This volume provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life inside and outside Germany. Prof. Karl S. Guthke, Harvard University

This elegant collection of essays ranges across eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought, covering philosophy, science, literature and religion in the 'Age of Goethe.' A recognised authority in the field, Nisbet grapples with the major voices of the Enlightenment and gives pride of place to the figures of Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller.

The book ranges widely in its compass of thought and intellectual discourse, dealing incisively with themes including the philosophical implications of literature and the relationship between religion, science and politics. The result is an accomplished reflection on German thought, but also on its rebirth, as Nisbet argues for the relevance of these Enlightenment thinkers for the readers of today.

The first half of this collection focuses predominantly on eighteenth-century thought, where names like Lessing, Goethe and Herder, but also Locke and Voltaire, feature. The second has a wider chronological scope, discussing authors such as Winckelmann and Schiller, while branching out from discussions of religion, philosophy and literature to explore the sciences. Issues of biology, early environmentalism, and natural history also form part of this volume. The collection concludes with an examination of changing attitudes towards art in the aftermath of the 'Age of Goethe.'

The essays in this volume are brought together in this collection to present Nisbet's widely-acclaimed perspectives on this fascinating period of German thought. It will be of interest to scholars and students of the intellectual life of Europe during the Enlightenment, while its engaging and lucid style will also appeal to the general reader.

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The Laocoon group in the Vatican, reputedly the work of the three Rhodian sculptors Hagesandros, Athanodorus, and Polydorus, is one of the most famous sculptures to have come down to us from antiquity. It depicts the Trojan priest Laocoon and his sons being bitten and strangled to death by two enormous serpents. There are various versions of the legend, but the most familiar is that of Virgil, who, in the *Aeneid*, Book II, describes Laocoon’s fearful death as a punishment imposed on him by Minerva, the protectress of the Greeks, for his temerity in warning his fellow Trojans against bringing the Wooden Horse into Troy. Since its discovery in a vault on the Esquiline Hill in Rome on 14 January 1506, the Laocoon group has been the subject of controversy, probably more so than any other ancient sculpture. But it was in Germany, between the middle of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century, that the controversy reached its height. After Winckelmann, in
1755, proclaimed it an exemplary instance of that Greek beauty which he urged his contemporaries to emulate, it played a central part in the rise of the neo-classical movement; and for over fifty years, many of the foremost intellects in Germany contributed to the debate over its significance and its relationship to their own aesthetic and philosophical principles. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the controversy is the diversity of opinion which the statue generated. Indeed, it is not too much to say that, during this period, it became a touchstone of taste. But in one respect, nearly all the participants were united: they regarded this sculpture as of paradigmatic value in art and aesthetic theory, and they spoke of it with reverence.

The object of this essay is not to provide a history of the neo-classical movement in Germany, a subject that has been amply treated in the past. Its aim is rather, by examining salient points in the reception of a particular work of art, to furnish a more concentrated, if more limited, perspective on some of the changes in attitude towards art and life which took place during the age of Goethe and its aftermath. I should add that I have chosen the Laocoon group rather than any other work not merely because so much was written about it at that time. It has for long struck me as strange that so drastic a spectacle as the group affords should have fascinated so rational an age as the eighteenth century, and that it was able to captivate such devotees of classical beauty and serenity as Winckelmann and the older Goethe. None of the explanations hitherto advanced for this phenomenon has impressed me as satisfactory, and it may be that, if we can discover why so many leading minds responded to the work’s challenge, we stand to learn something significant about their attitudes and the times they lived in, and perhaps also about the statue itself. Such problems as to when precisely the statue originated, and which version of the Laocoon myth it represents—problems about which art historians and archaeologists have continued to argue—I

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3 See, for example, Walther Rehm, *Griechentum und Goethezeit* (Leipzig: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1936); the same author’s *Götterstille und Göttertrauer* (Berne: Francke, 1951); E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935); and H. C. Hatfield, *Winckelmann and his German Critics* (New York, NY: King’s Crow Press, 1943).

shall mention only in so far as they impinge upon the interpretations of the group by the writers in question.

The Laocoon debate in Germany begins with Winckelmann’s essay ‘Thoughts on the Imitation of the Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture’ of 1755. It was this short essay, more than Winckelmann’s later History of the Art of Antiquity, which caught the imagination of his contemporaries, and expressed most strikingly his vision of the ancient Greeks as a happy and ideal race whose sculptures embodied consummate beauty, a beauty to which artists of every period should look as an unsurpassed model. The first such masterpiece which Winckelmann mentions, and the main example of the qualities he admires, is the Laocoön group. The group remains today what it was in antiquity, he says, ‘a perfect rule of art’. And in his celebrated lines on the excellence of the ancient statues, it is again the Laocoon which serves as his example:

Finally, the universal and predominant characteristic of the Greek masterpieces is a noble simplicity and quiet greatness, both in posture and expression. Just as the depths of the sea remain forever calm, however much the surface may rage, so does the expression of the Greek figures, however strong their passions, reveal a great and dignified soul. Such a soul is depicted in the face of Laocoon, and not only in his face, despite his most violent torments. The pain which is evident in his every muscle and sinew, and which, disregarding his face and other parts of his body, we can almost feel ourselves simply by looking at his painfully contracted abdomen—this pain, I maintain, nevertheless causes no violent distortion to his face or to his general posture. He raises no terrible clamour, as in Virgil’s poetic account of his fate. His mouth is not wide enough open to allow this, and he emits instead an anxious and oppressed sigh [...]. The physical pain and spiritual greatness are diffused with equal intensity throughout his entire frame, and held, as it were, in balance. Laocoon suffers, but he suffers like the Philoctetes of Sophocles: his misery touches us to the heart, but we envy the fortitude with which this great man endures it.

‘A noble simplicity and quiet greatness’—these are the qualities which Winckelmann glorifies in the statues of the Greeks and which became

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5 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Sämtliche Werke (subsequent references to this edition are identified by the abbreviation WW), ed. by Joseph Eiselein, 12 vols (Donaueschingen: Verlag Deutscher Klassiker, 1825–29), I, 9.
6 WW I, 30f.
the ideals of the neo-classical movement in Germany. He holds them up in opposition to the Baroque art of the preceding century with its movement, passion, and extravagance—the art of Bernini, whom he explicitly attacks in the essay. For the state in which ‘noble simplicity and quiet greatness’ are seen to their best advantage is not that of motion, but of rest.

On the face of it, the Laocoon group is scarcely the most obvious instance Winckelmann could have chosen to demonstrate his thesis. Numerous other Greek sculptures were known, even then, which display the simplicity and tranquillity he admires in a far higher degree than the complex and contorted Laocoon—the Belvedere Apollo, for example, to which he refers briefly, or the so-called Antinous, both of which Hogarth had praised two years before as models of classical perfection. As one critic remarks, ‘why he should have chosen this particular group as an example of the very qualities it lacks, is no easy question to answer.’

It is simply not enough to say, as some scholars have done, that the Laocoon group seemed moderate to Winckelmann in comparison with the excesses of Bernini, Puget, Falconet, and other sculptors of the Baroque and Rococo eras. This may well be true, but it does not alter the fact that more moderate examples still were available, to which the terms Winckelmann uses would have been much more appropriate. And as for E. M. Butler’s explanation that, ‘dazzled by a flash of a great revelation’, Winckelmann ‘was in fact in a trance; and like many another clairvoyant, he was uttering truths which did not apply to the object before him, but were associated with it in his mind’, this does not answer the problem at all, but simply evades it. By such reasoning, Winckelmann might just as well have chosen one of the ecstatic figures of Bernini as his example.

The true explanation is that Winckelmann had no choice but to show that his thesis applied to the Laocoon; and the reason for this lies in the work’s earlier reception. For it was realised, from the moment of its discovery in 1506, that this was the very work which Pliny, in his

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7 WW I, 20.
10 See, for example, Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, I, 484 and 496; see also Bieber, *Laocoon*, p. 33.
Natural History, had described as opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeponendum (‘the greatest of all works in painting and sculpture’);¹¹ and for the Renaissance, Pliny’s judgement was axiomatically valid. When his praise was echoed by Michelangelo, who was present immediately after the discovery, the work’s reputation was further enhanced. Not only Michelangelo, however, but Titian, Rubens, and other great artists revered and copied the group,¹² and the verdicts passed upon it down to the time of Winckelmann are one long succession of superlatives. Since it influenced the art of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods directly, its affinity with Baroque sculpture is a very real one—indeed, the period of Greek art from which it dates is often described as ‘Hellenistic Baroque’. The artists of the seventeenth century saw in it an example of extreme naturalism and unrestrained emotion,¹³ and it is not at all surprising that Bernini himself, no less than his detractor Winckelmann, regarded it as the greatest masterpiece of antiquity.¹⁴

Given the immense reputation of the Laocoon, Winckelmann had at least to accommodate the work to his thesis, if not to use it as his principal example. To ignore it would have been to lay himself open to immediate refutation. He opted for the bolder alternative, that of undermining his opponents’ case from within, and based his argument squarely upon the Laocoon. In order to succeed, however, he had to demonstrate that, for all its Baroque affinities, its greatness lay not in those aspects which Bernini and his successors admired, but in the precise opposite of these. And if he could persuade his readers that this extreme case was indeed characterised by ‘noble simplicity and quiet greatness’, his thesis would automatically be accepted for almost any other Greek work he cared to name. Just how successful his gamble was is shown by the subsequent history of neo-classicism in Germany.

