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Unraveling the Serpents

Illustrating the Laocoon in Propyläen

In his remarks »Wie man Skulpturen aufnehmen soll,« published in 1896, Heinrich Wölfflin voices concern about how the mass distribution of photographic reproductions of individual sculptures – as prints for purchase and as illustrations in periodicals and art-historical tomes – had bred misconceptions about the plastic arts. According to Wölfflin, the mistaken conviction that a sculpture might be viewed or photographed from any chosen angle – in particular, the contemporaneous partiality for a three-quarter profile on the sculptural object, a so-called painterly perspective borrowed from portraiture – had given rise to distorted, confused, and false ideas. On account of the varied reproductive mechanisms at work, that mistaken conception extended from the general public to the upper echelons of monumental art history. Wölfflin's piece, which despite its brevity contains no less than seven photographs, exemplifies the acute topicality of a discourse on the norms of illustration. The text begins:

Wer mit der Geschichte der Plastik zu thun hat, ist in der größten Verlegenheit um gute Abbildungen. Nicht dass die Publikationen fehlten – in allen Größen und Manieren werden die Dinge feilgeboten –, allein es scheint die Ansicht verbreitet zu sein, dass plastische Kunstwerke von jeder beliebigen Seite her aufgenommen werden könnten, und es bleibt völlig dem Ermessen des Photographen überlassen, unter welchem Winkel zur Figur er seine Maschine aufstellen will. [...] Das Publikum kauft diese Aufnahmen im guten Glauben, dass bei einer mechanisch angefertigten Abbildung vom Original ja nichts verloren gehen könne; es weiß nicht, dass eine alte Figur eine bestimmte Hauptansicht hat, dass man ihre Wirkung vernichtet, wenn man ihr die Hauptsilhouette nimmt; ohne Zucken lässt sich das verwilderte Auge der Menschen von heute die widrigsten Überschneidungen und Unklarheiten gefallen. Allgemein gewöhnt man sich an ganz falsche Eindrücke, denn nun geht der Verderb weiter: die Photographieen dienen als Vorlage für die Illustrationen der populären kunsthistorischen Litteratur, ja selbst in monumental angelegten Publikationen finden derartige falsche Bilder Platz und Duldung.¹

1 Heinrich Wölfflin: Wie man Skulpturen aufnehmen soll, in: Zeitschrift für bildende

To counter these falsities about the art of sculpture in the interest of public education – as to be undertaken by periodicals like the *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, in which his essay on sculpture was published – Wölfflin pleads for sculpture to be photographed from a »Hauptansicht.« *Hauptansicht* designates a frontal view »von der genauen Mitte aus,« a perspective also glossed as the »Normalaufnahme,« a terminology that makes its normativity explicit. Only from the front and middle does a potential periodical reader see sculpture as it was meant to be seen, namely, as an image rather than as an object.² The seven photographic illustrations in Wölfflin's text exemplify that norm.

One might be inclined to think that the concerns Wölfflin raises are uniquely derivative of a late nineteenth-century mass-media culture and specifically of the reproductive possibilities of photography and lithography, or, alternatively, as uniquely pressing to an art historian whose methodology was famously reliant on the possibility of illustration. Walter Benjamin, for example, attributes the rise of illustrated periodicals to the invention of lithography as a mechanism of mass reproduction: »Wenn in der Lithographie virtuell die illustrierte Zeitung verborgen war, so in der Photographie der Tonfilm.«³

However, I intend to argue that the problem of illustrating artworks in mass-media culture arose long before the widespread use of either of these technologies. The imperative to get illustration right in the pages of an art-historical periodical (if not a periodical of any kind) is more immediately related to the avowed purpose of periodicals than to the photographic medium. Hence, concerns similar to those Wölfflin expresses long predate the specific technologies he (and then Benjamin) contends with. In the first place, the mixed-medium periodical is intended to serve as an instrument of public education: it is an affordable medium accessible to a geographically dispersed public and promises a lifelong educational program that ideally commences at the point where obligatory schooling ends.⁴ Second, as ample recent scholarship on the nineteenth century has repeatedly demonstrated, both more elite, high-culture and, alter-

Kunst. Neue Folge 7, 1896, pp. 224-228; here p. 224; 8, 1897, pp. 294-297; and 26, 1915, pp. 237-244.

2 Ibid., p. 225. On the history of photographing sculpture, see Sarah Hamill and Megan R. Luke (ed.): *Photography and Sculpture. The Art Object in Reproduction*, Los Angeles 2017. On the depiction of plasticity in sculpture or lack thereof, see Alex Potts: *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven/London 2001.

3 Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [erste Fassung], in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M. 1991, pp. 431-469; here p. 436.

4 For an account of the periodical as defined by these ambitions, see Gustav Frank, Madleen Podewski and Stefan Scherer: *Kultur – Zeit – Schrift. Literatur- und Kulturzeitschriften als »kleine Archive«*, in: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Li-*

natively, popular, family periodicals – again on account of their affordability and accessibility – were envisioned as public archives, complimenting the inventories of newly created state archives and public museums.⁵ Beyond the circulation of individual issues, periodicals became, especially in their more permanent format as bound books, repositories (i.e., magazines) for collecting, organizing, disseminating, and perpetuating diverse forms of knowledge. In the case of art-historical periodicals, frequent metaphorical descriptions of the format as a museum bear added descriptive value, as their illustrations are imagined to allow for a virtual and mobile museal experience.⁶ To summarize the point, because they embodied a didactic promise for current readers and an archival promise for future readers, periodicals were responsible for establishing norms for illustration, norms that counteracted the falsified aesthetic impressions generated by the poor reproductions or replicas of mass-media culture. For these reasons it was imperative that a publication like the *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* get the terms of illustrative representation right.

It is because illustration is central to the programmatic functions of periodicals conceived as instruments of public education and archiving that an anticipatory echo of Wölfflin's concerns about the norms of illustrating sculpture are already central to an early predecessor to the *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*: the short-lived *Propyläen* (1798–1800), a product of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's and Heinrich Meyer's combined efforts to bridge aesthetic theory and practice and to edify their readers on the correct ways of making and appreciating art. This is to say that although the threat of inaccurate and misleading representation is undoubtedly exacerbated by the use of photography, lithography, and the exponentially increased use of illustrations during the late nineteenth century, *Propyläen* already wrestles with the question of how illustration relates to its own didactic and archival functions as a periodical, the same purposes I attributed to the later *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*. In the following essay, I examine what *Propyläen*'s use of illustration reveals about Goethe and Meyer's vision for the publication.

teratur 34/2, 2009, pp. 1–45; here pp. 41–45. The authors additionally identify entertainment as a third defining function of periodicals.

- 5 On the self-stylization of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century periodicals as public archives, see Sean Franzel: Von Magazinen, Gärbottichen und Bomben. Räumliche Speichermetaphern der medialen Selbstinszenierung von Zeitschriften, in: Archiv/Fiktionen. Verfahren des Archivierens in Literatur und Kultur des langen 19. Jahrhunderts, ed. Daniela Gretz and Nicolas Pethes, Freiburg i. Br./Berlin/Wien 2016, pp. 209–231.
- 6 On the museum as a descriptive metaphor and model for nineteenth-century periodicals, see Ulrike Vedder: Zwischen Depot und Display. Museumstechniken in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: Archiv/Fiktionen (fn. 5), pp. 35–68.

