituted three distinct spaces, all of which memorialize Erwin: the public cathedral, the forest grove, and the readerly imagination.

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48. Norbert Knopp reads this passage in relation to Goethe's later claim that the details of the cathedral contribute to the whole just as the small features of nature belong to a landscape, i.e., that all parts of the decoration contribute to the beauty of the building. Norbert Knopp, "Zu Goethes Hymnus *Von Deutscher Baukunst*, D. M. Ervini a Steinbach," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 53.4 (1979): 617–650.

49. Knopp notes that the association between the Gothic cathedral and the German forest can be traced to the early fifteenth century, when it is mentioned in a letter to an unnamed pope by an unknown author (perhaps Raphael or Castiglione). Knopp, "Zu Goethes Hymnus," 271–276. Frankl discusses the forest theory of pseudo-Raphael's letter, most notably the claim that the pointed arch emerged from the practice of tying two pines together to form support for a hut's roof. Paul Frankl, *Gothic Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), 217–218. See also Rykwert, *On Adam's House*, 97–101.

Goethe conceives the spirit of Erwin as the controlling artist whose singular intention is expressed in the building. Erwin creates within a tradition; his spirit alludes to the decorations that appear throughout the city's churches. Goethe conceives tradition not as an agent, and the cathedral is not a collective construction; the continuity between the Muenster and the local churches is a product of the artist's incorporation of local tradition, rather than the activity of some collective such as a guild. The artist improves upon the local practice yet draws from it as well. Erwin is above and within his society.

At a crucial point in Goethe's narration, when he stands confused and overwhelmed by the cathedral's monumental ornamentation, the ghost of Erwin rises to explain his work to the watchful poet. While ghosts have long provided protagonists with secret knowledge, in epic literature they are usually not artists who interpret their own work. The fantasy allows the viewer to learn the artist's aspirations when creating. Although no modern critic would expect that Dante or Homer would rise up to explain his intentions, Goethe uses this fiction throughout his life as a means of creating a literary voice for architecture. The fantasy presumes two forms of identification: first, sympathy between audience and artist; and second, and most problematically, when faced with ancient buildings, the ability to ascribe the work to a single creator. With Palladian structures in northern Italy, the attribution is based on the *Quattro libri dell'architettura* (Four Books of Architecture). With the temples of Paestum, the absence of a known architect heightens their alien effect on Goethe and leads him to struggle with the question Hirt described. With the Strasbourg cathedral, he settles on the tradition that a single person designed the facade, though the attribution was probably uncertain even in the eighteenth century.

The dialogue with the architect has the tone of a biblical revelation. Goethe positions the architect as a divine figure, as one who speaks, as an angel, in commands and with an inherent sense of necessity. Erwin appears before the poet with a challenging question—"Was staunst Du?" (Why are you amazed?)—as if the poet's confusion before the cathedral suggests doubt in its perfection. By asking, "Why are you amazed?" the spirit reverses the terms of the eighteenth-century discourse on taste. With the adoption of a biblical voice, the spirit in the text announces that the cathedral is not subject to a canon of good taste. The poet needs to overcome his anxiety. The cathedral is no longer treated as the mere object of emotional evaluation; instead it is presented as an unquestionable given. It is the poet's emotions that need to adapt to the building. The problem of how spirits address humans is an old one in the Christian tradition. In Luke 1:29 when the angel appears before Mary hailing her as blessed by God, she responds: "Welch ein Gruß ist das?" To which the angel replies: "Fürchte dich nicht, Maria!" (Do not be afraid!) When in Mark 16 Mary Magdalena and the other women find an angel in Jesus's tomb, the first words spoken to them are "Entsetzt euch nicht!" (Do not be amazed!) In Matthew 28:5 the same command is given as "Fürchtet euch nicht!" (Do not be afraid!)

Having rebuked the confused judgment of the cathedral, the spirit of Erwin immediately defends its massiveness as both necessary and traditional for the city. The scale of the cathedral is simply greater than that of the surrounding churches. The spirit again resorts to godlike proclamations by declaring the expansion of local traditions to a massive scale as both necessary and beautiful. "That all was necessary, and I lent it beauty" (Das all war notwendig, und ich bildete es schön) suggests the divine Creator's satisfaction in the book of Genesis.<sup>50</sup> However, the architectural spirit is far from omnipotent, and the last lines of his monologue bemoan the failure to complete the cathedral according to his original plan. The fate of the architect is to not complete his buildings as intended. The unfinished second tower marks an emptiness in the architect's work. Erwin speaks now more as one of Dante's shades who regrets the incompleteness of his own life. Goethe has the poet strike a pose like Dante having heard the story of Paolo and Francesca. After the spirit points out the flaws of his masterpiece, the poet sinks into sympathetic sadness: "And so he departed from me and my heart was filled with sympathy and melancholy."<sup>51</sup> The monologue on the cathedral's success and failure ends with the poet's melancholy identification with the architect. This sad feeling is itself an established trope within poetry. The equivalence between poet and architect is established through poetic means.