Winckelmann could not deny the obvious, however. He readily admits that every muscle and sinew of Laocoon is racked by violent torment, and that his body is by no means at rest. But this physical upheaval is counterbalanced (abgewogen) by certain qualities of mind which counteract the pain and reduce its expression to the minimum

¹¹ Pliny, Natural History, XXXVI, 37.
¹² Bieber, Laocoon, pp. 18f.
¹³ Bieber, Laocoon, p. 12.
consistent with the priest’s predicament. This is the sense of his famous metaphor of the sea, so often repeated by later writers: what really matters is not the visible surface of the water, which may rage and boil as it will, but the unseen depths, which are forever calm. Not the superficial appearance of the group, but its spiritual significance, is what counts, and by implication, the Baroque artists who venerated the group were themselves of a superficial turn of mind. In short, the qualities which Winckelmann detects are moral rather than aesthetic, and the only tangible evidence he adduces for them is the fact that Laocoön does not cry out, and therefore appears to restrain his emotions. His argument transcends those of his adversaries because it accommodates their case, along with his own, in a series of antitheses: motion and rest, passion and composure, pain and nobility, body and soul, are the co-determinants of the sculpture. And in each case, the second is not only the more important of the two—its connotations are spiritual rather than physical, which makes it a relatively intangible quality.

The triumph of Winckelmann’s idealistic aesthetics was made possible, however, not just by his skill in dialectics, but also by the temper of his age, the age of the Enlightenment. By showing that the Laocoön group embodied an idea, a stoical ethos, he succeeded in rationalising a respected but disquieting work. This strongly recommended both his own cult of Hellenism, and the statue itself, to his countrymen. It has rightly been observed that his conception of the Greeks and their moral excellence is of literary, rather than artistic origin, and that he derived it rather from Plato and Sophocles than from the much later products of Hellenistic art.\textsuperscript{15} His fondness for allegorical art reflects the same didactic bias.

In his later \textit{History of the Art of Antiquity}, Winckelmann discusses ancient art much more fully and empirically, and the work is rightly regarded as a milestone in art history.\textsuperscript{16} But although his analysis of the

\textsuperscript{15} See Hatfield, \textit{Winckelmann and his German Critics}, p. 9. Winckelmann suggests as much himself when he comments in his ‘Thoughts on the Imitation’: ‘The noble simplicity and quiet greatness of the Greek statues is also the true hallmark of the Greek writings of the best periods, the writings of the Socratic school’ (WW I, 34).

\textsuperscript{16} So convinced was Winckelmann, however, that the values he discerned in the Laocoön group were identical with those of the Socratic age that he allowed this belief, rather than archaeological or epigraphical evidence, to determine its date. He placed it as far back in time as possible, in the age of Alexander the Great (WW VI, 16).
Laocoon group is more detailed, he again dwells on Laocoon’s facial expression. As in the earlier essay, the physical is significant only in so far as it reflects the spiritual conflict:  

The paternal heart reveals itself in the mournful eyes, and pity seems to swim on them in a dim vapour. His face is plaintive, but not clamorous, and his eyes turn upwards in search of higher help. His mouth is full of sadness, and his depressed lower lip is heavy with it; but in his raised upper lip, it is mixed with pain, which rises with a surge of vexation, as if at an undeserved and unworthy injury, into his nose, making it swell up and revealing itself in the dilated and upturned nostrils. In his lower brow the conflict between pain and resistance, as if united in a single point, is fashioned with great wisdom [...].

He does proceed to emphasise the statue’s ‘beauty’ soon afterwards, but comes no nearer than in the previous essay to defining what constitutes it. This passage, in fact, is an exercise in physiognomy rather than objective description, and it was no doubt on such models as this that the physiognomist Lavater, in the 1770s, based his own fanciful interpretations of Greek and Roman countenances.

The success of Winckelmann’s arguments began a fateful trend in German criticism of the Laocoon, and indeed of ancient art in general. His visionary approach encouraged his successors to speculate, to read their own ideas into the work, and his concern with its ethical significance and exemplary status as a product of Greek humanity aroused enthusiasms which bore little relation to historical fact. As the archaeologist Heyne ruefully commented in 1779 on Winckelmann’s description:

It is not designed to provide a clear concept and representation of the group: and one must already know this figure precisely and have

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17 WW VI, 22.
18 WW VI, 23.
19 Cf. Blümner, Lessings Laokoon, p. 496: ‘For Winckelmann, beauty is a somewhat indefinable substance, of which it is easier to say what it is not than what it is.’
reflected on it before this description can produce its proper effect; otherwise, one risks falling into that state to which so many of our young compatriots succumbed a few years ago, by working themselves up, like the knight of La Mancha, into a transport of enthusiasm lacking in nothing except—a real, or at least a definite object.

To Winckelmann’s immediate successor in the Laocoon debate, however, Heyne’s strictures do not apply. For Lessing’s *Laocoon, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry* of 1766 is renowned for its precise reasoning, and what Lessing has to say on the beauty of Greek sculpture betrays nothing of Winckelmann’s Platonic enthusiasms.

Nevertheless, Lessing does adopt several of Winckelmann’s most important premises. Like his predecessor, he regards the Greeks as representatives of an ideal humanity, even if his opinion of them differs in some respects from Winckelmann’s; and he agrees with him that the Greek masterpieces provide a standard against which the art of all subsequent ages should be measured. For both writers, the highest beauty is that of the human form, and its supreme expression is found in the sculpture of the Greeks.

Lessing’s primary purpose in *Laocoon*, of course, is not to discuss the statue of that name, but to define the respective provinces of poetry and visual art. But in this enterprise, the Laocoon group serves as his main example in the visual arts, to which he contrasts Homer, and to a lesser extent Virgil, as his criteria in poetry. In placing the statue on a level with the greatest epics of antiquity, he implicitly acknowledges Winckelmann’s opinion of its merit. Indeed, the first works of art which the latter had named, in conjunction, in his essay of 1755, were the Laocoon group and the epics of Homer, and in his central passage on the group (already quoted above), the statue was compared with Virgil’s rendering of the Laocoon episode in the *Aeneid*. Lessing, then, respected Winckelmann as the foremost German authority on ancient art, and in choosing the title *Laocoon* for his treatise, he is both complimenting Winckelmann and endorsing his admiration of the statue.

Immediately after his preface, Lessing opens his treatise with Winckelmann’s words on the Laocoon group as an example of ‘noble simplicity and quiet greatness’.  

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22 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften* (subsequent references to this edition are identified by the abbreviation of the editors’ initials LM), ed. by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, 23 vols (Stuttgart, Leipzig and Berlin: Göschens, 1886–1924), IX, 6.
paid much attention to Laocoon’s face and had relatively little to say about the group as a whole. This followed from his interpretation of Laocoon as a paragon of fortitude, for which his face, more than his stricken body and struggling sons, furnished the main evidence. Lessing, however, is more specific still: the one feature which he stresses throughout the first thirty pages of his work is Laocoon’s mouth, and the fact that it is not wide open as if to emit a cry, despite his obvious anguish, but half closed, as if he were merely sighing. Here again, he concurs with Winckelmann—except that he rejects Winckelmann’s explanation of the half-closed mouth as a sign of noble simplicity and quiet greatness.

Lessing suggests another reason, or rather two reasons, for Laocoon’s apparent restraint; and both of them are aesthetic, rather than ethical, in character. Having cited examples from Homer and Sophocles of Greek heroes who did not hesitate to cry out in pain, he concludes that Laocoon’s heroic qualities cannot account for his suppressing his cries: and the first reason he advances is the law of beauty, by which, he argues, all Greek sculpture was governed. He explains this further in the following passage, which contains some of his central observations on the statue:

The master worked towards the highest beauty, under the given circumstances of bodily pain. This, in all its disfiguring violence, could not be combined with the former. He therefore had to diminish it; he had to reduce crying to sighing; not because crying betrays an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the face in a repellent way. For just imagine Laocoon’s mouth forced open, and judge the effect. Let him cry out, and see the result. We had an image which aroused pity, because it combined beauty and pain; now, it has become an ugly and abhorrent image from which one would rather avert one’s gaze, because the spectacle of pain arouses displeasure without allowing the beauty of the suffering subject to transform our displeasure into the sweet feeling of pity.

The wide open mouth [...] is a blemish in painting and a hollow in sculpture, which produces the most adverse possible effect.

It could well be argued, however, that Lessing’s disagreement with Winckelmann is more apparent than real. For in his History of the Art of Antiquity of 1764, Winckelmann had himself declared that the visual artist, unlike the poet, is constrained by the imperative of beauty: ‘In

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23 LM IX, 17.
the representation of the hero, the artist is allowed less freedom than the poet [...] Since the former [...] must choose the most beautiful of beautiful forms, he is confined to a certain degree of expression of the passions which must not have an adverse formal effect.\footnote{WW IV, 204f.} And the examples he gives of such restraint actually include the Laocoon group. Lessing was undoubtedly aware of this, for he writes in one of the drafts of his Laocoon: ‘Besides, Winckelmann has supplied more detail on Laocoon’s state of rest, and he shares my opinion that beauty was the reason for it’.\footnote{LM XIV, 380.} Despite this, he kept up the fiction that he had first encountered Winckelmann’s History only after his own treatise was virtually completed,\footnote{LM IX, 156.} and stuck to his original intention of refuting the argument in Winckelmann’s earlier essay of 1755 on Laocoon as a ‘great soul’. Various reasons have been given by critics for Lessing’s pretended ignorance of the History.\footnote{See, for example, Elida Maria Szarota, Lessings Laokoon. Eine Kampfschrift für eine realistische Kunst und Poesie (Weimar: Arion Verlag, 1959), p. 11. Szarota’s reasons are that the Laocoon group is more central to Winckelmann’s earlier work, that Lessing wished to keep off technical matters he knew little of, that he wished to avoid a full-scale polemic against the respected Winckelmann, and that he may in any case have preferred Winckelmann’s earlier to his later work.} Perhaps he merely wished to emphasise that he had discovered the law of beauty independently of Winckelmann. Or perhaps there was something about Winckelmann’s original moral interpretation which he wished at all costs to oppose.