I. *Laocoon* as Frame and Father

How *Propyläen* treats illustration in practice and in theory has been largely overlooked by the scholarship on Goethe and Meyer's project. This is because readers have been most likely to encounter the texts first issued in the periodical's pages as part of Goethe's collected-works editions.⁷ However, a reader of *Propyläen* in the first two formats in which it was made available, namely, a single periodical issues and as a bound volume containing all six »Stücke,« is from the very first page confronted with illustrations and the attendant concerns. Upon opening the periodical's cover, *Propyläen*'s earliest readers encountered two images: on the right, three copper engravings of Meyer's landscapes depicting Etruscan monuments outside Florence. It is probable that Meyer first drew the landscapes during his journey to Italy from 1795 to 1797, at the conclusion of which he met with Goethe in Stäfa to discuss plans for a project that would carry the title »Propyläen.« On the facing page appears J. C. E. Müller's copper engraving of Konrad Horny's drawing of the *Laocoon* statue, a drawing Goethe and Meyer had commissioned for the first issue (see fig. 1). The picture concludes a four-step media transfer: from the marble sculpture to a plaster cast that Goethe had seen on multiple occasions, from the plaster cast to a drawing, from the drawing to a copper engraving, to print. The process has succeeded in making the sculpture conform to the very norms Wölfflin elaborates nearly a century later. To produce an image nearly free of depth and contours, the drawing depicts the *Laocoon* in a frontal, centered view and almost entirely forgoes shadowing. In other words, the image deprives the viewer of almost any suggestion of sculptural depth, physical volume, and bodily presence. Instead, the depicted bodies are ornamented with an excess of meandering lines delineating musculature, lines more appropriate to anatomical drawing than to the depiction of a sculptural ideal.

Following these two images appear the title page – »Propyläen. Eine periodische Schrift. Herausgegeben von Goethe« – then the introduction including a note, »Über die beigegefügt Kupfer,« and, third, Goethe's essay »Über Laokoon.« This is to say that a reader of *Propyläen*, whose very title marks the symbolic significance of »thresholds,« is ushered into the periodical's interiority in its original print format as a viewer of the *Laocoon* group in the form of a two-dimensional print. Or, to bring an alternative perspective on the configuration of these first texts: in the first issue, the illustration of the *Laocoon* and Goethe's essayistic elaboration of the sculpture together frame the programmatic

7 For my analysis, I am relying on a digital reproduction of *Propyläen* available through the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek. See Johann Wolfgang Goethe (ed.): *Propyläen 1-3*, Tübingen 1798-1799, <https://haab-digital.klassik-stiftung.de/viewer/toc/3456450885/1/-/> (05.05.2024).



Fig. 1: Print of the *Laocöon* group from a copperplate by J. C. E. Müller based on a drawing by Konrad Hory, in: *Propyläen* 1/1, 1798, [1]v. Courtesy of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek, Klassik Stiftung Weimar

introduction. As a frame for the famously programmatic »Einleitung,« the depiction of the *Laocöon* paired with Goethe's essay come into view as integral to the overdetermined gesture of *Propyläen's* founding moment: they help enact the »Pathos des Anfangs,« in which, as Ernst Osterkamp writes, *Propyläen* and contemporaneous, similarly short-lived periodical projects around 1800 were steeped.⁸

Taking my cue from Goethe and Meyer's decision to include the drawing of the *Laocöon* in the first issue of *Propyläen*, I understand the drawing as enshrining

8 Ernst Osterkamp: *Neue Zeiten – neue Zeitschriften. Publizistische Projekte um 1800*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 1/2, 2007, pp. 62-78; here p. 73. For comparison, *Athenaeum* (1798-1800), its sequel, *Europa* (1803-1805), and *Phöbus* (1808) all experienced similarly brief, if not shorter, print runs. For a broad and insightful account of the rise of periodical literature around and after 1800, see Sean Franzel: *Writing Time. Studies in Serial Literature. 1780-1850*, Ithaca/London 2023.

the sculpture as the publication's emblem and, second, as initiating a discourse on illustration in relation to the purposes of a periodical publication. For one, each of these subjects, the sculpture and the illustration, constitute threads that establish continuity among the disparate issues. Thus, later contributions (Goethe's short piece advertising *Propyläen* in a different journal in 1799, the short piece »Einige Bemerkungen über die Gruppe Laokoons und seiner Söhne« in the second part of the first volume, and the essay »Über Restauration,« to name only the most prominent examples) return to the *Laocoon*, making the sculpture a continuous point of reference across serialized parts of the periodical. At the same time, the *Laocoon* as frame points back to Aloys Hirt's »Laokoon« in the final issue of *Die Horen* (1795-1797), thereby anchoring its thread, and *Propyläen* altogether, in Friedrich Schiller's precedent.⁹

Rather than follow each of these threads, I want to focus on how the placement of the image in conjunction with Goethe's essay »Über Laokoon« constitutes a frame for the »Einleitung,« and what that frame contributes to the introduction's programmatic reflection on the nature and purpose of periodical publishing. In my view, the initial (and initiatory) texts in the first issue of *Propyläen* (the drawing of the *Laocoon*, the »Einleitung,« and Goethe's »Über Laokoon«) were not merely selected because they reinforce the classical aesthetic norms commonly attributed to the »Programmatisch-Normative«¹⁰ nature of the journal but also because they offer a strategic, though not particularly efficacious, vision on the nature and purpose of periodical literature. While Goethe's »Über Laokoon« has repeatedly been read as exemplifying normative standards regarding art and its criticism in repudiation of earlier critics (Winckelmann, Lessing, Hirt, and, if Osterkamp is correct, his own collaborator Meyer as well), I understand the essay to additionally articulate a vision for periodical literature.¹¹ The decision to begin with the drawing of the *Laocoon* and an essay about it establishes *Propyläen*'s didactic and archival purposes and, furthermore, stylizes periodical literature as a form of benevolent paternalism. The first issue of *Propyläen* present itself as the archive of a charitable, humanist father whose inheritance promises to free younger generations from »labyrinthine« bewilderment, much as Laocoon seeks to free his sons from serpentine entanglement.

9 Aloys Hirt: Laokoon, in: Die Horen 12/10, 1797, pp. 1-26.

10 Ernst Osterkamp: »Aus dem Gesichtspunkt reiner Menschlichkeit«. Goethes Preisaufgaben für bildende Künstler 1799-1805, in: Goethe und die Kunst, ed. Sabine Schulze, Ostfildern 1994, pp. 310-322; here p. 312.

11 Ernst Osterkamp's *Im Buchstabenbilde* attributes yet a third programmatic position to Goethe's »Über Laokoon«, namely, as repudiating Meyer's schematic approach to art-historical material with a form of explicative, holistic criticism, »ein Verfahren integrale Bildwiedergabe.« See Ernst Osterkamp: *Im Buchstabenbilde. Studien zum Verfahren Goethescher Bildbeschreibungen*, Stuttgart 1991, p. 114.