The encounter with the spirit is presented as educational, and as a means for the poet to overcome his fear of the cathedral: "I owe it to your instruction, noble genius, that I no longer reel when confronted with your profundities." (Deinem Unterricht dank' ich's, Genius, daß mir's nicht mehr schwindelt an deinen Tiefen.)<sup>52</sup> The conclusion to the encounter returns to Goethe's initial anxiety in order to assert through a repetition of the spirit's biblical rhetoric that it has been overcome. The declaration "Es ist gut!" signals the end of anxiety over the cathedral's monstrosity and his own insecurity before it.

David Wellbery uses the Strasbourg essay to define genius as it appears in Goethe's early writings.<sup>53</sup> Wholeness, the ability to pour creative force into a single unity, distinguishes genius. Kenneth Calhoun follows Wellbery's lead as he points out that the cathedral is incomplete, that the originary unity of Erwin's plan for the building was not executed.<sup>54</sup> Goethe will return to the tension between plan and building most notably in Italy, where he discovers that many of Palladio's buildings do not exist as they are drawn in the *Four Books*. There remains a gap between the intention of the artistic genius and its execution. In Italy, Goethe sympathizes with the problems he imagines Palladio had in executing his plans. The entire dynamic

50. Goethe, "On German Architecture," 6; Goethe, HA 12: 11.

51. Goethe, "On German Architecture," 6; Goethe, HA 12: 11.

52. Goethe, "On German Architecture," 6; Goethe, HA 12: 11.

53. Wellbery, *Specular Moment*, 124–126.

54. Kenneth S. Calhoun, "The Gothic Imaginary: Goethe in Strasbourg," *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 75 (2001): 6.

of imaged wholeness and failed completion is made obvious by the visual discrepancy between drawing and structure.

## The Disturbing Place

While the opening section of "On German Architecture" displays its enthusiasm for the cathedral, Goethe acknowledges later that he went to the cathedral plaza prejudiced against Gothic ornamentation as an excessive and incoherently organized addition to any building: "When I first came to visit the cathedral, my head was filled with general notions of good taste. . . . Under the heading 'Gothic,' as in an entry in the dictionary, I piled up all the synonymous misconceptions that I had ever encountered, such as indefinite, disorganized, unnatural, patched-together, tacked-on, overladen."<sup>55</sup> The decisive transformation occurs when Goethe faces the front of the cathedral, a massive wall of decoration leading the eye upward to the structure's single tower:

But what unexpected emotions seized me when I finally stood before the edifice! My soul was suffused with a feeling of immense grandeur. . . . They say it is thus with the joys of heaven, and how often I returned to savor such joys on earth. . . . How often I returned to view its dignity and magnificence from all sides. How often the gentle light of dusk, as it fused the countless parts into unified masses, soothed my eyes, weary from intense searching. There all stood before my soul, simple and great, and I, full of bliss, felt develop in me the power at the same time to enjoy and understand. There I sensed the genius of the great builder.

Mit welcher unerwarteten Empfindung überraschte mich der Anblick, als ich davor trat! Ein ganzer, großer Eindruck füllte meine Seele. . . . Sie sagen, daß es also mit den Freuden des Himmels sei, und wie oft bin ich zurückgekehrt, diese himmlisch-irdische Freude zu genießen. . . . Wie oft hat die Abenddämmerung mein durch forschendes Schauen ermattetes Aug' mit freundlicher Ruhe geletzt, wenn durch sie die unzähligen Teile zu ganzen Massen schmolzen, und nun diese, einfach und groß, vor meiner Seele standen und meine Kraft sich wonnevoll entfaltete, zugleich zu genießen und zu erkennen! Da offenbarte sich mir, in leise Ahnungen, der Genius des großen Werkmeisters.<sup>56</sup>

That last "There" (*Da*) functions as a deictic marker telling us the place not only in physical space, but also within the train of Goethe's life and in the rush of his

55. Goethe, "On German Architecture," 5; "Als ich das erstmal nach dem Münster ging, hatt' ich den Kopf voll allgemeiner Erkenntnis guten Geschmacks. . . . Unter die Rubrik Gotisch, . . . haufte ich alle synonymisch Mißverständnisse, die mir von Unbestimmtem, Ungeordnetem, Unnatürlichem, Zusammengestoppeltem, Aufgeflicktem, Überladnem jemals durch den Kopf gezogen waren" (Goethe, HA 12: 10).

56. Goethe, HA 12: 11.

rhetoric, where the culmination of his reverie was reached. Far into his essay on architecture, Laugier, whom Goethe derogatorily refers to as a “flighty French philosopher-critic” (neufanzösischer philosophierender Kenner), also comes to speak about the Strasbourg cathedral with admiration.

Goethe sets architectural viewing in a narrative of travel, thereby highlighting the temporal character of architectural experiences. The sight of the building distinguishes his viewing of art from some motionless, atemporal contemplation. Yet the narrative always revolves around certain emotionally charged places. The visit to the building usually involves a long trip that is structured by a succession of arrivals and departures that are built into each other. Goethe's encounters with ancient architecture follow a pattern that starts with the anticipation of seeing the building, the surprise of engagement, and then a dialogue between himself and others (often the ghost of the architect) that attempts to resolve the strong emotions engendered by the sight of the building.