Whatever the reasons for his subterfuge, the beauty which Lessing discerns in the Laocoon group is much more clearly defined than Winckelmann’s, although it is still of a very general nature. As he remarks in one of his drafts, Winckelmann’s beauty is a quality which he appears to have abstracted from the works he admired; Lessing, on the other hand, concludes by an \textit{a priori} deduction that it is a necessary property of the visual arts, since they alone can render it: ‘For since the visual arts are alone capable of rendering the beauty of form; since they require the help of no other art in order to do so; and since other arts must dispense with it completely; it is surely indisputable that this beauty can be nothing other than their specific task.’\footnote{LM XIV, 411.} Given that his treatise is built upon the antithesis between visual art and poetry, it is very much
in Lessing’s interest to account for Laocoon’s facial expression by the
nature of the art in question; for Winckelmann’s moral argument, which
could apply just as well to poetry, blurs the distinction which Lessing
wishes to make. Furthermore, the explanation by the law of beauty has
the virtue of economy. For although Winckelmann’s moral explanation
is not necessarily incompatible with the argument from beauty, it is
logically superfluous: *principia praeter necessitatem non sunt muliplicanda.*
Finally, Winckelmann’s concept of beauty is empirically vague as well as
logically imprecise, whereas Lessing, who declares that violent passions
distort the body and ‘the beautiful lines which outline it in a state of
rest’,29 has observable, linear properties in mind. And when he says later
in his treatise that Virgil’s description of the serpents wound repeatedly
round Laocoon’s neck would destroy ‘the pyramidal pointed shape
of the group which is so agreeable to the eye’,30 it is obvious that his
conception of beauty is close to that of Hogarth, for whom it is associated
with serpentine lines and pyramidal figures. Hogarth, whose *Analysis of
Beauty* Lessing had reviewed favourably in 1754,31 had in fact singled out
the pyramidal shape of the Laocoon group for special praise.32

The second reason which Lessing suggests for Laocoon’s failure to cry
out is again derived from the nature of the art in question. But although
he does not say so, it is very much a secondary reason, for it is valid only
for sculptures or paintings which, like the Laocoon group, represent an
action in time in such a way as to create an illusion of reality.

Works which represent an action can represent only a single
moment within it. This being so, the artist must select the most fruitful
or ‘pregnant’ moment possible—that is, the moment which affords
the greatest scope for the imagination, the moment ‘from which the
preceding and subsequent actions become most intelligible’.33 And since
it is to be given an unnatural permanence in the work of art, it must
correspond to a state which is more than fleeting or instantaneous. For
these reasons, the moment represented in Laocoon’s conflict with the
serpents is not the climax of his agony, the final cry before his collapse,
but a moment just before it, to which the imagination can readily add

29 LM IX, 14.
30 LM IX, 41.
31 LM V, 405–07.
33 LM IX, 19f. and 95.
the climax, and in which Laocoon’s expression is more compatible with the permanence of statuary than a momentary shriek of pain would be.

Like Winckelmann, Lessing sees the group as governed by two opposing, but balancing principles. Since it depicts an action, it has motion as well as rest, ‘expression’ as well as beauty. And the expression—in this case, of pain—is tempered both in the interests of beauty, which is the overriding principle in all visual art, and because it must be appropriate to the most suggestive moment in the action depicted.

Lessing’s secondary argument concerning the ‘pregnant moment’, unlike his reflections on beauty, reveals a peculiarity of the group which neither he nor Winckelmann chose to acknowledge—namely that it is a thoroughly untypical sculpture. For it portrays a highly dramatic event which, as Lessing knew, had been the subject of a lost tragedy by Sophocles. This, far more than its abstract, linear beauty, is why it appealed so much to the dramatist Lessing. For him, it is a tragedy in nuce, which lends itself admirably to a literary approach. Accordingly, he even proceeds to apply his own neo-Aristotelian theory of tragedy to it. His concept of the ‘pregnant moment’, which suggests as much as possible of the preceding and succeeding action, and which in the case of Laocoon corresponds to the peripeteia of a tragedy, itself underlines the group’s dramatic qualities. And as the first quotation from his Laocoon above makes clear, the emotion which the statue arouses is that of pity. Here, perhaps, is the main reason why he decided to attack Winckelmann’s original interpretation of Laocoon’s restraint as a sign of stoic self-control, and to feign ignorance of his revised interpretation. Like Corneille’s theory of tragedy, Winckelmann’s picture of Laocoon as a stoic hero and ‘great soul’ demands admiration, not pity. And admiration is an unproductive emotion which cannot further the cause of human brotherhood.

Everything stoical is untheatrical; and our pity is always proportionate to the suffering expressed by the object of our interest. If we see him

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34 See LM IX, 7f.
35 Cf. E. H. Gombrich, ‘Lessing. Lecture on a Master Mind’, Proceedings of the British Academy, 43 (1957), 133–56, who sees Lessing’s opposition to Winckelmann as a veiled attack on the Cornelian theory of tragedy with its ideal of nobility as an object of admiration (pp. 143f.).
36 LM IX, 10.
bearing his misery with a great soul, this great soul will indeed arouse our admiration, but admiration is a cold emotion whose inactive amazement excludes every other warmer passion as well as every other clear impression.

That Winckelmann had chosen the Laocoon group as his main example in 1755 was a godsend to Lessing, whose dramatic theory enabled him to rationalise the group even more fully than the law of beauty did. Winckelmann’s admiration lacked that ‘clear impression’ which Lessing was looking for, in visual art as well as in poetry. And the fact that the dramatic qualities which Lessing praised in this particular statue are purely contingent, and absent in countless other sculptures and paintings which must rely on beauty alone for their appeal, is one of the reasons why the visual arts come off so poorly in his treatise in comparison with poetry, which can represent actions much more fully and effectively.37

The only other aspect of the group which Lessing discusses in detail is the date of its origin, a question which he treats at considerable length. It is not so much the date itself which interests him, for he is no archaeologist. What interests him is whether the statue is earlier or later than Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and whether Virgil’s narration of this episode is influenced by the group or vice versa. Although he concedes that the two works may have been created independently, or derived from an earlier common source, he does everything he can to show that the statue is based on Virgil. His principal evidence, which is purely hypothetical, is that Virgil, had he followed the sculptors, would have had no need to diverge from them in the way he does, with Laocoon uttering terrible cries, the serpents wrapped round his body instead of his limbs, etc.; whereas the sculptors, had they followed Virgil, would have been compelled by the nature of their art to make precisely the kind of alterations they appear in fact to have made.38 But why does Lessing argue at such length in support of a theory to which, as he is aware, there are equally possible alternatives?

He admits, near the beginning of his work, that the first thing which provoked him to disagree with Winckelmann was the latter’s

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37 Gombrich, ‘Lessing’, p. 140, even declares: ‘The more one reads the *Laocoon*, the stronger becomes the impression that it is not so much a book about as against the visual arts.’

38 LM IX, 34–50 and 156–62
condemnation of Virgil for allowing his Laocoon to cry out, instead of controlling his anguish like the Laocoon of the statue. The controversy began, then, as a defence of Virgil against Winckelmann, and of literature against visual art. It could well be that Lessing’s determination to establish the primacy of poetry in range of expression led him to argue in turn for its priority in time, and that the more limited he perceived the statue to be in its rendering of a temporal action, the more it came to look like a pale reflection of the poetic version which interested him more profoundly.

Lessing’s comments on the Laocoon group, despite his excessively literary approach and circumscribed view of the visual arts, had far-reaching effects. For he is one of those writers who are often just as impressive when they are wrong as when they are right. His arguments on the date of the statue, for example, have the excitement of a detective story, and it is from them that the debate on this question, a debate which continues today, takes it proper beginning. Similarly, his theory of the ‘pregnant moment’, which applied the criterion of verisimilitude to the sculpture with unprecedented rigour, started another controversy over precisely which moment in Laocoon’s death throes the work represents, and inaugurated a fashion for increasingly realistic interpretations of the group. (These, a few decades later, were taken to extremes which Lessing would never have dreamed of.) But the main effect of his comments on the statue, apart from enhancing its already immense prestige, was to reinforce Winckelmann’s cult of Greek beauty, while narrowing its already narrow scope still further. The Baroque view of the group was now completely refuted, and the other extreme of a restrained, and in the last resort empty beauty had been reached. No one before or since Lessing has rationalised this strange monument so ruthlessly or completely. With his law of beauty, ‘pregnant moment’, and tragic pity, Lessing pressed the statue, with its carefully balanced form and expression, into a logical system which fitted it as neatly as the pyramidal box into which Hogarth had said it could be packed. For Lessing, it held no further mystery. Gripped fast by the coils of the serpents and the straitjacket of Lessing’s system, Laocoön was bound as firmly as Prometheus. But just as surely, he was to show that he still had life in him, and the struggle he was soon to put up was the greatest
in his career. The first, tentative stirrings are to be found in the writings of Herder.

Herder mentions the Laocoön group on several occasions. His first extended reference to it is the poem ‘Laocoön’s Head!’, written at some time before he left Riga in 1769. The following extracts should convey its temper:

O thou, in a great sigh
soaring heavenwards! drawest from deepest heart’s abyss
the souls of thine on this sigh
heavenwards up with thee!

The serpent-bound earthly body,
how venom-swollen it succumbs! [...] 

O thou, of the high gods of heaven
a dumb image of compassion! amid all heavens
abandoned!—of all poor humanity
the highest majesty

Of suffering! [...] 

And all angels fetched thee in,
And with open mouth, loud in voice, the angels thee, thy children
embraced! The serpents’ knot
of fate was shattered [...] 

[...] Be, o head, my messenger
Of the deity!—Image of suffering!—like majesty of pain
on their soul of other soul
heavenwards draws and rests!