The »Einleitung« thus twice employs the term *Labyrinthe* to gesture at the complex and threatening historical circumstances through which it promises to guide the precocious »Jüngling« whose state of unaware confusion is addressed in the very first sentence.¹² So while Schiller's *Horen*, an immediate predecessor and model for *Propyläen*, enshrines, by means of its title and introduction, the three Horae as its patrons, *Propyläen* selects, by way of its choice of frame, the father figure of the *Laocoon* as its emblem. From this perspective, Caroline Schlegel and her brother-in-law Friedrich Schlegel prove to be among *Propyläen*'s most sensitive readers, perhaps because of their collaboration on *Propyläen*'s competitor, the journal *Athenaeum* (1798-1800). Regarding the first issue, Caroline Schlegel remarks, »Die Vorrede scheint voll väterlicher Milde,« while Friedrich similarly appreciates the text as a mixture of »Väterlichkeit, auch Würdanmuth und etwas Unterhaltungs-Popularität.«¹³ If the Schlegels are any indication, the periodical's self-stylization as a form of benevolent paternalism and the symbolic significance of the *Laocoon* as an emblematic representation of that vision were by no means lost on contemporary readers.

Appreciating the programmatic functions of those framing texts additionally makes it possible to situate *Propyläen* at a threshold moment in a much longer history of periodical literature. As a framing device and emblematic father figure, the *Laocoon* positions the periodical as a historical inheritor of a fading tradition of *Hausväterliteratur* at a moment when it was being rapidly replaced by a mass-media periodical culture that similarly catered to and promised to counsel the male head of the family.¹⁴ The very title *Propyläen* – defined at the onset

12 »Um ihn [den Menschen] zu verstehen, um sich aus dem Labyrinthe seines Baues herauszuwickeln [...]«; »Gern läßt man sich in die Labyrinthe genauer Betrachtungen ein.« Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Heinrich Meyer: Einleitung [in die *Propyläen*], in: *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, vol. 18: *Ästhetische Schriften. 1771-1805*, ed. Friedmar Apel, Frankfurt a. M. 1998, pp. 457-475; here pp. 462 and 471. The introduction begins: »Der Jüngling, wenn Natur und Kunst ihn anziehen, glaubt mit einem lebhaften Streben bald in das innerste Heiligtum zu dringen; der Mann bemerkt nach langem Umherwandeln, daß er sich noch immer in den Vorhöfen befinde.« Ibid., p. 461.

13 Caroline Schlegel to Carl August von Hardenberg, 15 November 1798, in: *Propyläen*, ed. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, introduction and appendix by Wolfgang Frhr. von Löhneysen, Darmstadt 1965, p. 1123. Friedrich Schlegel to Caroline Schlegel, ca. 20 November 1798, quoted from Dirk Kemper: *Propyläen*, in: *Goethe-Handbuch Supplemente*, vol. 3: *Kunst*, ed. Andreas Beyer and Ernst Osterkamp, Stuttgart/Weimar 2011, pp. 318-332; here p. 330.

14 For a succinct account of the historical transition from *Hausväterliteratur* to nineteenth-century periodical culture, see Saskia Haag: *Auf wandelbarem Grund. Haus und Literatur im 19. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg i. Br./Berlin/Wien 2012, pp. 213-224. As Haag points out, the centrality of the metaphor of the house for envisioning both the audience and didactic purpose of periodicals bridges between these two print cultures. In selecting

of the introduction as »Stufe, Tor, Eingang, Vorhalle, der Raum zwischen dem Innern und Äußern, zwischen dem Heiligen und Gemeinen«¹⁵ – announces that generic lineage yet redefines the »house« one is entering as no ordinary space of domesticity but instead as the sacred sanctuary of art exclusively inhabited by the father figure Laocoon, whom the reader (or precocious youth) encounters at the periodical's threshold. The vision of paternalism established by means of the placement of the image of the *Laocoon* and Goethe's »Über Laokoon« thereby bridges between the fading tradition of *Hausväterliteratur* and nineteenth-century periodical culture as it comes to gradually diversify its contents and intended audiences. At the same time, it continues to address itself, in the first place, to the paterfamilias as the gatekeeper (and presumably the subscriber) between the periodical and the family.

II. *Propyläen* on Illustration

Over the course of its brief lifespan, *Propyläen* printed five illustrated pages – a seemingly modest number, yet significant in comparison to both contemporary periodical publishing and previous treatises on the *Laocoon*, which typically abstained from illustration. Goethe's letters to Meyer, Schiller, and the publisher, the Cotta'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, concerning the periodical's launch indicate that the project was intended from its very inception to be illustrated,¹⁶ and

the title *Propyläen* and thereby referencing a sacred permutation of the house, Goethe and Meyer's periodical squarely places itself in that longer tradition.

15 Goethe/Meyer 1998 (fn. 12), p. 457.

16 An entire year before the periodical's launch, Schiller indicated to Johann Friedrich Cotta that the publication would encompass a modest number of illustrations: »Die Schrift wird in kleinen Abhandlungen, z. B. über den Laokoon, über die Niobe etc. geschrieben sein. Von Zeichnungen wird es nicht viel enthalten.« Schiller to Cotta, 28 March 1798, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), p. 1098. To the best of my knowledge, there is no immediate evidence, epistolary or otherwise, of whether Meyer or Goethe advocated for including the drawing of the *Laocoon* in the first issue. However, various points of circumstantial evidence point to Meyer. For one, Meyer directly commissioned Horny for the drawing and Müller for the copperplate. See Meyer to Goethe, 14 August 1798, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), p. 1103. Grave also notes that *Propyläen* was published during a period in which Goethe displayed diminished interest in drawing and largely paused his own collecting of drawings. See Johannes Grave: *Der »ideale Kunstkörper«*. Johann Wolfgang Goethe als Sammler von Druckgraphiken und Zeichnungen, Göttingen 2005, pp. 118–124. In contrast, at the time of publishing *Propyläen*, Meyer was committed to creating a collection of drawings that would illustrate Italy and Italian art. On this point, see Claudia Keller: *Lebendiger Abglanz. Goethes Italien-Projekt als Kulturanalyse*, Göttingen 2018, p. 354, fn. 46.

that Goethe, who meticulously participated in decisions concerning the format into its smallest details,¹⁷ was also involved in commissioning the copperplate engravings and felt responsible for their quality.¹⁸

The decision to include an illustration of the *Laocoon* to accompany Goethe's essay and the results were by no means uncontroversial. Hence, one contemporary review in the *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* complains loudly: »Noch mehr aber wundert es uns, daß er seinem Aufsatze einen Kupferstich von der Gruppe des Laokoons im Umrisse hat beyfügen lassen können, der auf eine unverschämte Art verzeichnet ist, und die nachtheiligsten Vermuthungen wider die praktischen Kenntnisse des Verfassers in dem Haupttheile der Kunst, in der Zeichnung, erwecken muß.«¹⁹ The reviewer appears to surmise the extent of Goethe's involvement when suggesting that the poor quality of the drawing goes against the practical knowledge of the author of the essay on the *Laocoon*. A comparative look, for example, at Marco Dente's vivid, if not stunning, copper engraving of the statue – a copper engraving that does not shy away from conveying bodily contour and volume and that was still widely in circulation around 1800 – lends the criticism greater weight.