No visit to a site occurs without preparation. Despite the importance of his immediate reaction to the sight of a building, Goethe always arrives anticipating a particular image. He has seen pictures, heard travelers' tales, read criticism, and thus the encounter, for all its immediacy, is already imbedded in an architectural discourse. The poet reacts not only to the building but also to everything he has heard. The discrepancy between expectations and experience often becomes its own topic. In Strasbourg he counts on being disappointed, then finds that he is amazed. In Verona he hopes to see the culmination of ancient architecture but finds disappointment. Then later as he visits Venice and Rome, he rediscovers scenes he has known since his childhood from the prints in his father's salon.

The travel narrative of Goethe's architectural encounters parallels the movement of the lyric subject in Goethe's early poem “Willkommen und Abschied” (Welcome and Departure). In this paradigmatic work, the speaker races on horseback to arrive at a secret place where the intensity of joining his beloved is represented as an exchange of glances.<sup>57</sup> Dark pines threaten the rider in much the same way that Goethe saw the Muenster. Indeed, the poem and the essay switch the tree-cathedral metaphor. If the Muenster's complex ornamentation holds together like the branches of a tree, so a huge tree that confronts the rider looms like a tower, and the forest holds the frightening faces of Gothic gargoyles: “Wrapped in fog stood the oak / a giant towering there / Where, from the bush, darkness / watches with a thousand eyes.” (Schon stand im Nebelkleid die Eiche, / Ein aufgetürmter Riese, da, / Wo Finsternis aus dem Gesträuche / Mit hundert schwarzen Augen sah.)<sup>58</sup> Just as the essay emphasizes the placedness of the church, so the poem stamps down the spot where the terrifying tree stands with the deictic “da.”

57. Meyer-Krentler notes that “Willkommen und Abschied” is structured as a departure followed by an arrival. Eckhardt Meyer-Krentler, *Willkomm und Abschied, Herzschlag und Peitschenhieb: Goethe-Mörke-Heine* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987), 100–101.

58. Goethe, HA 1: 27. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

While the poem concerns a specular exchange with a woman that, according to David Wellbery, affirms or even constitutes the male subject, the Strasbourg essay depicts an engagement wherein the subject first mourns, then confronts, and finally reconciles himself with an authoritative male figure.<sup>59</sup> Before the Strasbourg cathedral, and then later at the Doric temples at Paestum, Goethe is at first repulsed by what he considers a huge, thick, ungraceful apparition. In each case, he quite consciously “pulls himself together” by finding a new aesthetic value in the disappointing sight. This recuperative hermeneutic with the building occurs in the form of an imaginary dialogue between the poet and structure’s architect. The shift from repulsion to identification repeats the trajectory whereby the classical Oedipal rivalry is overcome.

Kenneth Calhoun links the essay’s ambivalent praise and terror before the cathedral with the self’s struggle against its own bifurcation. Goethe’s horror followed by his analytical efforts to overcome this feeling, can, according to Calhoun, be understood in Lacanian terms as the awareness of the self’s fundamental lack. The threatening alterity of the cathedral reflects the emotional chaos of a fragmentary subject. Calhoun also follows Wellbery’s reading of Goethe’s early lyric. For all the merits of this Lacanian reading it tends to accept the subjective voice at face value. When Wellbery and Calhoun emphasize the personal experience foremostly, they do not recognize how the contemporary architectural discourse permeates Goethe’s lyrical passages. Wellbery argues that “the regularities that define a discourse do not saturate its individual instances, they do not define the singularity of the text which (inevitably?) contains moments that escape, disturb or contravene discursive regulation.”<sup>60</sup> This proviso, however, ought not serve as an exemption that allows the critic to reintroduce the artist as genius and the poem as an isolated entity. Commentaries on Goethe’s architectural writings tend to emphasize the unique poetic tone at the expense of situating the writing within the broader arena of architectural theory. The fusion of personal statements with theory is particularly deceptive in the eighteenth century, when architectural commentaries were grounded in emotional impressions. Far from being at odds with the mainstream of French classicist thought, Goethe’s highly personal account of the cathedral extends the subjectivist tendencies of eighteenth-century architectural criticism. The Strasbourg essay is an example of this theoretical engagement, a poetic account that is supposed to have theoretical consequences. In the eighteenth-century discourse, subjective impressions have implications for architectural theory. The theory, with its insistence on foregrounding feelings, guides in turn the emergence of the subjectivity it demands as its own ground. In short, when Goethe describes the Gothic as monstrous, he is not only speaking of a personal response that alludes to castration anxiety, but also writing in the familiar terms of architectural theory. Gothic buildings had been called monstrous since at least the fifteenth century. To the Roman

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59. Wellbery, *Specular Moment*, 27.