The spirit of this poem is remote from Lessing’s cool deliberations. The style is exclamatory and incoherent—the young Herder cultivates the manner of Klopstock—and the emphasis is on the group’s pathos, to which Herder gives a religious slant which is totally absent from Lessing’s and Winckelmann’s descriptions. Laocoön here appears as an innocent sufferer on the point of death—a victim of cruel fate, or cruel gods, as in the classical myths; yet his passion, like that of Christ, is

40 Johann Gottfried Herder, Sämtliche Werke (henceforth SW), ed. by Bernhard Suphan, 33 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), XXIX, 303f. See also the editor’s introduction to this volume on the date of the poem.
somehow representative of suffering mankind. His soul, as he expires, is received by angelic embraces. In short, Herder’s poem is an incongruous mixture of classical and Christian elements, and its hero is a composite of Prometheus and Christ.

What Herder has done is to isolate and amplify the pathetic side of Winckelmann’s description of the statue. His references to Laocoon’s ‘sigh’, which he emphasises nearly every time he mentions the group in his works, and to the effects of the poison, point to Winckelmann’s essay of 1755. In his critique of Lessing’s Laocoon in the first of his Critical Silvae of 1769, he in fact cites Winckelmann’s description (although he has surprisingly little to say on the statue itself); but significantly, he omits Winckelmann’s initial sentences on Greek self-control, and quotes only the passage on Laocoon’s suffering. For it is neither the hero’s supposed stoicism and restraint, nor the beauty, balance, and symmetry of the group which captivates the young Herder, but its emotional expressiveness. In his poem, Laocoon has become the pretext for a sentimental effusion at a time when literary Empfkinsamkeit (sensibility) was at its height.

But Herder has discerned something else which Winckelmann was careful not to mention—namely the Christian associations which the group had acquired during the late Renaissance and Baroque eras, when artists had found in it a religious pathos akin to their own. Whether Herder knew it or not, theologians of the Counter-Reformation had commended Laocoon to painters as a model for the passion of Christ and the sufferings of saints and martyrs, and numerous examples of Christian art had been influenced by it: for instance, the figures of Christ and St Sebastian in Titian’s altarpiece of the Resurrection in the Church of SS Nazaro e Celso at Brescia reflect the artist’s studies of the group.

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41 See Hatfield, Winckelmann and his German Critics, p. 91.
42 See, for example, SW VIII, 20; XVII, 351; XXVIII, 281; etc.
43 Winckelmann, WW I, 32, quotes Bernini’s theory that the effects of the venom can be detected in Laocoon’s thigh.
44 SW, III, 74.
45 See Bieber, p. 12.
as does the Christ in Rubens’ ‘Elevation of the Cross’ in Antwerp Cathedral.  

In later discussions of the group, Herder again presents Laocoon in a pathetic light, as an anguished father and innocent martyr. But in his Letters on Humanity (Humanitäts-Briefe) of 1795, in keeping with his increasingly secular leanings in his later years, Laocoon is cited as an example of ‘pure forms of humanity’. On this occasion, Laocoon is explicitly likened to the Christian martyrs, but it is a further sign of Herder’s growing secularism that he now regards the statue as superior to its Christian counterparts: ‘It is scarcely possible to imagine a martyr as purer, more affecting, and at the same time more significantly beautiful in the sphere of art. The serpents disfigure nothing, and in their coils the dumb sigh of the sufferer creates an effect which Sts Sebastian, Laurence, and Bartholomew cannot produce’. In the commentary to his poem ‘Pygmalion’ of 1801, Herder again stresses the expressive qualities of the group—its movement and its pathos. By this time, however, the Promethean aspect has ousted the Christian associations completely. Laocoon, though close to death, is no longer so passive as before: he rightly resists the punishment of the gods—not in the cause of religion, of course, but of secular morality. He is a ‘martyr of patriotism and truth’. For Herder bases his interpretation on Virgil, but unlike Lessing, he considers that Virgil’s priest is in no sense a tragic hero. Laocoon’s sole offence is that he defended his country, and he dies as the innocent victim of a vengeful deity. By implication, the undeserved fate of this virtuous man is an indictment of the gods. In these last, moralistic observations on the group, Herder is in fact taking issue with Goethe, who interprets the work in purely aesthetic terms and dismisses the legend, with all the awkward questions it raises, as irrelevant (see p. 273 below).

To sum up: with Herder, the reception of the Laocoon group in Germany enters a new phase. In his sentimental poem, the enthusiasm which Winckelmann had aroused becomes divorced from the statue as

49 Cf. SW VIII, 20 (1778).
50 SW XVII, 351.
51 SW XXVIII, 280f.; like so many of his contemporaries, Herder now emphasises Laocoon’s activity, expressed in his ‘posture of struggling activity’ (Herder’s italics).
a work of art, and its emotional potential is cultivated for its own sake. The Christian pathos of the Baroque era is revived, and reinforced by the *Empfindsamkeit* of the 1760s. But along with this emotionalism, another characteristic begins to make itself felt. Herder’s Laocoon is the innocent, at first passive, victim of higher powers. But in the commentary of 1801 he is less submissive, and ‘seems [...] to dispute with the gods’.  

He now dies fighting for values he holds dear, and those values are human rather than divine. This new, defiant quality of Laocoon comes truly into its own, however, with Wilhelm Heinse’s novel *Ardinghello* of 1787.

A device sometimes employed by those who have offered new interpretations of the sculpture has been to look to other versions of the myth. Winckelmann, Lessing, and Herder, although they were acquainted with other versions, followed that of Virgil, in which Laocoon dies as a valiant patriot who has unwittingly crossed the plans of Minerva. But Heinse, through the mouth of the artist-hero of his novel, turns first to that of the fabulist Hyginus, whose Laocoon is a priest of Apollo, punished for marrying and siring children against the wishes of the god.  

He at once rejects this version, however, in favour of the more colourful explanation of the grammarian Servius in his commentary to Virgil: ‘Servius, however, gives the better explanation and says that it happened because he [...] made love to his wife through incontinence in the temple of Apollo’ (p. 239; Heinse’s italics).

From this beginning, Heinse constructs a picture of Laocoon as an audacious opportunist who exploited his priestly office to increase his power, and to indulge his carnal pleasures:

- His facial appearance with his fine curly beard is entirely Greek, and felt by a deeply perceptive man on the basis of everyday contact; it expresses an astute individual who respects little other authority than his own advantage and pleasure, and has duly chosen the best position in civil society for this purpose; full of energy and strength of body and soul.

In the statue, we see him punished for his final outrage, perpetrated within sight of the altar; and lest we forget the nature of his offence,

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52 SW XXVIII, 280.
Heinse, towards the end of his description, draws attention to the appropriate part of his anatomy (pp. 239f.):

The whole of Laocoon shows a man who is punished and whom the arm of divine justice has at last reached; he sinks into the night of death under the terrible judgement, and round his lips the recognition of his sins is still visible [...].

Even the genitalia of the father are stretched upwards by the overall tension, with scrotum and member contracted [...].

Heinse’s Laocoon dies, then, as a Dionysian criminal and public enemy. But he is neither an object of pity, nor of condemnation. On the contrary, his death is a glorious one, which is described with unconcealed admiration: ‘There suffers here a mighty rebel against society and the gods, and one shudders with joyous sorrow at the terrible downfall of this splendid criminal’ (p. 240).

It is hard to avoid the impression, however, that Heinse’s Laocoon is rebelling not against the majesty of Apollo, but against the moral idealism of Winckelmann. Admittedly, both the statue, as a work of art, and Laocoon, as a man, are just as much objects of admiration for Heinse as they were for Winckelmann. But they are admired for precisely the opposite reasons. The morality of Heinse’s priest—if morality it can be called—is one of unscrupulous and sensual egotism. In his coarse vitality and flouting of religion, he is as far removed from Winckelmann’s noble stoic as he is from Herder’s seraphic martyr, and his apotheosis foreshadows Nietzsche’s cult of the powerful and ruthless individual. Similarly, the aesthetic qualities which Heinse celebrates are the reverse of those praised by Winckelmann. The description of the statue, as of many other works of art analysed by the hero of Heinse’s novel, serves to illustrate the long dialogues on aesthetics which take up much of the work. And although it is set in Renaissance Italy, the problems it deals with and the terminology employed are those of Lessing, Winckelmann, and the eighteenth century. Movement, expression, sensuality, and individual character, not immobile serenity and idealised abstraction, are what Heinse values in the art of antiquity: ‘every form is individual,

and none is abstract; a purely ideal human figure, whether of a man or a woman or a child or an old man, is inconceivable’ (p. 12). Such are the qualities he discovers in the statue and holds up in conscious opposition to Winckelmann (pp. 239f.):

His entire body trembles and shakes and burns, swelling up under the agonising deadly venom which spreads like a river [...].

The serpents carry out the orders from on high, solemn and naturally huge of their kind, like earthquakes devastating the lands.

The flesh is wonderfully alive and beautiful; all the muscles rise from within, like waves in a storm at sea. He has done with crying and is in the process of recovering his breath. The son on his right is gone, the one on his left is meanwhile held fast, and the dragons will soon make short work of him.

With its picture of unmitigated violence, its vigorous, colloquial language, its reversal of Winckelmann’s metaphor of the sea, and its mischievous suggestion that, although Laocoon is not crying out, he is merely drawing breath to renew his screams, this account is a counterblast to Winckelmann, and a parody of his image of classical restraint. As if to underline this, the last sentence on the main figure, ‘The left side may well belong to the highest achievement art has attained’, ironically affirms Winckelmann’s ‘this part of the body can be described as a miracle of art’.55

What is not apparent from the novel is that Heinse probably gave more thought to the group than any of his contemporaries. The commonplace books of his Italian journey, which were not published until the twentieth century, are full of conflicting interpretations of the group, in which he anticipates some of the main arguments of the nineteenth-century critics. For whereas most of Heinse’s contemporaries are content to admire Laocoon’s heroism in face of his punishment, regardless of what its cause may have been, or to feel secure in the knowledge that Sophocles had written a tragedy in which Laocoon’s fate would no doubt have been adequately explained, Heinse recognised that the statue posed essentially the same problem as the Lisbon earthquake, the problem of theodicy (his use of the metaphor of an earthquake underlines this connection): ‘If Laocoon is a criminal, why is he so beautiful in his physique, and so wise and intelligent in his features?