As though they expect such criticism, *Propyläen's* editors address the question of illustration throughout the first issue, weighing its potential didactic value against the dangers posed by inaccurate, distortive replicas and reproductions. Such an assessment, performed along the very terms that Wölfflin employs nearly a century later, becomes an enduring topic for Goethe and Meyer's periodical (though I, for my purposes, will largely limit my attention to concerns related to the illustration of the *Laocoon*). The editors appreciate that they are writing for an audience unlikely to have ever encountered the original works in question and that they must consequently mediate the public reception of replicas readers would more likely be familiar with, replicas that make it possible,

17 Goethe details his very exact vision for the periodical format in a letter to Cotta on 27 May 1798: two issues [*Strücke*] per volume [*Band*], each issue composed of eleven bound full sheets [*Bogen*], with a copper plate engraving for the cover, to be printed in octavo format with a »mäßigen« number of lines, presumably for easy reading. In his letter, Goethe motivates these dictates by giving priority to yet a third fundamental function of periodicals as entertainment. »Ohne daß es eine Zeitschrift würde, näherte man das Werk einer so beliebten und der Zerstreuung des Publikums so gemäßen Art.« Goethe to Cotta, 27 May 1798, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), pp. 1099–1100.

18 See, for example, Goethe's complaints about and recommendations for modifying the copper engravings for the periodical's cover in Goethe to Meyer, 15 June 1798, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), p. 1119.

19 Review of *Propyläen*. Eine periodische Schrift herausgegeben von Göthe, in: *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* 36/1, 1800, pp. 61–96; here p. 81.

as Benjamin later writes, for originals to meet their public halfway.²⁰ With their mediating functions in mind, *Propyläen*'s »Einleitung« presents replicas and reproductions in mixed media as a necessary compromise. »Ein stumpfer, unvollkommener Gipsabguß,« the editors promise, nonetheless retains the »Idee, die Einfalt und Größe der Form« of the original, bringing it into view as if it were seen from a distance and, what's more, viewed by poor eyesight.²¹

By casting the difference between original and plaster replica as a spatial distance, replicas are conveniently classified among geographically distant artworks to be made present in the pages of the periodical, alongside, for example, the illustrated Etruscan monuments or Raphael's rooms at the Vatican, which are also discussed in the first issue. As an archive, *Propyläen* provides a record of originals inaccessible on account of their geographic or medial remove. In a similar vein, the introduction allows that »ganz unvollkommene Nachbildungen« retain the potential to stimulate »eine lebhaftige Neigung zur Kunst.«²² Insofar as the periodical is addressed to those who have once encountered the original artwork or a replica in the past and, at the same time, to those who have yet to encounter it, but may do so in the future, illustrations alternatively serve as a tool for memory recall or as a virtual substitute that prepares the way for appreciating the object in question by stimulating the necessary attachment.²³ A drawing of the *Laocoon* as included in the first issue of *Propyläen* should thus be understood as a reproduction that captures the essential form of the original and hence suffices as a catalyst for aesthetic appreciation. The claim that the plaster replica retains the idea or at least stimulates appreciation could additionally be read as an anticipatory justification for the credibility of Goethe's »Über Laokoon,« whose author had only encountered the sculpture in such a medium.²⁴

20 Benjamin 1991 (fn. 3), p. 438.

21 Goethe/Meyer 1998 (fn. 12), p. 470.

22 »Auf jeden, der ein zwar ungeübtes, aber für das Schöne empfängliches Auge hat, wird ein stumpfer, unvollkommener Gipsabguß eines trefflichen alten Werks, noch immer eine große Wirkung tun, denn in einer solchen Nachbildung bleibt doch immer die Idee, die Einfalt und Größe der Form, genug das Allgemeinste noch übrig; so viel als man mit schlechten Augen allenfalls in der Ferne gewahr werden könnte.« Ibid., p. 470.

23 »Indem nun aber die Verfasser für diejenigen zu arbeiten denken, welche die Werke teils gesehen haben, teils künftig sehen werden; so hoffen sie für solche, die sich in keinem der beiden Fälle befinden, dennoch das mögliche zu tun. Wir werden der Nachbildungen erwähnen, anzeigen, wo Abgüsse von alten Kunstwerken, alte Kunstwerke selbst, besonders den Deutschen, sich näher befinden, und so echter Liebhaberei und Kunstkenntnis, so viel an uns liegt, zu begegnen suchen.« Ibid., p. 472.

24 Ibid., p. 470. As he reports in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe saw a plaster cast of the *Laocoon* in 1769 in Mannheim and acquired a plaster replica of the bust in 1774. See Wolfgang Frhr. von Löhneysen: Anhang, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), pp. 1096-1166; here p. 1126.

In a short text that advertises *Propyläen* and was published (in the *Allgemeine Zeitung*) a year after the first issue in the hope of lifting its dismal subscriber numbers,²⁵ Goethe returns to the subject of illustrating the *Laocoon*. Goethe there attributes the widespread misconception that the sculpture depicts Laocoon's youngest son in the moment of being bitten by a snake (a claim that Goethe had already memorably taken issue with in the earlier essay) to poor replicas. Citing Jacopo Sadolet's verse as the probable source for past illustrators, Goethe exclaims: »Hievon sieht man nichts in der Gruppe! und doch ist es in Zeichnungen und Kupferstiche und andere Nachahmungen übergegangen.«²⁶ The many relays between text and image in an already saturated media culture lie, so Goethe, at the root of misinterpretation. True to that critique, the drawing of the *Laocoon* in *Propyläen*'s first issue distinctly depicts a snake on the left with the firm line of a closed jaw, its head neatly tucked under the left palm of the young boy. In effect, the misidentification of the central moment of the struggle in the *Laocoon* has, according to Goethe's »Über Laokoon,« at least one origin in the misleading nature of poor illustration.²⁷ In turn, Goethe's intention to strip the *Laocoon* of previous misreadings originating, as Inka Mülder-Bach's brilliant reading of Goethe's essay demonstrates, in discourses foreign to the object itself (for example, mythology, anatomy, or Sadolet's verse) also entails freeing the sculpture from misconceptions that issue from reproductive media.²⁸ Against this background, the drawing in the first issue represents either an imperative corrective to a media culture threatened by misleading illustrations or a further exacerbation of that very threat.

Justification for including the two illustrations in the first issue comes most immediately in Goethe's apologetic note »Über die beigefügten Kupfer,« which follows on the introduction and constructs a capacious gap between the

25 The Cotta'sche Buchhandlung first issued a print run of 1500-2000 copies, which was later reduced to 450, as Cotta reported to Schiller in the summer of 1799 that only 450 copies had been sold in the first year. See Kemper 2011 (fn. 13), p. 321.

26 Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Propyläen*. Eine periodische Schrift, in: Goethe 1998 (fn. 12), pp. 658-668; here p. 661. On the subject of Goethe's critique of falsifying replicas beyond *Propyläen*, see Grave 2005 (fn. 16), p. 225.