60. *Ibid.*, 19.

eye they were grossly distorted bodies, disturbing a balanced order as much as a blob building today may unsettle a traditional Austrian town. The Gothic, now so familiar, would once have had an effect much like the deconstructed bodies of Greg Lynn's architectural speculations. Renaissance denunciations treated the Gothic as a multiplicitous body that proliferated deformed shapes within itself.<sup>61</sup> Goethe mocks himself a little as he describes his prejudices against the style. Like a dictionary, he writes, he could list off all sorts of negative terms associated with the Gothic. The young poet deploys the same strategy of denunciation as Kant and French classicists: he piles on his criticism. More specifically, like Kant, Goethe uses the term *haufen* to describe an incoherent mass.<sup>62</sup> In thinking about the Gothic, Goethe says, he stacked up the many faults, so that the denunciations piled (*gehäuft*) in his mind replicate the pile (*Haufen*) that Gothic (and any other unclassical style) supposedly embodies. The symmetrical mind dismisses the disordered pile by piling on derision. The dismissal of the Gothic enacts the fault ascribed to it in the first place—a disordered loading-up of symbols. Calhoun similarly links the Gothic with the baroque and the rococo, thereby recreating the classicist habit of piling all but the geometrically rigorous into one unwieldy and barbarous category. The monstrous Gothic is a common trope, a cliché (not unlike the castration anxiety); that is why it must be understood as an effect of discourse, as well as a subjective terror.

The facade of the cathedral represents phallic triumph and castration at once. Only one of the planned two towers was completed, because, according to lore, the builders feared that the completion of the second tower would have brought about the collapse of the entire structure. The Muenster stands thus as monument and warning, as the Tower of Babel and as its antithesis, the built and the unbuilt. Goethe writes about the energy that was to raise the two towers but sadly completed only one.

Without question the sight of the Strasbourg cathedral is a shock. Calhoun brings out how disturbing and grotesque the sight of the building was for Goethe. His repeated visits to the church constitute an effort to familiarize himself with the disturbance. They are according to psychoanalysis a form of *Reizbewältigung* (stimulus mastery). The fort-da game, which tests the poet's relation to the beloved object, takes place over a long period of time. In *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe not only tells of his repeated visits to the cathedral; he also has the church's tower reappear on the horizon as he recounts his romantic masquerade with Frederike Brion on the hills outside Strasbourg.<sup>63</sup>

The shock of modern urban existence is preceded in the eighteenth century by the experience of the sublime. Most commonly the sublime is associated with natural phenomena, but here Goethe gives a distinctly urban example of struggling

61. Greg Lynn, "Multiplicities and Inorganic Bodies," in *Folds, Bodies, and Blobs*, 44.

62. Goethe, "Von deutscher Baukunst," HA 12: 10.

63. Knopp, "Zu Goethes Hymnus," 632.

rationally against an overwhelming monument. Nevertheless, in order to explain how intimidated he was by the cathedral, Goethe compares it to a giant tree, thus giving it a more recognizable quality. The analogy between city and forest persists well into the nineteenth century. Benjamin, for example, recounts how the wanderer through Paris was portrayed as a woodsman.

Walter Benjamin speculates in "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that shock produces a singular *Erlebnis* that is distinct from sensations that are integrated into consciousness as *Erfahrungen*.<sup>64</sup> Whereas *Erfahrungen* can be organized into a coherent narrative of temporal duration, a shock-induced *Erlebnis* stands outside the stream of ordinary perception. *Erfahrungen* seem intelligible and even expected, whereas an *Erlebnis* arrives as a surprise that threatens the sensibility of the viewer.<sup>65</sup> Goethe's essay is written in response to the shock of the cathedral; his conversations with the spirit of Erwin are like a dream that recuperates the equilibrium that was disturbed by the first encounter. Goethe, the spectator, makes the building intelligible by rediscovering within it aesthetic terms familiar to him from his father's classicism—harmony and symmetry. The monstrously new that alters the familiar into an unexpected form is brought to reason when Goethe detects a continuity between the Gothic and the mainline architectural tradition. The shocking genius behind the cathedral becomes instead one manifestation of an ancient lineage. By folding the Gothic cathedral into the symmetrical and harmonious, Goethe is taking one step toward his later belief that the classical properties are themselves conditions of humanity.

Goethe's writing on architecture plays this dynamic out both within the brief temporal frame of specific visits to famous sites, as well as over the course of his entire lifetime, wherein he first rejects and then affirms his father's fascination with Italian architecture. In his encounters with buildings and their architects, Goethe does not seek a beloved so much as a peer and a rival. The architectural texts are marked by a male-male engagement that is more concerned with comparisons between different forms of the artist. The contemplation of buildings does not evoke the desired woman who returns the look of the poetic subject, rather it establishes a masculine, mentoring relationship between viewer and builder. The desire in the Strasbourg essay is mimetic: it seeks to establish an equal relation between Goethe and Erwin. As the observing subject, Goethe constitutes himself as emulating the architect.