55  WW VI, 23.
And if he is virtuous, are the gods not then unjust? Plagued by such doubts, Heinse concludes in turn that the group is an empty exercise in technical virtuosity, and, in another of his inimitable passages, that it is utterly contrived and devoid of beauty:

I do not know whether the Laocoon group is really as beautiful as is claimed; the more I look at it, the more artificial it seems to me, and like a dancing-master’s pose, as if the serpents were trained for one of them to descend through the arms and the other to ascend between the legs, so as to bind, as it were, the father and the two little sons into a marble fan; and to give it a handle, Papa must sit on the altar.

Set as it is amidst notes on Lessing’s Laocoon, this irreverent outburst is clearly directed as much at German neo-classicism as against the group itself, and Heinse decided not to publish it. He finally included in his novel the one interpretation which not only expressed the Dionysian philosophy of his hero Ardinghello, and at the same time struck out at Winckelmann, but seemed to do most justice to the problem of evil and providence. For as he writes in his notebooks:

No evils give pleasure which do not belong to the best of a larger whole, even in imitation [...]. Laocoon can most kindly be interpreted as nothing more than the divine execution of an infamous voluptuary, along with the brats he sired in licentiousness in the temple of Apollo [...]. The Greeks never depicted an evil which did not contribute to the good of a whole; perhaps with the exception of their Oedipus.

Heinse’s rebellious Laocoon marks a further step away from neo-classical idealism towards a more naturalistic interpretation of the group. The graphic description of his physical torments foreshadows an increasing interest in the pathology of Laocoon’s death. And for all its exaggeration, this exuberant portrait cannot be dismissed as poetic fantasy. Laocoon’s aggressively virile nakedness, and its incongruity with his priestly function before the altar, has often proved an embarrassment, and one of the fullest archaeological accounts of the group in the twentieth century

56 Wilhelm Heinse, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Carl Schüddekopf, 10 vols (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1903–25), VIII (1), 516. All subsequent references are to this volume, in which the main discussions of Laocoon occur on pp. 282ff., 295–301, 311–14, 433f., 516f., 536 and 562f.
57 VIII (1), 516f.
58 VIII (1), 536.
59 VIII (1), 433f.
suggests that the erotic version of the myth may well have influenced the statue.\textsuperscript{60} Moreover, several commentators mention other ancient representations of the legend in which Laocoon is accompanied by a winged Cupid.\textsuperscript{61} Be that as it may, Heinse’s discussion tells us as much about the author and his age as it does about the statue. His Laocoon is a Kraftgenie, like the hero of Ardinghello, a work which Goethe bracketed together with Schiller’s The Robbers.\textsuperscript{62} He represents a protest against the social and religious constraints of the times, and the rage of Apollo found a sympathetic echo in the reactions of many scandalised readers.\textsuperscript{63}

The Laocoon of Friedrich Schiller, however, is of a different stamp from Heinse’s irresponsible priest. For the Schiller who celebrates Laocoon’s heroism is no longer the dramatist of protest and author of The Robbers; he is the mature theorist of tragedy for whom greatness consists not in heroic deeds as such, but in the moral freedom which manifests itself in them. Apart from a short tribute to the statue in his Letter of a Danish Traveller of 1785, in which he praises it as a ‘model of the highest truth and beauty’,\textsuperscript{64} Schiller does not discuss the work at length until 1793, in his essay On the Pathetic. That he should select this work of sculpture, along with Virgil’s narrative of the legend, as his chief illustration in an essay on tragedy indicates just how immense the reputation of the group had become in Germany by the final years of the century.

Schiller’s Laocoon is conceived in the tradition of Winckelmann and Lessing rather than that of Herder or Heinse. Like Winckelmann’s hero, he is caught up in a conflict of mind and body, and it is his strength of will which transforms his physical defeat into a moral triumph; to reinforce this point, Schiller quotes the description from Winckelmann’s History of the Art of Antiquity in full.\textsuperscript{65} At the same time, his account resembles

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] See, for example, WW VI, 23; Heyne, ‘Examination’, II, 45; Blümner (ed.), Lessings Laokoon, p. 706; and Foerster, pp. 28f.
\item[63] See, for example, the comments on Heinse’s Ardinghello by Stolberg, F. L. W. Meyer, Herder, Jacobi and others in Baeumer’s edition of that novel, pp. 563–65, 573, etc.
\item[64] Friedrich Schiller, Sämtliche Werke, ed. by Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, 7th edn, 5 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1984), V, 881. All subsequent references to Schiller are to this edition.
\item[65] Schiller V, 251.
\end{footnotes}
that of Lessing, in that his Laocoon evokes a reaction comparable to that which we experience on witnessing a tragedy. Laocoon controls the effects of his suffering by a supreme effort of will, and according to Schiller, it is through overcoming his natural inclinations in this way that the hero rises to tragic stature: ‘to retain one’s freedom in a storm which agitates the whole of sensuous nature requires a capacity for resistance that is infinitely exalted [erhaben] above all the power of nature’.66

The word ‘erhaben’ (sublime) is fundamental to Schiller’s interpretation. The first ingredient of tragic art is suffering, and the greater the suffering, the greater the moral victory of the hero who resists it. In so doing, he attains sublimity.67 What Schiller admires in Winckelmann’s description is not the beauty found in the statue, but precisely this conflict of spiritual and physical principles: ‘How truly and finely the conflict between intelligence and the suffering of sensuous nature is developed in this description, and how aptly the phenomena are specified in which animality and humanity, natural coercion and rational freedom are revealed!’68 Schiller’s Laocoon is altogether a more exalted character than his predecessors: for he has passed through the school of Kant’s moral philosophy. By substituting Kant’s terminology for Winckelmann’s, Schiller assimilates him to his own theory of tragedy, which is based on Kantian premises; and he goes on to show, with reference to Virgil, how Laocoon evokes our pity by choosing to suffer in a virtuous cause—that is, by attempting to rescue his children.69 The sculptor, unfortunately, cannot render this active sublimity (das Erhabene der Handlung), as it is not in his power to indicate whether an action is freely chosen or not—in other words, the categorical imperative cannot be expressed in marble. He can only depict a more passive kind of sublimity, whereby the hero retains his moral freedom while submitting to his inevitable fate.70 Laocoon, then, is a close relative of Schiller’s Maria Stuart. Like her, he displays ‘das Erhabene der Fassung’.

Though an eminently virtuous character, Schiller’s Laocoon has at least one thing in common with Heinse’s defiant rebel: the accent lies more on his freedom than on his morality. As a true Schillerian hero, it

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66 Ibid., V, 412.
67 Ibid., V, 515 and 517.
68 Ibid., V, 521.
69 Ibid., V, 526.
70 Ibid., V, 527.
is more important that he should be morally free than that he should be freely moral. But unlike Heinse, Schiller does not go into the rights and wrongs of Laocoon’s punishment. That he regards it as unmerited, however, is clear from his poem ‘Das Ideal und das Leben’ (‘The Ideal and Life’) of 1795: 71

When the sufferings of man assail you
When Laocoon against the serpents
Defends himself with nameless agony,
Let man be outraged! May his protest
Strike against the heavenly vault above
And tear the fabric of your feeling heart!

Like Herder a few years later. Schiller here suggest that Laocoon’s fate cannot be reconciled with divine providence. But he does not pursue the question further, and nothing more is heard of the Kantian Laocoon.

The best known contribution to the Laocoon debate in eighteenth-century Germany, after those of Winckelmann and Lessing, is that of Goethe. 72 It is not surprising that he was fascinated by the statue and followed with interest the controversy which Lessing’s Laocoon aroused over the limits of poetry and the visual arts. 73 For as a young man, he had still not decided whether to devote his main energy to poetry or to painting.

He first saw a plaster cast of the entire group in the collection of statuary at Mannheim in October 1769. In his letter to Langer of 30 November 1769, he describes the visit, and tells how the Laocoon in particular aroused his enthusiasm: ‘Among lots of pretty things I

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71 Ibid., I, 204.
72 Since a good chronological survey of Goethe’s many utterances on the group is provided by Gottfried von Lücke, ‘Goethe und der Laokoon’, in Natalicium. Johannes Geffcken zum 70. Geburtstag (Heidelberg: [n.p.], 1931), pp. 85–99, I shall confine myself here to the principal ones. See also Ernst Grumach, Goethe und die Antike, 2 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1949), II, 547ff. As for Heinrich Keller’s Goethe und das Laokoon-Problem (Frauenfeld and Leipzig: Huber & Co., 1935), it deals not with Goethe’s views on the statue, but with his attitude to the problem discussed in Lessing’s Laocoon, namely the distinction between poetry and visual art.
encountered [...] nothing was able to attract my entire being so much as the Laocoon group [...]. I was entranced by it, so that I forgot all the other statues'.

He has set down some reflections on the group, he informs Langer, which should throw new light on the controversy, and has communicated these discoveries to his teacher Oeser, with whom he studied art at Leipzig. He hopes to put the finishing touches to his essay (‘ce petit ouvrage’) in the following year. Unfortunately, this work is now lost.

Although Goethe may have visited Mannheim again in 1771, his remarks concerning that visit in his Dichtung und Wahrheit (Poetry and Truth), composed many years later, probably apply to the earlier occasion, which he had by that time forgotten. These remarks, at any rate, contain some clues as to what the discoveries he mentioned to Langer may have been:

I resolved for myself the famous question as to why he [Laocoon] does not cry out by telling myself that he was unable to do so. All the actions and movements of the three figures were in my view derived from the initial conception of the group. The entire posture of the main body, as violent as artistically accomplished, was composed of two elements, namely the striving to resist the snakes and the recoil from the momentary bite. To reduce this pain, the abdomen had to be drawn inwards, making it impossible to cry out. Hence I also decided that the younger son had not been bitten [...].

