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Tarrying on the Threshold: Nationalism and the Exemplary¹

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Johann Gottfried von Herder was among the contributors to an essay competition announced by Ludwig II in April of 1777² which was held to mark the founding of the *Société des Antiquités* in Kassel and was conceived as an opportunity to appraise the importance of classical art in modern times. The guidelines for the competition specifically invited participants to assess Johann Winckelmann's contribution, nearly a decade after his death, to the study of classical antiquity.

Herder's entry did not win; nor, in fact, was it published until well after his death when it resurfaced in 1882.³ However, a

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1. I would like to thank Goucher College for generously supporting my research for this project by awarding me a grant through the Beatrice Aitchison Non-Tenured Faculty Professional Advancement Fund.
 2. Wolfgang Leppmann indicates the year of the competition as 1779, and says that it was held to "commemorate the tenth anniversary of Winckelmann's death," but as best I can ascertain this date is incorrect. See Wolfgang Leppmann, *Winckelmann* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) 80.
 3. The essay was first published under the title *Denkmal Johann Winckelmann* in 1882 and was subsequently published in a fully annotated

modified version of the essay did find its way into print during Herder's lifetime when, in 1781, Christoph Wieland commissioned Herder to write three biographical articles for the *Teutschen Merkur*. The first of these, a tribute to the legacy of Winckelmann, borrowed heavily from the earlier competition essay and this short article, together with one on Lessing and another on Sulzer, were published cumulatively.⁴ Both the original competition essay and the modified *Merkur* version, are boldly nationalistic, as the opening lines of the competition essay makes evident:

First of all I ask the liberty, as a German, to write in German about Winckelmann. Winckelmann was a German and remained so even in Rome [*Winckelmann war ein Deutscher und blieb selbst in Rom*]. In Italy he composed his writings in German and for Germany.... He is among the few who have made the German name esteemed even in regions where it is customarily associated with that of the Goths....

edition collected in *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1892) VIII 437-83. A more recent edition, also well annotated, appears in *Herder's Werke* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1964) V 227-54. The prize for the contest went to Christian Gottlob Heyne, director of the philological seminar at Göttingen since 1763 and friend of Winckelmann's from his time in Dresden. In his essay Heyne identifies Winckelmann as the first to attempt a comprehensive treatment of classical antiquity by employing an historicist approach to its art.

4. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Andenken an Winckelmann, Lessing und Sulzer." *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*. Ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1892) XV 35-50. The original text was written for Christoph M. Wieland as part of a three essay collection in memory of Johann J. Winckelmann, Gotthold E. Lessing and Johann G. Sulzer which was published in Wieland's *Teutschen Merkur* in 1781. It was printed again in 1786 as part of the second collection of Herder's *Zerstreuten Blätter*. The Winckelmann portion of the essay has been translated into English by Alexander Gode as "Winckelmann: A Commemorative Essay by Johann Gottfried Herder," and is included at the beginning of Johann J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1968) I vii-xvii.

The style [*Schreibart*] of his writings will remain as long as the German language lasts; a large part of its content and its spirit will survive—why therefore should Winckelmann be, as he was in his life, also after his death, banished [*Winckelmann, wie ers im Leben war, auch noch nach seinem Tode verbannt werden*]?⁵

The question Herder asks is by no means a rhetorical one. The set of concerns it raises regarding Winckelmann's tepid reception in Germany is not only significant for the internal purpose of Herder's laudatory essay, but, as I intend to show, speaks more broadly about the complexities that color Herder's conception of the *National*. By consolidating in the same heroic portrait of Winckelmann the figure of indomitable national identity (*Winckelmann was a German and remained so even in Rome*) and the figure of interminable banishment (*why therefore should Winckelmann be, as he was in his life, also after his death, banished*), Herder formulates a somewhat striking and certainly enigmatic paradigm for the national: a figure who has been banished from that of which he is, at least by example, constitutive.

Herder's two essays on Winckelmann are, I would suggest, indicative of a broader programmatic dilemma confronting Herder's writings on nationalism which, while insisting on a normative return to German national solidarity, do so within an historically contextual methodology that seems to thoroughly challenge the analytic principles upon which universal normative demands are customarily legitimated. Since the contextual historiography developed in Herder's writings is set squarely against universal concepts, which in the realm of eighteenth-century political theory is best typified by Kant's cosmopolitanism, Herder's unflagging campaign to spur Germans into reviving their authentic national identity finds its normative legitimacy rooted in something other than an abstract, conceptual premise. In other words, Herder's celebrated turn to history, which he pursues as a

5. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Denkmal Johann Winckelmann" 227. Translation is my own.

means of undoing the rational abstractions of enlightenment philosophy, cannot therefore be legitimately abandoned at the moment he needs to ground a normative call to national solidarity. Whatever legitimacy such a call might require, it clearly cannot take the form of an *a priori* principle insulated from historical critique. Consequently, Herder grounds his normative demand in a non-conceptual justification, that is, in a justification which he derives not from abstract principles, but in historical models. In the opening lines of Book VIII of the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Herder speaks to the salient differences between abstract conceptual analysis and analysis based on history: "The metaphysician has here a much easier task. He sets out with establishing a certain idea of the mind, and from this deduces everything, that can be deduced, wherever, or under whatever circumstances, it may be found. The philosopher of history can proceed on no abstract notion, but on history alone."⁶

Thus, Herder promulgates his normative demand for national solidarity, i.e., his call for Germans to return to their authentic *Volkgeist*, by relying on an historical, and thus on a largely descriptive analysis, which immediately begs the question, how might a normative injunction result from a fundamentally descriptive methodology? The answer, of course, rests on the fact that Herder's analysis is not simply descriptive, or rather, on the fact that certain of Herder's descriptions assume a normative function. The descriptive analysis that typifies Herder's historical work and which informs his candid remarks on German nationalism, occasionally yield not only material evidence in support of nationalist norms, but go further and actually constitute norms themselves. In such instances, in those cases where a description adopts the trappings of a normative demand, *description becomes exemplary*, and it is Herder's use of the exemplary as a bridge between descriptive and normative analysis that I am interested in examining. I will argue that Herder's two essays on Winckelmann demonstrate his strategic use of historical examples in

6. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (New York: Bergman Publishers, 1800) 188.

formulating a demand for national solidarity, but will also argue that these same essays reveal, in their reference to the particular example of Winckelmann and his banishment, an unresolved theoretical difficulty at the heart of Herder's normative project.

In the opening passage of Herder's competition essay, Winckelmann is invoked as one who shouldered his German identity with pride even in a foreign land—writing in German even while in Italy. And though Winckelmann certainly went on to write much in Italian, Herder attributes his eventual use of Italian precisely to the poor reception shown to his work by those in Germany. In fact, Winckelmann's tepid reception in Germany gives rise to the question which frames the entire scope of Herder's essay: "why therefore should Winckelmann be, as he was in his life, also after his death, banished?"⁷

Winckelmann, the figure who according to Herder ought to inhabit the core of the national, the figure who genuinely expresses his German heritage and produces great works in its language, remains banished (*verbannt*) to the outside of that which, given the delayed emergence of a German national identity, to say nothing of the establishment of a unified German nation state, had yet to constitute a legible inside. What is most vexing about this passage is the fact that the interior from which Winckelmann has been exiled is described by Herder as residing most profoundly and most maturely in the figure of exile himself. It is Winckelmann, as he who embodies the cultural-nation,⁸ as the

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7. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Denkmal Johann Winckelmann" 227. Translation is my own.
 8. I am thinking here of Friedrich Meinecke's use of the term *Kulturnation* which owes much to Herder's formulation of nationhood as an ethnic and cultural community grounded in a common historical and climactic past. For Herder, it is a cohesive culture that builds a nation and, in agreement with Wulf Koepke on this point, the very conjoining of these two terms into a compound would have likely been received by Herder as tautological. A nation was understood as *both* a cultural and political fact. See Wulf Koepke, "Kulturnation and its Authorization through Herder." *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic*

figure of the national without reservation or contamination, who is appealed to by Herder not only in tribute to one who has died, but in lament for one who remains banished even in death. In differentiating these two lamentations Herder engages two parallel manifestations of banishment and it is amid these manifestations that an important aspect of the *National*, conceived of as a normative demand legitimated by concrete historical examples, takes shape. It is, therefore, worth taking a moment to examine how the term banishment (*Verbannte*) is employed in the two essays under consideration.

Herder employs the term "banishment" in two distinct ways. On the one hand, there is the body of Winckelmann and its physical displacement from German speaking territory. Though it is true that Winckelmann was never actually stricken from Prussia, Herder repeatedly submits the argument that if Winckelmann wished to remain true to his character and exercise his abilities he had no option but to "flee like a banished stranger."⁹ Herder asserts that among Germans "Nowhere was there an opportunity open to him—despite his abundance of knowledge, of awareness, of acuity—to find but one man ready and able to redeem him from his plight,"¹⁰ all of which entails an actual and bodily relocation.¹¹ This physical exile corresponds to what one might refer to

Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge, ed. Wulf Koepke (Columbia: Camden House, 1996) 193.

9. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Winckelmann: A Commemorative Essay by Johann Gottfried Herder," trans. Alexander Gode, *History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1968) I ix. I have slightly altered the translation.
10. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Winckelmann: A Commemorative Essay by Johann Gottfried Herder" I vii.
11. Herder's suggestion that Winckelmann was not appreciated in German speaking lands is not altogether true. In fact, Goethe suggests just the opposite: "With all our efforts, however, in regard to art and antiquity, each of us had always Winckelmann before his eyes, whose ability was acknowledged with enthusiasm in his fatherland." See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Poetry and Truth from My Own Life*,

as a *corporeal banishment* and it is literally before this exiled body that Herder's 1781 essay is drafted: "... I gather these thoughts here at this site of sadness, at Winckelmann's grave."¹²

But on the other hand, there is the legacy of Winckelmann—the topic of the essay competition which occasions Herder's initial reflections—and in this case the form of the exile is not so easy to isolate. What Herder laments most fervently is the *enduring* banishment, the persistent ostracism of Winckelmann's thoughts and character. In this case, banishment takes the form of an expulsion of national character, the displacement of *Volksgeist*, not of a body, but of an *ethos*, what one might refer to as an *ethotic* or *ethical banishment*.¹³ Here the banishment (*Verbannte*) of Winckelmann is no mere injury perpetrated against an individual, rather it is presented as the injustice of a nation brought upon *itself*. In its neglect of Winckelmann, and more broadly in its neglect of the *Volksgeist* he exemplifies, the German nation demonstrates to Herder that it has also neglected itself. It has forgotten itself, not inadvertently or innocently, but in a manner which is entirely culpable. It is, in other words, an unjust forgetting and Herder is clear in treating it as such. And moreover, what makes this forgetting so unjust is its sequence: *it is the forgetting which here compels the banishment, not the banishment which activates a forgetting.*

In the traditional form of banishment—which is never applied to a stranger but only to one who fully belongs a community, one whom the community knows all too well—the physical removal of the body precipitates a forgetting of that *ethos* which is to be

trans. R. O. Moon (Washington D. C.: Public Affairs Press, 1949) 284-85.

12. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Winckelmann: A Commemorative Essay by Johann Gottfried Herder" xv-xvi. Winckelmann was murdered in Trieste by Francesco Arcangeli on 8 June 1768. His body was buried in the churchyard of San Giusto in Trieste.
13. Here I am stressing the Greek—as "character" or "habitual way of living." One might also hear the resonance of—designating a "group of people accustomed to living together" or "a body of individuals." After Homer—comes to refer more specifically to a "nation of people."

forsaken. Banishment is enacted when an individual life is deemed virulent to a community, when a life is understood to be *baneful*. In such cases, the body is expelled, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the character of that life which dwells within it. The underlying expectation holds that once the body is expunged the memory of the life it bears will dissipate as well. The same logic can more commonly be observed in the ban of the book which like all banishment is invariably a response not to an unlawful action and its agent, but to a broad-reaching conceptual threat, to the very conceivability of establishing a *new* law. An act which is merely criminal, no matter how despicable, is thoroughly acceptable to the law; it can be accommodated by the law and mitigated by punishment. The threat to which the ban most typically responds, however, is not of this nature, for the ban, by expelling the body, also forfeits the law's claim over that body. What the ban properly responds to, and why its rightful object is not *corpus* but *ethos*, is not that which perpetrates a crime, but that which threatens the authority of the law itself—something which obligates not a punishment but a forgetting. The ban, then, is that penalty reserved not for a deed but for a character, which in its normal employment proceeds by first expelling the body so that in turn the character will also be expunged.

In the case Herder outlines in his two essays, however, this sequence is flipped, it is the banishment of the *ethos* that compels the physical relocation of the body, or *corpus*. It is this reversal of the operation of the ban that renders it acutely culpable and is the reason Winckelmann's death at the hands of Francesco Arcangeli in Trieste implicates, in Herder's estimation, the entire German nation.¹⁴ In his 1781 essay, Herder explicitly indicts Germany for

14. In the traditional form of the ban the life which is in exile is a life which can be killed without committing homicide, without culpability. It is a body beyond the memory of the law. But unlike the case presented here by Herder, the forgetting is a result of the ban, not its precondition. Giorgio Agamben, in a refined treatment of this subject, draws the connection between the ban and the sovereign who, while also beyond the law, remains nevertheless integral to it: "The