In many Goethean texts, this Oedipal dynamic is framed by another narrative of escape, encounter, and retreat. Not only is the Italian journey an escape from Weimar and an entry into the mythical space of Italy, but the trip is itself broken down into smaller moments of departure and arrival across Italy, within cities, and

64. Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings*, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), 4: 319.

65. Beatrice Hanssen summarizes the difficulties in translating the two terms into English, in "Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 70 n. 2.



at specific sites. In the Strasbourg essay, the poet arrives in the city only to immediately leave his hotel so as to find the cathedral, which he will revisit repeatedly, always checking his emotions as he comes and goes. The travel narratives of Goethe's architectural writing are often similar to the adventures within the "specular moment" of his lyric poetry; however, whereas the lyric variant posits a scene of desire and fulfillment, the architectural scenes entail repulsion and its subsiding through identification.<sup>66</sup> The hallucinatory union with the building and its architect grants the poet a gift comparable to that which the beloved bestows in lyric poetry; however, the architectural exchange is always a masculine, heterosexual moment saturated with the language of education. That the master builder always appears as both a brother artist and an authoritative teacher demonstrates that the architectonic perspective is vital to Goethe's overall project of self-education: in other words, the experience of architecture is not so much a matter of perceiving the arrangement of space as understanding oneself in relation to the place.

Manfredo Tafuri marks the beginning of Enlightenment architectural theory with Laugier's call for a return to nature in urban planning. Tafuri couples Laugier's fascination with returning architecture to its natural conditions, whether as a rambling city park or the primitive hut, with the simultaneous English interest in the "picturesque."<sup>67</sup> The eighteenth-century suggestion that a city should appear as natural as a forest, Tafuri argues, resonates through bourgeois design, for it has many valences. Laugier may have had nothing more than Paris with its many squares in mind, yet the northern European fascination with the poetics of landscape gives "naturalism" a distinctly antiurban importance. The pedestrian, as described by Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire, stalks through Paris as if he were in the primal forests of North America. The chaos of urban modernity becomes sensible as a fantasy, a hunt with deadly consequences that could also be nothing more than a child's game. Wandering through the vast city becomes a mythic undertaking, even as it promises playful insights. The eighteenth-century urge to build and perceive buildings naturally has a second strain—the urge to escape the city as the center of finance and government authority. The natural structure, so readily translated, as the more human, eschews an alliance with institutions. This refusal to join official architecture becomes visible through a modest simplicity in design as well as a proliferation of ornamentation. A tree is both simple and profuse in its foliage. The architectural decor of a natural building seeks to both reduce and exceed classical convention. This double aspect of eighteenth-century "natural" design brings the hut together with the Gothic cathedral as two forms of building that fail the classical middle. The Renaissance Italian denunciation of Gothic style as derived from barbaric dwellings finds new life in the eighteenth-century integration

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66. Wellbery, *Specular Moment*, 61.

67. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Ludwig La Penta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 4.

of Gothic ruins in picturesque landscapes. If one were to find an antiauthoritarian architecture in the eighteenth century, two likely sites would be the temporary peasant housing and the despised old ruins.

Goethe insists on these associations throughout his essay. He extends his initial comparison between the cathedral and a tree into a quarrel with Laugier's primitive hut. Beutler suggests that Goethe has an alternate design of the primitive hut in mind when he argues with Laugier.<sup>68</sup> In his "Prometheus" fragment, Goethe has the immortal give precise instructions on how to build the first house:

First tear off the branches!  
 Then ram them down here,  
 Leaning into the ground here,  
 And that one there, across it;  
 Then tie them together on top!  
 Then another two back there  
 And then one across.  
 Now branches from the top  
 To the ground,  
 Tied together and entwined,  
 With grass all around,  
 More branches over them  
 So that no sunlight,  
 No rain, no wind, penetrate.  
 Here, my son, your refuge and hut!

Erst ab die Äste!—  
 Dann hier rammle diesen  
 Schief in den Boden hier  
 Und diesen hier, so gegenüber;  
 Und oben verbinde sie!—  
 Dann wieder zwei hier hinten hin  
 Und oben einen quer darüber.  
 Nun die Äste herab von oben  
 Bis zur Erde,  
 Verbunden und verschlungen die,  
 Und Rasen ringsumher,  
 Die Äste drüber, mehr,  
 Bis daß kein Sonnenlicht,  
 Kein Regen, Wind durchdringe.  
 Hier, lieber Sohn, ein Schutz und eine Hütte!<sup>69</sup>