27 »Um die Stellung des Vaters sowohl im Ganzen als nach allen Teilen des Körpers, zu erklären, scheint es mir am vorteilhaftesten, das augenblickliche Gefühl der Wunde als die Hauptursache der ganzen Bewegung anzugeben. Die Schlange hat nicht gebissen, sondern sie beißt, und zwar in den weichen Teil des Körpers, über und etwas hinter der Hüfte.« Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Über Laokoon*, in: Goethe 1998 (fn. 12), pp. 489-500; here pp. 493-494.

28 See Inka Mülder-Bach: *Sichtbarkeit und Lesbarkeit*. Goethes Aufsatz »Über Laokoon«, in: *Das Laokoon-Paradigma*. Zeichenregime im 18. Jahrhundert, ed. Inge Baxmann, Michael Franz and Wolfgang Schäffner, Berlin 2000, pp. 465-479; here p. 473.

illustration and the original. The note calls as much attention to the drawing's deficiency as to its illustrative value, noting that »Die Kupfer, welche wir dem gegenwärtigen Stücke beifügen, so wie diejenigen, die allenfalls in den künftigen folgen möchten, können nur den Zweck haben, dem Leser eine schnelle, allgemeine, sinnliche Anschauung von Gegenständen zu geben, die eben zur Sprache kommen.«²⁹ At the same time, Goethe's note provides a distinct and noteworthy justification for illustrating the *Laocoon* despite its medial and geographic distance to the original, pointing to the sculpture's singular degree of complexity: »Die erste Tafel stellt einen Umriss der Gruppe des Laokoons vor, weil nicht leicht jemand sich der sehr verwickelten Anordnung derselben, worauf doch so viel, bei jedem Worte das man darüber äußert, ankommt, deutlich erinnern möchte.«³⁰ The very subject of the *Laocoon*, its intertwined set of five bodies, exceeds the capacity for lively mental representation. It is the heightened complexity of the sculptural arrangement, the convoluted terms of entanglement, that justifies the compromise of illustration.

The attribution of extraordinary complexity to the *Laocoon* – which Goethe's essay introduces as »ein verwickeltes Werk«³¹ – also sets the stage for »Über Laokoon.« The essay aims at a form of discursive disentanglement, untangling the knot of the *Laocoon* sculpture into a legible form.³² Legibility means, as I noted, stripping the artwork from discourses that have occluded the sculpture as an aesthetic object from view, freeing the object from misconceptions that have their origin in multimedia reproductions, and unfolding the complex arrangement into a linear script. Thus, the critical disentanglement that Goethe's essay offers is not only a matter of »Entmythologisierung« – namely, of undressing the object of discourses that have disguised its genuine iconic temporality as Mülder-Bach so persuasively argues³³ – it is also a matter of untangling the complex knot of bodies into a legible, linear script compatible with the presentation of the sculpture as a two-dimensional image on the first page of *Propyläen* and the linear script of a written text. For Goethe's interpretative labor reads the nexus of bodies from left to right, from the youngest (smallest) son on the far left, to the father in the sculpture's center, and, finally, to the older son on the right.

29 Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Über die beigelegten Kupfer, in: Goethe 1998 (fn. 12), p. 476.

30 Ibid.

31 Goethe 1998 (fn. 27), p. 491.

32 Franzel points out that the image of untying a knot is a common feature of how periodicals around 1800 describe their ambitions to bring clarity to a subject. That context likewise suggests the programmatic choice of the *Laocoon* for *Propyläen*, the sculpture depicting just such a knot of life-threatening proportions. See Franzel 2023 (fn. 8), p. 19.

33 Mülder-Bach 2000 (fn. 28), p. 473.

The thrust of Goethe's reading and the temporality he attributes to the sculptural object abides by that directionality: on the left, we perceive the youngest son to have lost his battle against the snake, as he has already been bitten and poisoned; in the middle the father is at the height of hostilities, the precise moment of being bitten; and, on the right, the older son, only lightly entangled, presents the possibility of escape and an incipient hope for the future. The here and now of the sculptural moment has been unfolded to reveal a past, present, and future. To maintain this temporality, it is naturally essential that the youngest son on the left not be seen in the moment of being bitten, as this would distort the temporal linearity Goethe intends to establish. Goethe's essay thrice performs this reading from left to right, thereby mapping the knot of bodies into a linear and legible sequence. Take, for example, the following passage:

Gehen wir nun weiter und denken uns den Vater, der sich mit seinen Kindern, es sei nun wie es sei, von Schlangen umwunden fühlt, so gibt es nur Einen Moment des höchsten Interesse: wenn der eine Körper durch die Umwindung wehrlos gemacht ist, wenn der andere zwar wehrhaft aber verletzt ist, und dem dritten eine Hoffnung zur Flucht übrig bleibt. In dem ersten Falle ist der jüngere Sohn, im zweiten der Vater, im dritten der ältere Sohn.³⁴

Goethe's essay thus answers the very complexity of the sculptural arrangement that initially warranted illustration by offering a reading in which the dense and twisted mass of bodies is unraveled into a nearly optimistic sequence replete with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

III. The Periodical Format

The circumstances of the periodical's creation suggest three reasons for reading »Über Laokoon« as contributing to the first issue's rationale for a periodical publication. In the first place, the editors of *Propyläen* were all too aware that launching a periodical represented an at least economically uncertain undertaking. Goethe, for one, had just witnessed Schiller's difficulty establishing *Die Horen* – Schiller's fifth attempt at a periodical – which folded after a brief span of three years. The mere three-year lifespan of *Die Horen* and the ultimately even more ephemeral duration of *Propyläen* were by no means anomalies. Both the plethora of periodical launches and the brevity of their lifespans are representative of an epoch eager to distribute public Enlightenment in periodical form yet regularly unable to find a receptive audience, that is, the minimum number of

34 Goethe 1998 (fn. 27), p. 497.

subscribers needed to make a publication viable.³⁵ The example of *Die Horen* and its recent cessation weighed heavily on the inception of Goethe and Meyer's publication, giving them cause to provide a rationale and a vision for yet another launch. It also weighed heavily insofar as it was Schiller who first proposed, on behalf of Goethe and Meyer, the project to the Cotta'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, which had previously published *Die Horen*. Understandably, the publisher initially hesitated to adopt the project but ultimately did so, both on account of Schiller's support and in the hope of acquiring Goethe as a regular author, as indeed they did.³⁶

Furthermore, *Propyläen* adopted *Die Horen's* commitment to universal humanism and its concomitant refusal to engage with political or contemporaneous subject matter that might prove to be divisive among authors or readers.³⁷ *Propyläen* thus perpetuates *Die Horen's* vision of a periodical as generating a form of convivial conversation among a network of geographically »entfernten Freunden«³⁸ – though Goethe and Meyer temper that vision with a heavy dose of paternalism that essentially casts the reader as a youth listening in on a circle of mature and erudite father figures. In this vein, the »Einleitung« famously presents itself as a »Gespräch« by means of which »eine[] wechselseitige[] Ausbildung« takes place, a conversation among »einer Gesellschaft harmonisch gebildeter Freunde,« with the added advantage that the medium of writing establishes a record of that exchange and its own developmental phases.³⁹ As the

35 Osterkamp argues that the failure to find subscribers is undoubtedly related to the programmatic orientation of *Die Horen*, *Propyläen*, and similar projects, each of which was founded in open contempt of its public. »Von nun an wurde jede neue Zeitschrift gewissermaßen gegen das Publikum gegründet,« writes Osterkamp. The essence of these publishing projects is »in ihren Ansprüchen an programmatische Geschlossenheit und inhaltliche Qualität und in ihrer Intransigenz gegenüber den Wünschen des Publikums.« Osterkamp 2007 (fn. 8), p. 69.