He adds, however, that Oeser was not greatly impressed by his findings; and it is indeed understandable that this friend and teacher of Winckelmann should have looked askance at the young Goethe’s account, since it eschews Winckelmann’s moral interpretation completely in favour of a purely physical, anatomical explanation. For Goethe, the group is governed by a tension of opposites, just as it was for Winckelmann and Lessing. But the opposites he has in mind are not those of pain and a moral or aesthetic restraint upon its expression, but pain and physical resistance to its source. Undeterred by Oeser’s neo-classical teachings, the young Goethe simply follows the evidence of his

74 HA Briefe, I, 97f.; this letter is in French, translated here into English.
75 See the editor’s comments in HA XII, 584f. and Humphry Trevelyan, Goethe and the Greeks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), pp. 38f. on the dates of the two visits.
76 HA IX, 502.
senses. If he did indeed formulate these conclusions in 1769, he was the first to explain Laocoon’s contracted abdomen and consequent silence not as the result of a conscious effort, but as an involuntary reflex. This interpretation was to be widely accepted in the following century.

Goethe had now come to believe, as a gloss on Lessing’s Laocoon in his Ephemerides of 1770 confirms, that truth, rather than beauty, is the governing principle in ancient art: ‘The ancients [...] shunned not so much the ugly as the false, and understood how to transform even the most terrible distortions in beautiful faces into beauty’. He adds even more plainly a few lines further on ‘that the excellence of the ancients should be sought in something other than the formation of beauty’. The position he has now reached is the one he develops a few years later in the essays On German Architecture and After Falconet and on Falconet, where he rejects the cult of beauty (‘the soft doctrine of recent beautification’) altogether and glorifies realistic and ‘natural’ forms of art instead. To the ideal, the abstract, and the typical, the young Goethe opposes an art informed by individual character and expression, such as Gothic architecture and Dutch painting—an art which he describes as ‘characteristic’. ‘This characteristic art’, he declares, ‘is then the only true one’.

Given these sentiments, it is ironic that Goethe’s chief work on the Laocoon group, the essay On Laocoon of 1797, should have been written to refute a theorist who summed up the essence of the group as ‘characteristic’. The theorist in question was Aloys Hirt, the authority on ancient art who acted as Goethe’s guide to the antiquities of Rome during his Italian journey.

Goethe was not the first, as has been maintained, to apply the term ‘characteristic’ to the visual arts. Hogarth, for example, speaks of the ‘characteristic beauty’ of Glycon’s statue of Hercules, by which he means that its beauty is not that of a general ideal, but of an individual character,

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77 Der junge Goethe, ed. by Hanna Fischer-Lamberg, 6 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963–74), I, 431.
78 HA XII, 7–15 and 23–28.
79 HA XII, 13.
appropriate to the exceptional physique of Hercules.\textsuperscript{81} Christian Garve, in 1769, similarly declares: ‘Thus, when it was a question of making certain persons and beings recognisable, the artist often had to make exceptions to his supreme law and give the characteristic precedence over the beautiful.’\textsuperscript{82} And Herder also applies the term to sculpture in that same year.\textsuperscript{83} The significance of the word varies somewhat from one writer to the next, sometimes denoting a purely individual quality, and sometimes that of a particular type; but in all cases, it is distinct from, and often the antithesis of, the concept of beauty as a universal ideal. Fluctuations of this kind also occur in Goethe’s use of the term—\textsuperscript{84} but ‘the characteristic’ for him is always distinct from beauty in an ideal sense, and indeed is often synonymous with Winckelmann’s and Lessing’s term ‘Ausdruck’ (expression).\textsuperscript{85}

For Aloys Hirt, truth and expression are the basis of all great art, particularly that of antiquity. Its excellence lies in its ability to express individual characters and emotions rather than abstract ideals:\textsuperscript{86}

In all the works of the ancients without exception, both at rest, and in movement and expression, individuality of significance—the characteristic—is evident. All other laws were subordinate to this in every representation, in every figure [...]. Truth, as the first requirement of the characteristic, must therefore be predominant in every work of art. It remains, and is, the basic law of beauty and of goodness.

From these remarks, it is obvious that Hirt’s naturalistic aesthetic is akin to that of the young Goethe.\textsuperscript{87} What distinguishes it is not its conception, but the one-sided way in which Hirt applies it. For despite his premise

\textsuperscript{81} Hogarth, \textit{Analysis of Beauty}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{82} Review of Lessing’s \textit{Laokoon}, reprinted in Blümner (ed.), \textit{Lessings Laokoon}, p. 691.
\textsuperscript{83} Herder, SW III, 90, \textit{Erstes Kritisches Wäldchen}. Herder uses it in a rather different sense, however, to represent that which characterises a god as the god of war, love, or the like, rather than as an ordinary individual, so that the sculptor may have to represent such figures as ‘more characteristic than individual’. Once again, however, a particular rather than a general quality is envisaged.
\textsuperscript{85} See Mason, ‘Schönheit, Ausdruck und Charakter’, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{87} See Lücken, ‘Goethe und der Laokoon’, p. 92.
of the ‘characteristic’, Hirt is no Stürmer und Drängen, but a literal-minded rationalist who pursues his theory to whatever extremes it may lead. Humourless and lacking in elegance—‘He is a pedant, but knows a lot’, was Goethe’s succinct judgement—he is inflexibly opposed to Winckelmann and Lessing, and determined to banish the last vestige of ideal beauty from the ancient statues. The ‘characteristic’ is to take its place. His main example, needless to say, is the Laocoon, which is the subject of one of his two essays published by Schiller in 1797 in his journal Die Horen: ‘But what—if Laocoon’s expression were neither that of sighing nor of crying? if the artist gave no thought either to reflection on quiet greatness or to a beauty which moderated expression, but fixed his choice rather on the moment of the highest degree of expression?’ By arguing against Winckelmann that pain, and pain alone, determines the expression and attitude of the main figure, and against Lessing that the moment represented is the climax of Laocoon’s agony, immediately before his collapse, Hirt draws a horrifying picture which outdoes even Heinse’s in violence, and from which all heroic elements, even those of the rebel, are lacking. What we have here is not so much an aesthetic analysis as a pathologist’s report, in which, for good measure, not one but multiple causes of death are enumerated:

Laocoon does not cry out, because he is no longer able to cry [...]. The paroxysm, the highest tension, the raging convulsions are visible in all his limbs [...]. The blood, which rushes in complete turmoil into the outermost parts and makes all the vessels swell up, disrupts the circulation and prevents inhalation: the lungs, through the compression and impeded circulation of the blood, are progressively distended; the corrosive venom from the serpent’s bite helps to accelerate the violent

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88 Ludwig Geiger, ‘Briefe von Goethe und Hirt’, Goethe-Jahrbuch, 15 (1894), 68–81 and 96–108 (p. 97). Compare Schiller’s comment to Goethe on one of Hirt’s essays he had accepted for Die Horen: ‘We must indeed set something up to counteract the dreadful ponderousness of Hirt’s essay’: 25 October 1796, in Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe, ed. by Franz Muncker, 4 vols (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1892), II, 21.


90 Although I have no positive evidence, I strongly suspect that Hirt’s account is influenced by Heinse’s. For example, Hirt’s comment on ‘the greatest possible contraction of his abdomen, which causes even his genitals to project’ (‘Über Laokoon’, p. 8), is all too reminiscent of his predecessor. Hirt may have read Ardinghello, or he may have met Heinse in Rome, where Hirt was in residence from September 1782 and which Heinse left in July 1783.

fermentation; a stifling pressure stupefies the brain, and an apoplexy seems to effect a sudden death [...].

After continuing for several paragraphs in this vein, Hirt concludes, with disarming modesty, ‘I believe I have shown that the masters represented the most strenuous degree of expression’. 92

Writing such as this, of course, lent itself to satire. In his novella ‘The Collector and his Circle’ of 1799, Goethe puts Hirt’s arguments into the mouth of the boorish and dogmatic guest, who is dubbed ‘the characteristician’, 93 and against whom the mild and civilised collector vainly defends the beauty of ancient art. And although the guest is eventually worsted in argument by another visitor, ‘the philosopher’ (whose views are modelled on those of Schiller), 94 his thesis is refuted less by logic than by ridicule. His following remarks are a pastiche of Hirt’s description: ‘Step before the Laocoon, and see nature in complete upheaval and despair, the final stifling pain, convulsive tension, raging spasms, the effects of a corrosive venom, violent fermentation, impeded circulation, stifling pressure and paralytic death.’ 95 To this, the philosopher caustically replies that, if Laocoon really were as the guest describes him, he would deserve to be smashed to pieces on the spot.

The unfortunate Hirt was further satirised on two occasions by August Wilhelm Schlegel, 96 who labelled his method ‘the surgical approach’, and took the only step which remained to be taken beyond his diagnosis of apoplexy: is it not possible that Laocoon is already dead? 97 After repeating Winckelmann’s and Lessing’s contention that Laocoon’s condition is tempered by nobility of expression and beauty of execution, Schlegel concludes: ‘Of course he cannot cry out, otherwise he would raise his voice against so disfiguring a description and failure to recognise his heroic greatness’. 98 And although Hirt attempted to

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92 Ibid.
93 HA XII, 78.
94 Compare, for example, the views of ‘the philosopher’ on the treatment of horrific subjects in poetry (HA XII, 80f.) with those of Schiller in his letter to Goethe of 7 July 1797 (Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe, II, 122f.).
95 HA XII, 76.
97 Ibid., I, 2, p. 261.
98 Ibid., I, 2, p. 263.
refute these accusations,” Schlegel offered only mockery in reply: “Since I then indicated that I did not consider Laocoon’s condition as yet quite so desperate, he [Hirt] made such an immoderate fuss in reply that he almost changed places with his hero.”