Winckelmann's death, an event he understands to be a direct consequence of a callous and willful disregard: "O noble man, you were felled by the hand of the inexorable moira at the *border of the country* to which you had come to be a stranger [*Fremdling*], from which you were hurrying away to reach that other country that had bestowed honor upon you and joy."¹⁵

In Herder's condemnation of Germany's brazen disregard for Winckelmann, Herder is not merely referring to the single, corporeal death of Winckelmann but, more saliently, to the death of the German spirit that Winckelmann exemplifies. It is this death, the death of the *ethos*, which is paramount in Herder's mind and it is in lament over this death that he writes his essay. The crime of the German nation was not carried out against Winckelmann alone,

banishment of sacred life is the sovereign *nomos* that conditions every rule." Banishment in its traditional expression is at once excluded from the law and its incipient foundation. But while in its sovereign form the ban is constitutive of the law, the banished is also one who is excluded from all protection under the law. Agamben quotes Desiderio Cavalca's *Il bando nella prassi e nella dottrina medievale* (Milan: A. Giuffra, 1978), "'To ban' someone is to say that anyone may harm him." The first ban in the Judaic context is, of course, the ban of Cain. Chapter four of the first book of the *Torah* describes Cain's immediate response to his punishment, "Since You have banished me this day from the soil, an I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me." Cain immediately recognizes his vulnerability, his exposure to being killed without his assailant committing homicide. God then places a mark on Cain. The mark not only protects him from those who would kill him, but does so by keeping him within the memory of the law—branded with the sign of his crime. The criminal, unlike the banished, remains within the law. *The criminal is not forsaken*. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Torino: Einaudi contemporanea, 1995). Translated into English as, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

15. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Winckelmann: A Commemorative Essay by Johann Gottfried Herder" xv.

but was carried out against the German *ethos* of which he is paradigmatic.

In both essays, but particularly in the one written in 1781, Herder draws from this single death lessons relevant for an entire nation, or perhaps more accurately, something relevant to the very idea of the *National*. It is the banished body, interred in the soil of northern Italy and invoked by Herder as a metaphorical border demarcating the mutual perimeter between two nations, that manifests something salient about Herder's normative nationalism, something that forces Herder to attribute to the nation, and by extension to Winckelmann as its exemplary figure, an ambiguous standpoint. Winckelmann is described as *simultaneously inhabiting both an internal and an external location* with respect to the German nation. He is excluded from that of which he most exemplifies. It is the image of a nation sundered from itself that Herder captures in the banished figure of Winckelmann, an image which, however, highlights a significant problem at the heart of Herder's normative project. To suggest that a nation should actively recapture its lost identity presumes that the authenticity of a national character is more durable than the individual's in whom it is embodied.

The solidity of a nationality [Herder wrote in 1801] which does not forsake itself, but builds and continues to build upon itself, gives to all the aspirations of its members a certain direction. On the contrary, other peoples, because they have not found themselves, must seek their salvation in foreign nationalities, serving them and thinking with their thoughts—such nationalities forget even the times of their glory and their own proved endeavors, always *desiring*, never *achieving*, always tarrying on the threshold.¹⁶

16. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Adrastea*. *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*. Ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1892) XXIII 160-61. This translation is cited in Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931) 117-18. *Adrastea* was a journal published by Herder, the first volume of which appeared in 1801. After

Winckelmann, we are told, was compelled by German disregard to seek refuge in a foreign land, but did so while retaining, or more precisely, *in order* to retain, his nationality. By contrast, Germany, by "seeking its salvation in foreign nationalities"¹⁷ had, in Herder's estimation, lost its own national identity in the process. Germany's authentic nationality, represented by Herder in the image of Winckelmann's body buried along the northern border of Italy, was, quite literally, a nationality "tarrying on the threshold."¹⁸ The figure of the exile, though on foreign soil, retains his national character. It is this differentiation between political territory and cultural spirit, between the nation as a bounded territory administered by laws and the nation as an irreducible ethno-cultural heritage, which is invoked here by the very possibility of a nationality forsaking itself.

The nation which has forsaken itself is a nation which has forgotten something essential about itself. Consequently, what Herder implies is that nationality, while it can be denied or forgotten, cannot be expunged. Even when forgotten it remains alive and potent. Thus, while Herder maintains that external factors alter national character, he nevertheless, speaks of the character of a nation as though it were eternal, as though it were an essential substance, *out of which* a nation emerges and in consort with which a nation authentically formulates itself. It is only through this understanding of the nation, in which the nation is something both eternally present and historically influenced, that a nation can plausibly be said to have forsaken (*verläßt*) itself, for it allows one to see the adopted, inauthentic character of a people as only a surface phenomenon under which lies a durable national character waiting to be resuscitated.