68. Beutler, *Von deutscher Baukunst*, 33–45.

69. Goethe, HA 4: 183.

Goethe and Laugier share a common inclination to deploy the long-standing motif of the hut as a contrast to the ostentatious baroque palace.<sup>70</sup> Critics have long noted that the hut appears in eighteenth-century literature as a pointed political attack on the absolutist court. Both Goethe and Laugier are working with Rousseau's terms. Poems such as "Prometheus," "The Wanderer's Storm Song," and "The Wanderer," as well as crucial scenes in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, show that the hut represents proximity to nature and independence from society.<sup>71</sup> By the time of Goethe's essay, several writers had already invoked the hut as the pliable alternative to official architecture, and as such it had become the site of theoretical contention. Only the French Revolution could have enabled Georg Büchner and Ludwig Weidig to write their 1834 motto "Peace to the huts! War against the palaces!" (Friede den Hütten! Krieg den Palästen!) Nevertheless, eighteenth-century poets had long presented the hut as a place of defiance, which in its squalor repudiated the luxury of the court. The lines from Goethe's "Prometheus," "My earth you / must leave standing / and my hut / which you never built" (Muß mir meine Erde / doch lassen stehn / und meine Hütte, die du nicht gebaut), are not without precedent. His lean-to is the paradigm for the fortress, the castle built of thick walls intended to block out the winter and the enemy. Under the influence of Rousseau, both Laugier and Goethe are eager to present a simplified architecture that lacks pretension and participates in rural life. Goethe notes that his lean-to hut can still be seen in the fields of northern Europe as the temporary abode of farmhands. In his lyric poetry of the period, the hut also signifies an isolated existence, away from society, dependent on nature. Modesty is one of its most obvious attributes. It represents shelter without social pretense, a short-term structure for nomadic laborers. The hut does not fulfill even the first quality in Vitruvius's triad; it is neither solid nor comfortable nor pretty, but at best picturesque in the new eighteenth-century mode. Laugier, on the other hand, follows Vitruvius's myth of the first building, intending his *cabane* as a model of solidity; its four posts are the basic tectonic form for all subsequent building.

There are as many difficulties in distinguishing French from German architecture as there are in separating Goethe's essay from Laugier's treatise. While Goethe presents forceful oppositions between each, his own arguments reiterate much that appears in Laugier's volume, particularly the proposition that a building's greatness manifests itself not through an adherence to mathematical principles, but through the impression it makes upon the viewer—a position that will later be repeated almost directly by the author of *Investigations into the Character of Buildings*, when he argues that measuring the proportions of ancient buildings keeps architects

70. For a comprehensive survey of the hut in architectural theory, see Joachim Gaus, "Die Urhütte: Über ein Modell in der Baukunst und ein Motiv in der bildenden Kunst," *Wallraf-Richarz-Jahrbuch* 33 (1971): 7–66.

71. Edith Braemer, *Goethes Prometheus und die Grundpositionen des Sturm und Drang* (Weimar: Arion, 1959), 275–297; Helmut Rehder, "Das Symbol der Hütte bei Goethe," *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 15 (1937): 403–423; Gaus, "Die Urhütte."

from thinking about them critically.<sup>72</sup> To be certain, Laugier praises the Strasbourg cathedral and recognizes the overwhelming impression of the massive cathedral: "Nothing can be compared to the tower of Strasbourg Cathedral. This superb pyramid is a masterpiece ravishing in its prodigious height, its accurate diminution, agreeable form, the precision of its proportions and the unique delicacy of its detail. I do not believe that any architect has ever produced anything as boldly conceived, as happily thought out, as correctly executed. There is more art and genius in this one building than in all the great marvels we see elsewhere."<sup>73</sup> Yet, as his remarks on Notre Dame in Paris show, he also quickly recovers from his wonder, only to start noticing the many mistakes in the building.<sup>74</sup> In his general outline of architectural history, he reiterates the well-established opinion that medieval cathedrals reflect the bad taste of barbarians: "[It was] a new system of architecture in which neglected proportion and ornament childishly crowded produced nothing but stones in fretwork, shapeless masses and a grotesque extravagance. . . . Unfortunately, most of our cathedrals are fated to preserve the remains of this style for generations to come."<sup>75</sup> Although Laugier does not mention the analogy, one aspect of the Renaissance characterization of the Gothic as barbarian is the suggestion that its shapes, particularly the pointed arch, were derived from tying trees in a forest to form the pillars of a building.<sup>76</sup> Implicit within this analogy is the proposition that the columns supporting primitive houses were made of living trees. This ancient genealogy of architecture makes a double appearance in Goethe's contest with Laugier: first, in Laugier's revival of the primitive hut as the prototype for all subsequent architecture, and second, in Goethe's chain of metaphors coupling the cathedral facade with a northern European forest, the kind of inhospitable terrain Tacitus vividly associated with the tribes living across the Roman frontier.

Although Laugier's praise differs from Goethe's (for he has little love for the ornaments Goethe admired in the sunset), fundamentally the two writers share the same theatrical approach to the cathedral. Both stand before it as spectators waiting to be impressed by the facade. Both seek an organizing principle that unifies the disparate elements of the facade; both end their reverie by glorifying the architect who conceived of its form. The difference lies in what each author makes of the

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72. *Untersuchungen über den Charakter der Gebäude: Über die Verbindung der Baukunst mit den schönen Künsten und über die Wirkungen, welche durch dieselben hervorgebracht werden sollen* (repr., Nördlingen: Alfons Uhl, 1986), 43–44: "Many architects have considered the body of a building merely as an object to be measured, and this thought has been applied to the shaky theory of relations. They always have a measuring stick and a compass in their hand, instead of using their eyes, and they do not stop until the length, breadth, and height of the building has been determined down to the last inch. This work has also absorbed a large portion of their valuable time studying antiquity, time that they would better have used thinking about the object."