36 For an account of Schiller's mediating role between Goethe and Meyer and the Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, see Kemper 2011 (fn. 13), pp. 318–321. On 28 March 1798, Schiller proposed »ein gemeinschaftliches Werk über ihre Kunsterfahrungen in einer Suite von kleinen Bändchen,« for which he then suggests, two months later, the title »Der Künstler.« Cotta voices his doubts in reply: »Also offen zu gestehen, gefällt mir bei dieser Unternehmung das nicht, daß sie bloß für das Kunstpublikum ist, dieses scheint mir zu klein für den Verleger von Goethes Schriften, der auf einen sehr zahlreichen Absatz muss rechnen können.« Schiller to Cotta, 28 March 1798; and Cotta to Schiller, 11 April 1798, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), pp. 1098–1099.

37 Osterkamp 2007 (fn. 8), p. 77.

38 Goethe to Carl von Knebel, 15 May 1798, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), p. 1099.

39 Goethe/Meyer 1998 (fn. 12), pp. 459 and 458.

editors advertise, inaugurating the archival function of their publication: »Jeder Moment des Wachstums ist fixiert.«⁴⁰

However, it is not only their awareness of the fact that establishing a periodical presents an uncertain undertaking that gives Goethe and Meyer reason to provide a programmatic vision of the periodical in the first issue. Equally significant is the fact that Goethe and Meyer considered their decision to publish their collaborative efforts in specifically this format an unfortunate compromise if not a betrayal of their earlier ambitions. As most recently documented by Claudia Keller, Goethe and Meyer had long planned to craft a cultural history of the Italian »Kunstkörper,«⁴¹ a project envisioned in multiple possible formats. For example, while meeting with Meyer in Stäfa, Goethe records their intention, »ein Epitome unserer Reise und Nichtreise zusammenschreiben,« possibly in the format of »ein paar allgemein lesbare[n] Oktavbände[n]« and »im dritten das als Noten und Beilagen nachzubringen, was vielleicht nur ein spezielles Interesse haben kann.«⁴²

While *Propyläen* remained true to the aims to produce a work of collective authorship and to deliver, at least to a modest degree, a cultural history of Italy to a general public, Goethe considered the ultimate format to be a concession to extenuating historical circumstances.⁴³ Thus, he writes in the 1799 advertisement, seemingly in sympathy with those reluctant to subscribe, that the project would have achieved an entirely different, more complete, and more ambitious form and format had it not been for the »zerstörende Lust« of an »alles bewegende[n] Genius,« Napoleon. In Goethe's estimation, that destructive drive had exercised its violence on the subject matter of his and Meyer's project, Italy's »Kunstkörper,« and specifically Rome's, and, by extension, on the project itself.⁴⁴ The same force that displaced the *Laocoon* statue from the Vatican and thereby dismantled the integrated body of Italian culture is made responsible for the serialized, part-and-parcel format of Goethe and Meyer's project.

40 Ibid., p. 459.

41 See Keller 2018 (fn. 16).

42 Goethe to Karl August Böttiger, 25 October 1797, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), p. 1098.

43 Alternatively, Keller interprets the periodical format as less a concession than a first attempt to bring a semblance of order to the project's materials: »Propyläen [stellt] zwar eine Phase der Sortierung dar, in welcher versucht wird, bestimmte Positionen experimentell zu erproben und eine Systematisierung zu erreichen.« Keller 2018 (fn. 16), p. 352.

44 »Man hat vielleicht jetzo mehr Ursache als jemals, Italien als einen großen Kunstkörper zu betrachten, wie er vor kurzem noch bestand. Ist es möglich davon eine Übersicht zu geben, so wird sich alsdann erst zeigen, was die Welt in diesem Augenblicke verliert, da so viele Teile von diesem großen und alten Ganzen abgerissen wurden.« Goethe/Meyer 1998 (fn. 12), p. 475.

In other words, the fragmented, because serialized, format of the periodical represents a concession to the now fragmented state of that cultural body. Alluding to Napoleon's invasion of Italy,⁴⁵ the looting of the Vatican, and the transfer of the *Laocoon* statue to Paris, Goethe famously writes in the advertisement in the *Allgemeine Zeitung*:

Man würde sich nur traurigen und vergeblichen Betrachtungen überlassen, wenn man hier anzeigen wollte, wie diese Arbeiten, welche teilweise und sukzessiv dem Publikum vorgelegt werden können, in einer andern Gestalt und zu einem erfreulichern Ganzen hätten verarbeitet werden sollen, wenn nicht am Ende des Jahrhunderts, der alles bewegende Genius seine zerstörende Lust besonders auch an Kunst und KunstVerhältnissen ausgeübt hätte. Wir wünschen, daß die Teile, die wir gerettet haben, da wir das Ganze aufgeben mußten, in diesen Zeiten der allgemeinen Auflösung wieder bindend für Künstler und KunstFreunde werden mögen.⁴⁶

Goethe's apology draws attention to those very aspects of the periodical format that might appear to be at odds with the aesthetic norms that constitute its content, that is, an incongruity between format and content. As he admonishes in »Über Laocon,« the imperative to speak of an artwork as a whole is nothing less than the concomitant imperative to speak of the whole of art.⁴⁷ Yet the fact that a periodical's texts are published in successive parts (»teilweis und sukzessiv«) – as frankly was the case for a great number of *Propyläen*'s pieces that were serialized across issues and, moreover, broken down within individual issues into smaller, serial parts⁴⁸ – implied that the texts themselves could never overcome

45 For a recent discussion of *Propyläen* in relation to Napoleon's Italian campaigns, see Hans-Jürgen Schings: *Laokoon und La Mort de Marat* oder Weimarische Kunstfreunde und Französische Revolution, in: *Klassizismus in Aktion. Goethes Propyläen und das Weimarer Kunstprogramm*, ed. Daniel Ehrmann and Norbert Christian Wolf, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2015, pp. 67-122.

46 Goethe 1998 (fn. 26), p. 658.

47 »Wenn man von einem trefflichen Kunstwerke sprechen will, so ist es fast nötig von der ganzen Kunst zu reden, denn es enthält sie ganz, und jeder kann, soviel in seinen Kräften steht, auch das Allgemeine aus einem solchen besondern Fall entwickeln.« Goethe 1998 (fn. 27), p. 489.

48 Multiple texts are divided even within a single periodical issue into smaller parts designated as »letters.« Meyer's text »Über Etrurische Monumente,« for example, is printed as two consecutive units, »Erster Brief« and »Zweiter Brief.« Similarly, the article »Rafaels Werke besonders im Vatikan« is broken down into a numerated chronological inventory of the painter's masterpieces intended to illustrate his artistic development. In effect, these rubrics separate the texts into even smaller fragments than necessitated by serialization.

their constitution as parts or fragments so as to represent art as a whole.⁴⁹ The periodical format, while necessitated by extenuating historical circumstances, falls far short of the authorial aim to present the body of art as one integrated totality. Hence, the editors of *Propyläen* felt compelled to justify the choice of the periodical format not only because it represented a trade-off between historical circumstances and their vision for a cultural history of Italy but also on account of the perceived incongruity between the publication format and the aesthetic norm it espoused.