There is, of course, a circularity evident here, particularly with respect to Herder's system of historical development. On the one

Herder's death in 1803, the journal was briefly continued by his son but soon folded.

17. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Adrastea* 161.

18. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Adrastea* 161.

hand, national character is governed by the whims of climate and historical fortune, while on the other, it is invoked as a quasi-permanent reality. For Herder, the character of a people is as old as the land it occupies, influenced by its ancient climate, tended by its variety of resources. But, one might ask, why only in this earliest formative period? Why only in the form of an unalterable gestation? It is in this form, as the yield of circumstances old enough to be eternally relevant, that the nation confronts itself as a stranger, as something that, though it may mutate, remains alert to a lurking, formative authenticity. It is only by being embroiled in this conflicted description, that is, by being both an eternal character of a people waiting to be fully expressed and an historically conditioned attitude of a people dwelling in a shared environment, that the national remains poised on its own threshold. A national character is unique, the precise yield of its historical heritage, yet in order for one to engage (normatively) in a concerted effort to call forth this identity from a people who, for whatever reasons, has opted for the appeal of foreign attitudes, one must ultimately lean in the direction of an ahistorical, essentialist point of reference.

Faced with the difficulties of bridging the gap between a powerful contextual understanding of values and an equally strong commitment to a set of normative principles concerning those values, Herder, does not turn to abstract, ahistorical principles, but rather to the specific content of history itself—and more specifically, historical individuals whose normative potency, like that of Winckelmann, resides in their exemplarity.

In his writings on Winckelmann, Herder formulates an analogous relation between Winckelmann's banishment from Germany and Germany's disregard for its own national heritage. It is, of course, not the actual reception or lack of reception of Winckelmann's work in Germany that is at issue, for certainly Herder is hyperbolic in his portrayal. What is at issue is the concept of the *National* itself and the power Herder invests in it. That the nation can be both inside and outside itself, that it can be asked to find itself, to return to itself, adopt itself, learn from itself, and even

commit a crime against itself, is what is being considered in Herder's two essays, and in each case it is Winckelmann and his banishment which serve as the example.

The example here is not simply an *instance* of nationalism, it is not merely a *case in point*, rather it functions as proof in and of itself. It is true, in other words, insofar as it is witnessed—even through history. For Herder, *nationalism is the product of a relation to an exemplary figure*, or more precisely to a set of figures and traditions. It is not proven so much as it is shown.

Perhaps, then, it is only somewhat surprising that the remedy Herder proposes for the neglect shown to Winckelmann by the German people, and more broadly, the remedy Herder prescribes for Germany's neglect of its own *ethos*, is to erect a lasting monument. What Herder prescribes as a means of turning German national consciousness away from French culture and back toward its own historically authenticated tradition is, at least metaphorically, the erection of a monument dedicated to the German *ethos*, namely a monument for Johann Winckelmann. This is, of course, also the title of Herder's 1777 essay: *Denkmal Johann Winckelmann*.

In both the 1777 and 1781 essays, Herder's stated intent is to create from his words a monument to Winckelmann and, in bringing it back to Germany, symbolically return Winckelmann's spirit, if not his body, his *ethos*, if not his *corpus*, to Germany as well.¹⁹ The opening passage of the 1777 essay concludes: "Should

19. There are those who claim, without hesitation, that Herder read Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* seven times before the age of twenty. See Henry Hatfield, "Winckelmann: The Romantic Element." *The Germanic Review* 28, no. 1 (1953): 285. In 1765 Herder wrote to Hamann that Winckelmann had substantially more to teach him as an historian than he did as a classical scholar. As the most significant German precursor of *Historismus*, the notion of organic historical development, Winckelmann, through his division of Greek art into four distinct periods, provided Herder with a method that he would implement on a vaster scale. See Johann

my writing deserve it, let it be translated, if not, let it remain as a German monument, a raw unformed stone, with Winckelmann's name written upon it, like a lonely tomb dedicated to the sacred memory of a hero."²⁰ And at the end of his 1781 essay: "Farewell! Your murdered body rests in peace though no monument helps the pilgrim, find your grave. Your body rests beyond the borders of your fatherland, and these poor pages have not the power to go back and turn into a monument within your country."²¹

Gottfried von Herder, *Briefe*, eds. Wilhelm Dobbek and Günter Arnold (Weimar, 1977) I 38.

20. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Denkmal Johann Winckelmann" 227. Translation is my own.
21. Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Winckelmann: A Commemorative Essay by Johann Gottfried Herder" xvi.