73. Laugier, *Essay on Architecture*, 116.

74. *Ibid.*, 101.

75. *Ibid.*, 8.

76. Frankl, *Gothic*, 273–276.

example. Laugier treats the cathedral and its impression on the viewer as one example in a longer discussion of church architecture, whereas Goethe remains riveted. For him the *Erlebnis* is the foundation for further poetry, as the essay's closing apotheosis of Hercules and Prometheus shows. Laugier uses his feelings to induce abstract principles, whereas Goethe posits an almost hallucinatory intimacy with a specific architect.<sup>77</sup> Goethe places greater emphasis on particularity. He provides a more personal reading of the cathedral's facade, without drawing conclusions about "Gothic" as a style. Nevertheless, both writers share the eighteenth-century understanding of architectural interpretation as a *Gegenüberstellung* between facade and observer.

From its first formulations, the tasteful judgment of buildings allowed for a poetic approach to architecture, though the first advocates of an emotional assessment of architecture did not take their own responses as poetry. Laugier describes some very strong feelings in response to buildings—rapture, enthusiasm, indifference, disgust, shock, and repulsion; however, he treats these responses as data in an experiment, which can be repeated by others with similar results: "I have thought a long time about these different reactions. I repeated my observations until I was sure that the same monuments impressed me always in the same way. I sounded the taste of others and, by submitting them to a similar experiment, found that all my own impressions were felt by them more or less vividly according to the different temperament that nature had given them."<sup>78</sup> Laugier was concerned to show that his emotional responses were not only his own. Laugier shares with Hume, and later Kant, the concern that aesthetic judgments have a general, perhaps even universal, validity. Goethe's account, on the other hand, is decisively subjective. It presents a highly personal account that does not concern itself with establishing a broad standard of judgment through a repeatable methodology. Laugier states that his feelings are the basis for the principles he derives for architecture, although he does not spell out the relationship between emotions and the new code. Laugier evaluates his feelings in order to abstract from them. Goethe, on the other hand, falls into his feelings; indeed, they are as important as the buildings themselves. Laugier returns from his emotions to discuss design principles, whereas Goethe refers to architectural standards only to explain his feelings. Laugier has a scientific method in mind, whereas Goethe treats the contemplation of a building as a moment in the education of the viewer. Goethe allows the building to impress subjectivity, whereas

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77. Reinhard Liess makes a similar point, noting the instability of Goethe's arguments: "The French scholars put great effort into providing definitions and precise concepts that remained stable over time, and which could be used by different people under different circumstances. Goethe, on the other hand, considered his concepts alterable, in a process of constant formation and alteration. The meanings could change from one sentence to the next. Any comparison or parallels between Goethe's concepts and those in the French art criticism are therefore difficult and sometimes inconclusive." Liess, *Goethe vor dem Straßburger Münster*, 44.

78. Laugier, *Essay on Architecture*, 3.

Laugier allows feelings to serve as the basis for commentary that never really leaves the realm of architectural discourse. In Strasbourg, the Muenster alters the inner order of the poet, but Laugier does not grant architecture the ability to restructure subjectivity. Laugier's concern to establish a standard of architectural judgment that is not just personal suits the public character of architecture. Goethe's lyrical approach to buildings negates sociability, preferring instead an intimacy that shuts most others out. This pull away from the public character of aesthetic experience corresponds to the tendency of Goethe's poetry to negate "both the sociability of love and its objective representation."<sup>79</sup>

The intensity with which Goethe assaults Laugier has always unnerved readers, and the older Goethe makes no mention of his youthful anger toward the French theorist.<sup>80</sup> Of course, Goethe famously changed his architectural preferences, even before he traveled to Italy to discover Palladio and the surviving ruins of antiquity. While architectural debates often take on a vicious polemical tone that other art forums spare themselves, Goethe's anger at classicism had a distinctly personal dimension.

The problems of interpreting "On German Architecture" are inextricably connected to the history of Goethe's own self-criticism. By the time the Strasbourg essay had found an enthusiastic readership, Goethe had traveled to Italy, discovered Andrea Palladio's works, and formulated his own complex aesthetic based on ancient Greek and Roman models. In his 1806 autobiography, we can easily recognize his classicist preference for transparency and simple forms as he tries to summarize the basic arguments of the essay, and to eliminate the distortions he ascribes to his earlier writing. *Poetry and Truth* lists the salient points of "On German Architecture" in one short paragraph. Had Goethe written in his youth as clearly as he does in *Poetry and Truth*, then his essay might have had more influence, he claims. In his youth and under the influence of Herder and Hamann, he enveloped his arguments in a dusty cloud of strange words and phrases, thereby darkening the light of his thesis.<sup>81</sup> Architectural historians usually concur. They tend to reiterate Goethe's own synopsis and leave the hyperbolic and often obscure poetic language to literary critics. By drawing a distinction between poetry and theory, these critics fail to explain the essay's importance in elevating architecture to the status of an autonomous art. Literary critics, on the other hand, read "On German Architecture" without reference to architectural history. Their aim is to place it within the aesthetic and psychological dynamics of the Sturm-und-Drang literature. However, because it radicalizes the eighteenth century's careful balance between canonical rules and subjective taste in both disciplines, the essay needs to

79. Wellbery, *Specular Moment*, 16.

80. Robson-Scott, *Gothic Revival*, 81.

81. Goethe, FA 14: 553.

be read from two directions, as a statement about architectural as well as literary criticism.