Instead, the periodical format becomes a museal archive for fragments recovered from a catastrophic turn of events. It is in relation to these historical forces and the fate of the looted *Laocoon* statue that the second of the two programmatic functions of the periodical – its didactic and archival functions – most clearly comes into view.⁵⁰ *Propyläen* stylizes itself as recovering what remains in the aftermath of Napoleon's destructive path, that is, as recovering piecemeal the now dismantled Italian art body, a dismantling epitomized by the removal of the *Laocoon* statue from its native ground. In effect, while the project of a history of Italian art could never be realized in its original form, the mission to provide

49 Edith Anna Kunz notes the same incongruity between *Propyläen's* serialized format and the emphasis on the whole central to its »[k]ämpferischen Klassizismus.« Rather than read the serial format as a form of compromise, she suggests that it represents a field of experimentation that initiates a period of transition in Goethe's work from a classical vision of the whole to a more dynamic postclassical concept of the text: »Die Entstehungsgeschichte der *Propyläen*, die als solche eine Geschichte des Scheiterns ist, kann auf der Ebene der Darstellung als Geschichte eines Übergangs vom klassizistischen Werkanspruch zu einem dynamischen, postklassizistischen Textkonzept gelesen werden, eines Übergangs, der hier schon 1798 verortet werden kann.« Edith Anna Kunz: »Vorhallen« und »Heiligtum«. Text- und Kunstkonzept von Goethes *Propyläen*, in: »Ein Unendliches in Bewegung. Künste und Wissenschaften im medialen Wechselspiel bei Goethe, ed. Barbara Naumann and Margrit Wyder, Bielefeld 2012, pp. 35-50; here p. 38. Against interpretations of the programmatic, normative function of the periodical, Keller similarly reads *Propyläen* as a fluctuating and flexible medium of experimentation: »Dieses Fortschreiben ist jedoch auch Indiz für die Wandelbarkeit der periodischen Schrift: Sie bezeichnet weniger eine statische Programmatik, als sie die momentane Fixierung eines Prozesses darstellt.« Claudia Keller: Die ungeschriebenen *Propyläen*. Klassizismus im Experiment, in: *Klassizismus in Aktion* (fn. 45), pp. 387-405; here p. 387.

50 So while Osterkamp identifies the conclusion of *Propyläen* as a programmatic attempt to change the course of artistic education and appreciation, in contrast to Goethe's later turn toward archival projects (a »Musealisierung des Klassizismus«), I am suggesting that that the periodical is already conceived as a museal institution continuous with those later archivist ambitions. As evidence for this turn to »Musealisierung,« Osterkamp specifically names two such projects, first the purchase of Asmus Jakob Carstens's *Nachlass* and, second, Goethe's work on an edition of Winckelmann's papers. See Osterkamp 1994 (fn. 10), p. 321.

an archival record of the body of Italian art becomes all the more urgent. To press the point in an exaggerated manner: *Propyläen* reacts to the promise of a new museal body of art in the Parisian Louvre by inaugurating a second museal technology, the periodical, to preserve and present the subject of (Italian) art. *Propyläen* itself represents one answer to the question with which the »Einleitung« concludes: How should other nations, specifically England and Germany, react to »dieser Zeit der Zerstreuung und des Verlustes«?⁵¹

As a counteroffensive to the Parisian museum, the periodical becomes a medium ready to respond to these unfortunate historical circumstances, if not to the fluctuating and finite condition of modern life per se. With a more optimistic view on the possibilities inherent to a serial publication consisting of consecutive parts than voiced in the advertisement, the introduction announces:

Kurze Aufsätze, in die man von Zeit und Zeit seine Gedanken, seine Überzeugungen und Wünsche niederlegt, um sich nach einiger Zeit wieder mit sich selbst zu unterhalten, sind auch ein schönes Hülfsmittel eigner und fremder Bildung, deren keines versäumt werden darf, wenn man die Kürze der dem Leben zugemeßnen Zeit und die vielen Hindernisse bedenkt, die einer jeden Ausführung im Wege stehen.⁵²

In effect, not only is the fragmented format of the periodical (conceived as fragments of a convivial exchange) well suited to the recovery of fragments of the body of art, the brevity of its texts accommodates the brevity of human life and the many obstacles it encounters.

What's more, the »Einleitung« promises that the serial publication, through gradual accumulation, might over time come to approximate the whole of art:

Da die Einrichtung des gegenwärtigen Werks von der Art ist, daß wir einzelne Abhandlungen, ja dieselben sogar teilweise, vorlegen werden, dabei aber unser Wunsch ist, nicht ein Ganzes zu zerstückeln, sondern aus mannigfaltigen Teilen endlich ein Ganzes zusammen zu setzen; so wird es nötig sein,

51 »[D]ie Methode, wie ein Künstler und Kunstliebhaber Frankreich und Italien zu nutzen hat, wird sich angeben lassen, so wie dabei noch eine wichtige und schöne Frage zu erörtern ist: was andere Nationen, besonders Deutschland und England, tun sollten, um, in dieser Zeit der Zerstreuung und des Verlustes, mit einem wahren, weltbürgerlichen Sinne, der vielleicht nirgends reiner als bei Künsten und Wissenschaften statt finden kann, die mannigfaltigen Kunstschatze, die bei ihnen zerstreut niedergelegt sind, allgemein brauchbar zu machen, und einen idealen Kunstkörper bilden zu helfen, der uns mit der Zeit, für das was uns der gegenwärtige Augenblick zerreißt, wo nicht entreißt, vielleicht glücklich zu entschädigen vermöchte.« Goethe/Meyer 1998 (fn. 12), p. 475.

52 Ibid., p. 459.

bald möglichst, allgemein und summarisch dasjenige vorzulegen, worüber der Leser nach und nach im einzelnen unsere Ausarbeitungen erhalten wird. Daher wird uns zunächst ein Aufsatz über bildende Kunst beschäftigen, worin die bekannten Rubriken, nach unserer Vorstellungsart und Methode, vorgetragen werden sollen.⁵³

The *Laocoon*, whose complexity mimics the labyrinthine modern condition, then stands in for the new *Kunstkörper* that will be gradually, issue by additive issue, reconstituted through the museal acquisitions of the periodical publication.