Hirt’s views were completely at odds with those of Goethe, who had long since outgrown his youthful love of ‘the characteristic’, and whose classical ideals, since his Italian journey, had filled him with a new respect for Winckelmann. Why then, one may ask, did he and Schiller go out of their way to publish Hirt’s essay in the journal Die Horen, of which Schiller was the editor?

Schiller welcomed the essay, for he believed the time was ripe for the ‘characteristic’—that is, expressive and realistic—elements of Greek art to be brought to the fore:

> for in general, Winckelmann’s and Lessing’s conception is still prevalent, and our most recent aestheticians, on both poetry and sculpture, are at great pains to free the beauty of the Greeks from all characteristic elements and to make these a hallmark of modernity. It seems to me that the more recent analysts, in their efforts to isolate the concept of the beautiful and to set it up in a certain purity, have almost emptied it of content and turned it into an empty sound [...].

He is thinking above all of Friedrich Schlegel, whose eulogies of Goethe and high-handed criticisms of Schiller had irritated them both, and who, in his pre-Romantic years, was outdoing even the Weimar Classicists in his cult of Greek beauty. In his On the Study of Greek Poetry of 1797, Schlegel described the state of modern poetry, whose hallmark is ‘the characteristic’, as anarchic and decadent. The only way to salvation was to follow the beginnings Goethe had made, and to cultivate ‘the highest beauty’, devoid of individual expression, as found in Greek poetry and art. To this extreme classicism, Hirt’s essay offered the perfect antidote: the two extremes would cancel each other out. Besides, Schiller must have found Hirt’s arguments a good deal more sympathetic than

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100 Athenaeum, II, 2. Stück, 227.
101 Schiller to Goethe, 7 July 1797, in Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe, II, 122.
those of Schlegel, for as we have seen, he had himself stressed not the beauty of the group, but its sublimity and the extreme suffering which Laocoon has to endure. Goethe readily agreed that Hirt’s essay should be published, not least because he saw the benefits which he stood to reap: as Schiller pointed out, the way would be open for Goethe and his ally Heinrich Meyer to carry the day with their more balanced views, before a public already disposed in their favour.

Provoked by Hirt’s ideas, Goethe had by now almost completed his own essay *On Laocoon*, reviving his plans of almost thirty years before. He published it in the first number of his periodical *Propyläen* in the following year. Since Goethe avoided naming him, Hirt could only reply in the most general and indirect terms. Completely outmanoeuvred, he had only time to defend himself in a feeble postscript to his own essay in *Die Horen*, before August Wilhelm Schlegel’s ridicule and the satire of Goethe’s ‘The Collector and his Circle’ descended on him in turn. His more detailed reply, in which he conceded many of Goethe’s points but stuck firmly to his own theory of ‘Karakteristik’, remained unpublished.

Like most of the previous theorists, Goethe was interested in the Laocoon group for its exemplary qualities, and as a means of illustrating his own aesthetic principles. The way in which he and Schiller treated Hirt was far from admirable, but for the classicist Goethe, his theories posed a greater threat than Friedrich Schlegel’s insipid cult of beauty, for they implied that the group had no exemplary status whatsoever, and reduced it to an interesting, but purely individual case—a study of extreme physical pain. Such heresies could not be left unchecked. And the method Goethe chose was the same as that which Winckelmann had successfully employed before him: he would transcend his opponent’s views by incorporating them into his own, broader thesis, for Hirt had failed to realise ‘that only Lessing’s, Winckelmann’s and his, and indeed

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103 To Schiller, 8 July 1797, *Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe*, II, 124.
104 Heinrich Meyer’s ‘Einige Bemerkungen über die Gruppe Laokoons und seiner Söhne’, in *Propyläen*, I, 1. Stück (1799), 175f. was written, however, in 1796 and does not take issue with Hirt. In his much later *Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen*, 4 vols (Dresden: Waltersche Buchhandlung, 1824–36), Meyer dismisses Hirt, without naming him, as a past writer whose exaggerated notion of ‘das Charakteristische’ has now disappeared without trace (I, 206), but does not mention him in his discussion of the Laocoon (III, 65–79).
105 See Schiller to Goethe, 7 July 1797, in *Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe*, II, 123.
107 Hirt’s remarks were first published in Denk, *Das Kunstschöne*, pp. 110–16.
several further pronouncements, together exhaust this work of art’. Heinrich Meyer understood Goethe’s tactic precisely when he wrote of his essay: ‘It stands so well in the middle between the two extremes which have in turn been asserted, namely beauty without sympathy and passion as the supreme purpose and goal of art, and truth which was meant to be represented’. Goethe’s essay is open to fundamental objections, but as one might expect, it is masterfully written, and contains many original observations on the group. As so often, he has learnt from the limitations of his predecessors, and at the same time availed himself of their positive achievements. One of the main insights he brings to his study, and with which he introduces the work, is an awareness of how limited the rational understanding is in face of a complex work of art, whose significance is not finite, but inexhaustible. Accordingly, he does not apply a rigid conceptual framework to it, as Lessing had done. The concepts he does employ are not narrow or restrictive, but of a general kind, and he uses several of them, not just one or two as others had done—knowledge of anatomy, individual character, degree of movement, idealisation, and appeal to the senses (Anmut) are among the qualities he looks for, as well as the traditional Schönheit. And aware of the excesses to which Winckelmann’s physiognomical approach had led, he refuses to speculate on Laocoon’s spiritual state, and warns against reading our own reactions into the work itself. In these, and in other respects, he has benefited from the work of the Göttingen archaeologist Heyne, whose essay of 1779 on the group is distinguished by its common sense, its careful scrutiny of the evidence, and its refusal to speculate.

108 To Schiller, 5 July 1797, in Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe, II, 121. Precisely the same point is made by Carl Ludwig Fernow, another neo-classicist, in his remarks on the Laocoön in his essay ‘Über das Kunstschöne’, in Fernow, Römische Studien, 3 vols (Zurich: H. Gessner, 1806–08), I, 291–450. Winckelmann, Lessing, and Hirt discern ‘Idealität’, Schönheit’, and ‘Karacter’ respectively in the statue: in fact, all three are present (p. 430). This essay was no doubt intended to support Goethe.


110 HA XII, 56.

111 Ibid.

112 For example, Heyne argues that the struggle is at its height, not at its end, and that the ways in which the group can be interpreted are infinite. He also applies the formula of unity in variety to it: ‘Just think of the different postures of the three
Goethe is also the first to consider the statue almost exclusively in aesthetic terms as a work of sculpture. For even Lessing, although his analysis is primarily aesthetic, supplemented it with long historical reflections and an elaborate philological apparatus, and his poetic interests influenced his interpretation considerably. As on his first visit to Mannheim, Goethe is guided above all by his senses. And unlike most of his predecessors, he treats the group throughout as an organic whole, instead of concentrating his attention on the main figure. The properties he is most concerned with are formal ones—symmetry, balance, gradation, co-ordination, and unity in variety—and it is in this emphasis on form that the classical values he has espoused since his journey to Italy, as well as the limitations of his aesthetics, become most apparent.

Goethe’s interpretation resembles those of Winckelmann and Lessing in that he sees the statue as governed by a tension of opposites, the main ones being beauty on the one hand, and passion and expression on the other. But since the latter qualities had been given so much prominence by Hirt, Goethe takes more account of them than the other neo-classicists had done, and, doubtless as a concession to Hirt, even refers to them as ‘das Charakteristische’. The counterbalancing ‘Schönheit’ is not, however, a distinct quality of attractiveness existing side-by-side with the group’s expressive qualities—Goethe reserves the separate term ‘Anmut’ (grace) for that which is visually agreeable. It consists rather in the restraint or moderation with which the—inherently violent—expression of the group is executed. But he realises that the group is far too complex to be comprehended by a simple antithesis such as that of beauty and expression. This is merely the dominant polarity within which a whole series of subordinate contrasts can be discerned, and these in turn call forth contrasting emotional reactions in the beholder:

I therefore venture to repeat once again that the group of Laocoon, along with all its other acknowledged merits, is also a model of symmetry and diversity, of rest and movement, of contrasts and gradations, which

individuals, their different emotions, their different ages, their different expressions, their contrast and yet union through their entrapment by the snakes. What variety, and yet how many points of unity!’ (Heyne, Sammlung antiquarischer Aufsätze, II, 20 and 27f. Otto Harnack, ‘Zu Goethes Laokoonaufsatz’, Vierteljahresschrift für Litteraturgeschichte, 6 (1893) 156–58, also notices Heyne’s influence on Goethe.

113 HA XII, 58.
present themselves to the viewer in part sensuously, in part spiritually, and together with the high pathos of the spectacle excite an agreeable sensation and moderate the storm of suffering and passion through grace and beauty.

There is a similar conflict of opposites in the actions of all three figures. Each of them performs not one, but two separate actions. The elder son attempts to extricate himself from the coils, while reacting in horror to his father’s plight; the younger son fights for air with one hand, and fends off the serpent with the other; and Laocoon himself struggles actively with his arms, while his body reacts convulsively as he is bitten in the loins. ‘There thus arises a combined effect of striving and yielding, of action and passivity, of effort and surrender, which would perhaps be impossible under any other circumstances’.\(^\text{114}\) This theory that everything is determined by the bite, which is administered at the very centre of the group, is of course the one that Goethe had framed on his visit to Mannheim almost thirty years earlier.

In analysing the temporal dimension of the group, Goethe is able to reformulate Lessing’s idea of the ‘pregnant moment’. Like Lessing, he believed that the moment represented is not the climax of Laocoon’s agony, as Hirt had maintained, but the moment preceding it. Yet unlike Lessing, he argues that this moment is both fleeting and climactic—the statue resembles ‘a fixed stroke of lightning’,\(^\text{115}\) and what we see is ‘the climax of the moment represented’.\(^\text{116}\) But the climax Goethe has in mind is not the climax which Hirt spoke of: it is the climax of the action, not of the agony; and like Lessing’s ‘pregnant moment’, it is a transitional phase between two separate actions—the struggle against the serpents, and the reaction to the bite.