Two stories surround Goethe's encounter with the Strasbourg cathedral. The best-known tale recounts Goethe's anticipation leading up to the moment before the cathedral, followed by his stunned reversal of opinion at the site. Most scholarly interpretations cannot resist retelling the events preceding Goethe's epiphany, in part because the essay provides a poetic account of aesthetic expectations as they are first disproven and then transformed.<sup>82</sup> These interpretations tell the story of how Goethe arrived in Strasbourg, landed in his hotel, and then immediately rushed out to find the famous church. Goethe builds this narrative into the 1774 essay. Years later he layers on more details. Both tellings emphasize Goethe's aesthetic expectations before laying eyes on the cathedral. His dismissive views of Gothic architecture build up to a sudden reversal of judgment upon seeing the cathedral. Despite his disparaging prejudices, he has an unexplained urge to view the building, which is validated by his sudden admiration. The narrative amounts to an aesthetic conversion that replicates the drama of Saul's journey to Damascus. No conversion tale makes sense without first explaining how the protagonist originally despised the belief he later came to hold so fervently.

Behind this reversal lies a second backstory concerning Goethe's arguments with his father over architecture, a tale that Goethe also provides in *Poetry and Truth*, but that scholars have not linked explicitly to the Strasbourg conversion. Goethe arrives in Strasbourg, having taken the post coach in an all-day journey from his parental home in Frankfurt, where he had a long fight with his father that culminated in the young poet disparaging his father's attempt to renovate the family home in the manner of a Roman palazzo. Built into Goethe's sudden espousal of Gothic design is an eager rejection of his father's classicism. Here the plot does not entail a reversal so much as a long-standing opposition, which is given expression as an epiphany. The Oedipal rivalry manifests itself in "On German Architecture," giving a distinctly personal yet, from a psychoanalytical perspective, recognizably universal form to Goethe's espousal of the Strasbourg cathedral.

The authorities of the two backstories reinforce one another. The father's admiration for Roman architecture was confirmed by Goethe's drawing instructor, Adam Oeser, at Leipzig. The work of the French theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier, whom Goethe so unfairly attacks as merely fashionable, was to be found in the father's library.<sup>83</sup> In *Poetry and Truth*, Herder and Hamann<sup>83</sup> are mentioned as the models for Goethe's early writing.

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82. The most recent example is Bisky, *Poesie der Baukunst*, 37–43.

83. It was the fashion in Germany to dismiss French theorists as merely fashionable. See, for example, the denunciation made just a few years before Goethe's essay: "Paris is suffering undeniable accusations at the hands of its Abbé Laugier, and even Rome gives occasion to the same. The reproaches are spreading about so swiftly that even lovers and connoisseurs of architecture are starting to claim that the art of building has declined precipitously, and instead of pursuing the good, healthy, perfect

Both stories entail a struggle against authority, which in eighteenth-century aesthetic terms was explained as a conflict between subjective judgment and universal claims to beauty. Goethe's praise of the Gothic cathedral stands in opposition to the reigning canon of architectural taste, as does his rejection of his father's classicizing tendency, yet Goethe's paean to the cathedral recuperates terms from classical architectural theory, raising the question of whether the poet ultimately affirms the paternal aesthetic he so passionately rejects. His engagement with architecture turns around the question of the individual's capacity to assert himself within an arena that claims to have already determined him. The essay on the cathedral includes a struggle with the aesthetic canon of the day, his father's comprehensive and highly classical pedagogy, and Goethe's own uncertainty as an artist.

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taste, they let themselves be seduced by the charms of novelty." (Paris leidet von seinem Abbé Laugier in der Baukunst unwidersprechliche Vorwürfe, und selbst Rom giebt zu dergleichen Anlaß. Der Tadel greift so geschwinde um sich, daß Liebhaber und Kenner der Architektur zu behaupten anfangen, die Baukunst habe sehr abgenommen, und, anstatt dem gesunden, guten, vollkommenen Geschmacke nachzustreben, lasse man sich durch den Reiz der Neuigkeit verführen.) Francis Christoph de Scheyb (Koremons), *Natur und Kunst in Gemälden, Bildhauereyen, Gebäuden und Kupferstichen*, zweyter Theil (Leipzig: Fried. Gotth. Jacobäern, 1770), 413.