IV. Periodical Paternalism

It is with respect to the first purpose of periodical literature I identified, as a didactic instrument, that the significance of the *Laocoon* in framing the programmatic »Einleitung« most distinctly comes into view. The editors of *Propyläen* present the *Laocoon* in a multimedia format as the initiatory moment not only because the object exemplifies the aesthetic norms they wish to elaborate but also because it is representative of an attitude of benevolent paternalism with which they intend to endow the publication. The *Laocoon*, as I suggested earlier, serves *Propyläen* as an emblem. Regardless of the many decades that he had yet to live, Goethe, at the time of publication, describes himself as passing on the accumulated knowledge of his past, writing to Karl Jacobi that, »Wenn man sich eine große Zeit seines Lebens mit gewissen Gegenständen abgegeben hat, so wünscht man sich und andern doch auch zuletzt Rechenschaft abzulegen, sich die Resultate klarzumachen und sie mitzuteilen.«⁵⁴ Accordingly, the introduction begins by explaining the significance of the threshold space to which the title refers as marking the difference between youth and adulthood. The periodical thus introduces itself as a mediating instance for ushering youth into the domain of intellectual, aesthetic maturity.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 464–465.

⁵⁴ »Leider ist es nicht das dankbarste Geschäft,« concludes Goethe. Goethe to Karl Jacobi, 16 August 1799, in: *Propyläen* (fn. 13), p. 1115.

⁵⁵ As Helmut Schneider shows, this programmatic ambition is also evident in Goethe's »Der Sammler und die Seinigen,« of which Schneider writes: »Überdies verleiht Goethes Dichtung dem Programm der Kunstzeitschrift und ihrem Beiträger- und Leserkreis eine fiktive Anschaulichkeit, wenn der dargestellte Besitzer der Sammlung und seine Familienangehörigen und Freunde – die ›Seinigen‹ des Titels – mit den Autoren der *Propyläen* in einen regen (freilich nur einseitig wiedergegebenen) Korrespondenz- und Besuchsverkehr treten.« The virtual collection »wird zum Ort einer idealen – geistigen – Kunst-

The representative function of the *Laocoon* is most evident in the essay itself, for what remains to be seen when the sculpture is undressed of the discourses irrelevant to its essence is Laocoon as father. At the essay's most critical moment, Goethe writes:

Die Bildhauerkunst wird mit Recht so hoch gehalten, weil sie die Darstellung auf ihren höchsten Gipfel bringen kann und muß, weil sie den Menschen von allem, was ihm nicht wesentlich ist, entblößt. So ist auch bei dieser Gruppe, *Laokoon* ein bloßer Name, von seiner Priesterschaft, von seinem trojanisch-nationellen, von allem poetischen und mythologischen Beiwesen haben ihn die Künstler entkleidet, er ist nichts von allem, wozu ihn die Fabel macht, es ist ein Vater mit zwei Söhnen, in Gefahr zwei gefährlichen Tieren unterzuliegen. So sind auch hier keine göttergesandte, sondern bloß natürliche Schlangen, mächtig genug einige Menschen zu überwältigen, aber keineswegs, weder in ihrer Gestalt noch Handlung, außerordentliche, rächende, strafende Wesen. Ihrer Natur gemäß schleichen sie heran, umschlingen, schnüren zusammen, und die eine beißt erst gereizt.⁵⁶

Extricated, first by the artist, second by the adept interpreter, from his priesthood, his Trojan background, and all poetic and mythological paraphernalia, what remains is »ein Vater mit zwei Söhnen.« Therein, in the constellation of father and child, lies the sculpture's powerful essence. Goethe's prosaic retelling of the central event emphasizes the same point: »Ein Vater schlief neben seinen beiden Söhnen, sie wurden von Schlangen umwunden und streben nun erwachend, sich aus dem lebendigen Netze loszureißen.«⁵⁷ On these grounds, Goethe insists that the force of the composition rests precisely on the family constellation (in contrast, perhaps to a Herculean contest between man and beast); a depiction of Laocoon absent children, or alternatively, absent father, »wird ihren ganzen Wert verlieren.«⁵⁸ Just as the snakes are to be regarded as »natürliche Schlangen,« and not as allegorical stand-ins, so too is Laocoon to be seen as a representative of a »mere« father. What the sculpture imparts to its viewer, and

familie.« Helmut J. Schneider: Kunstsammlung und Kunstgeselligkeit. Zu Goethes Sammlungs- und Museumskonzeption zwischen 1798 und 1817, in: Goethe Yearbook 22, 2015, pp. 227-246; here p. 229.

56 Goethe 1998 (fn. 27), p. 492.

57 Ibid., p. 493. And again: »Wir nahmen an, daß natürliche Schlangen einen Vater mit seinen Söhnen im Schlaf umwunden [...].« Ibid., p. 497.

58 Ibid., p. 496. »Ein starker, wohlgebauter Mann, aber schon über die Jahre der größten Energie hinaus, weniger fähig Schmerz und Leiden zu widerstehen. Man denke sich an seiner Statt einen rüstigen Jüngling, und die Gruppe wird ihren ganzen Wert verlieren!« Ibid.

the essay to its reader, is »Angst, Furcht, Schrecken,« and, most powerfully, »väterliche Neigung.«⁵⁹ Stripped of its mythological significance, the sculpture reveals powerful yet quotidian fatherly feeling.

Recognizing that Goethe's essay aims to excavate the moment of fatherly feeling from the *Laocoon* and, moreover, to enshrine this disposition in *Propyläen's* first issue helps make sense of one of the essay's more enigmatic passages in which Goethe describes a child, full of energy and life, falling at the height of its play, a decisively mundane situation selected to accentuate the »mere« father of the *Laocoon*. Key to the passage is that we as readers are not asked to adopt the perspective of a child as it falls so as to empathize with its change of fate or pain. Instead, we readers are asked to adopt the perspective of a more experienced person, presumably an adult, watching the child absorbed in play:

Man sehe ein lebhaftes Kind, das, mit aller Energie und Lust des Lebens rennt, springt und sich ergötzt, dann aber etwa unverhofft von einem Gespielen hart getroffen oder sonst physisch oder moralisch heftig verletzt wird; diese neue Empfindung teilt sich wie ein elektrischer Schlag allen Gliedern mit, und ein solcher Übersprung ist im höchsten Sinne pathetisch, es ist ein Gegensatz, von dem man ohne Erfahrung keinen Begriff hat.⁶⁰

By means of this analogy, the reader is asked to rehearse a paternal perspective on the child, to make sense of its experience as a dramatic reversal of fortunes. It is a perspective not unlike the one made evident to us in Goethe's reading of the *Laocoon* sculpture. What we come to appreciate and to practice as *Propyläen's* readers is the difference of perspectives between father and child, and the way in which the first should aim both to make sense of the child's predicament and to extricate the child from the labyrinthine entanglements of its historical situation, just as Laocoon fights to extricate his sons from the entanglement of their dramatic, historical situation. From the standpoint of the *Laocoon* drawing and essay, *Propyläen* comes into view as a periodical that seeks to cultivate aesthetic erudition at the highest standard, and, at the same time, to cultivate a family of readers bound by an appreciation for and exercise of fatherly feeling.

59 Ibid., p. 495.

60 Ibid. Müllder-Bach, for comparison, explains the image of the child as an analogy. »In Hinblick auf Genre, Figur und Handlung läßt sich kaum eine Szene denken, die von dem Schlangenkampf Laokoons weiter entfernt ist als das Spiel eines Kindes. Doch Goethe interessiert erneut nur die formale oder strukturelle Analogie.« Müllder-Bach 2000 (fn. 28), p. 476. The analogy, I would argue, rests not only on the dramatic turn of events but also on the paternal perspective that the image, or scene, brings into view.

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