In Laocoon himself, therefore, two successive actions are represented simultaneously. And as Goethe points out, the three figures have succumbed in varying degrees to the serpents’ attack, from the peripheral involvement of the elder son to the fatal wound of the father. The group thus conveys an extended temporal sequence, and Goethe, like Lessing and Schiller, is aware of its dramatic qualities. The elder son, the father, and the younger son evoke fear, terror, and pity respectively,\(^\text{117}\) and the

\(^{114}\) HA XII, 61.
\(^{115}\) HA XII, 60.
\(^{116}\) HA XII, 63.
\(^{117}\) HA XII, 65.
elder son is not only a participant in the action, but also a spectator.\textsuperscript{118} The group as a whole can be likened to a tragedy: it is in fact ‘a tragic idyll’.

It is at this point that the limitations of Goethe’s classicism become most obvious. Despite his concessions to Hirt, he cannot bring himself to admit that the group has anything remotely horrific about it—he therefore denies that the younger son has been bitten at all,\textsuperscript{119} although it has always been accepted that he has, and he denies that any effect of the venom can be seen in the father’s body.\textsuperscript{120} Similarly, his convictions demand that the statue, like all great works of art, should represent a universally intelligible condition—in short, that it should be ideal rather than ‘characteristic’. It accordingly depicts not a specific event which can be understood only by those who know the myth of Laocoon, but a scene of universal human relevance:\textsuperscript{121}

of his priesthood, of his Trojan-national and all poetic and mythological accretions, the artists have divested him [...] It is a father with two sons, in danger of succumbing to two dangerous animals. Thus there are also no divinely sent serpents, but purely natural ones [...] A father was asleep with his two sons, they were enwrapped by two serpents and now struggle, as they awake, to tear themselves out of the living net.

Here, for once, Goethe is demonstrably wrong. Apart from the fact that the block on which Laocoon sits is plainly an altar, it was known before Goethe’s essay was written that he originally wore a laurel wreath, as a groove around his head testifies;\textsuperscript{122} this at once identifies him as a priest of Apollo. And as for the serpents, they are zoological monstrosities, being too thin for constrictors, and too long to be venomous.\textsuperscript{123} As Herder drily observed, ‘an ordinary snake event does not explain this representation’;\textsuperscript{124} to understand its significance, we have to know the legend—and even then, we have to decide which version of it to follow.

\textsuperscript{118} HA XII, 64.  
\textsuperscript{119} HA XII, 60.  
\textsuperscript{120} HA XII, 61.  
\textsuperscript{121} HA XII, 59.  
\textsuperscript{123} See A. W. Lawrence, \textit{Greek and Roman Sculpture} (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 250.  
\textsuperscript{124} Herder, SW XXVIII, 281.
Despite all Goethe’s efforts, an unexplained residue remains. This late attempt, at the end of the eighteenth century, to restore Laocoon to the neo-classical niche which Winckelmann had created for him did not succeed. It was to no avail that C. L. Fernow, in his Roman Studies of 1806, tried to defend the neo-classical interpretation against the doubts which Hirt had disseminated, because the tide of opinion on the statue had already begun to turn. One of the first signs of this change came, in fact, from within the neo-classical camp itself: as early as 1787, F. W. B. Ramdohr, after reiterating the verdict of Winckelmann and his followers that the statue displays unity in variety and expression tempered by beauty, confessed, after many apologies and hesitations, ‘that this group, despite all its undoubted advantages, has not awakened in me the pleasant impression which I have experienced at the beauty of other statues’. Try as he might, Ramdohr could not discover in the Laocoon that beauty and restraint which he recognised in the Antinous and the Belvedere Apollo. And though the Schlegels joined Goethe in opposing the views of Hirt, they were allies whose services he could well have done without. For Friedrich Schlegel, who had defined the essence of modern art as ‘the characteristic’ and condemned it as inferior to ‘the highest beauty’ of Greek art, soon reversed his position entirely and held up ‘the characteristic’, for which he now preferred the near-synonym of ‘the Romantic’, as the ideal to which modern art should aspire. In other words, Schlegel’s aesthetic values were by this time close to those of Hirt, who must therefore be regarded as a forerunner of Romanticism; the main difference was that Hirt saw these values as fulfilled in ancient art, and Schlegel in modern art. In short, the Romantic era had begun, and it faced the task of explaining those aspects of the group which Goethe’s elegant analysis had failed to account for.

In the nineteenth century, more interpretations of the group than ever before appeared, but few of them were as independent or original as those of the previous century. They began as reactions to, or developments of, earlier points of view, and thenceforth, a few themes were enlarged upon with a remarkable degree of continuity. Instead of analysing individual

127 See Denk, Das Kunstschöne..., p. 108.
contributions separately, in chronological sequence, it will therefore be more convenient to follow each of the main tendencies within the nineteenth century debate to the point where they converge; that is, the point where the Laocoon debate ceased to be an issue of importance in Germany.

One of the few facts of the Laocoon myth on which everyone agreed was that his death was divinely ordained. Yet apart from Herder and Heinse, none of the writers hitherto discussed had seriously considered the religious implications of the statue. Goethe had, indeed, flatly denied that it had any. They seem not to have been unduly troubled that the divine wrath may have struck down an innocent victim. But in the nineteenth century, two questions of a religious nature were discussed again and again: is Laocoon’s punishment justified? and does his death, as represented in the statue, have any religious or spiritual significance?

For the classical scholar F. G. Welcker, whose study of the group first appeared in 1827, Laocoon is above all a man of religion: his expression has ‘something priestly and pious’ about it. To justify Laocoon’s punishment, Welcker argues that the statue is based on the lost tragedy of Sophocles, in which Laocoon doubtless died for an erotic misdemeanour such as that reported by Hyginus and Servius. But Welcker does not try, as Heinse had done, to endow the death itself with any positive significance—it is not the apotheosis of a Dionysian hero, but merely ‘affecting, exciting pity, and hopeless’. Like Herder, he makes much of ‘the pathetic quality of the scene’, and does his best to arouse compassion in us for the dying priest. Indeed his efforts to extenuate Laocoon’s transgression, which he describes as ‘a youthful precipitation’, are so successful that we are left with the impression that the punishment, after all, scarcely fits the crime. Welcker is therefore aware of the problem which had troubled Heinse, but he does not solve it satisfactorily. The same applies to the art historian Heinrich

128 Compare Visconti, II, 268, for whom Laocoon is satisfied with the knowledge that he is innocent: ‘He does not repent […] for his zeal in attacking the Wooden Horse, and he prefers the evidence of his conscience to the anger of the gods and the opinion of men.’
130 Ibid., I, 325.
131 Ibid., I, 326
132 Ibid., I, 346.
Brunn, who interprets the group in a similar way in his *Geschichte der griechischen Künstler*, and cites Welcker in support.\(^\text{133}\)

Needless to say, later writers were not convinced by such explanations. Adolf Stahr, in 1855, discerns ‘a lack of reconciliation [...], something oppressive, frightening, agonising’ in the group, and calls Laocoon’s death a ‘hopeless martyrdom’.\(^\text{134}\) And three years later, Johannes Overbeck, while acknowledging that the serpents are unmistakably divine emissaries, denies that any moral idea whatsoever can be gleaned from the statue; for even if some versions of the myth attempt to justify Laocoon’s death on ethical grounds, none of this can be perceived from the group itself.\(^\text{135}\) In short, Welcker, Brunn and other religious apologists do not carry conviction, because the statue depicts only the terrible punishment, but gives us no means of telling whether it is merited or not. Furthermore, the best known version of the myth, that of Virgil, portrays Laocoon as entirely innocent. This, perhaps, is why Novalis had declared: ‘it is an immoral work of art.’\(^\text{136}\)

But there is a further reason why many nineteenth-century writers saw Laocoon’s death in a negative light. As Walther Rehm has shown, after Fritz Stolberg visited Italy in 1791–92 and judged the ancient statues unfavourably from a Christian point of view,\(^\text{137}\) the opinion steadily gained ground that even the most serene sculptures of gods and goddesses were spiritually empty. It is unfortunate that Novalis’s comments on the group, jotted down after a reading of Goethe’s essay, remained fragmentary. From what he does say, however, it appears that, at a time when Friedrich Schlegel was still paying homage to Greek beauty and defending Winckelmann’s views, Novalis had already found the group spiritually deficient; not only does he describe it as immoral, he also feels that Laocoon is not passive enough in his suffering: ‘Is not a more comprehensive, in short more exalted moment in the Laocoon


\(^{137}\) Rehm, *Götterstille*, p. 141.
drama conceivable—perhaps that in which the highest pain turns into rapture—resistance into surrender—the highest life into stone.’

Friedrich Thiersch, whose history of Greek art was published in 1825, goes even further. He sees Laocoon’s death not as a moral victory, but as a spiritual failure, and says that the statue reveals ‘a mind succumbing in the grimmest struggle, already close, indeed surrendering, to the terror of despair’. But once again, it was one of the greatest intellects of the age who expressed the new attitude most memorably. Hegel, in his Lectures on Aesthetics (1818–28), contends that Christian art is superior to that of antiquity because it offers a hope of liberation and redemption through love, even in suffering and death:

In the ideals of the ancients, on the other hand, we [...] may well see only the expression of pain in nobler natures such as Niobe and Laocoon; they do not dissolve in laments and despair, but preserve their great and high minded nature in this state; but this self-preservation remains empty, for the suffering and pain are as it were the final state, and in place of reconciliation and satisfaction there is a cold resignation, in which the individual, without breaking down, gives up what it had held on to [...]. Only Romantic religious love attains the expression of bliss and freedom.

It is ironic that the philosopher Hegel, rather than the Schlegels or Novalis, pronounced the most characteristically Romantic verdict on the group. He also declares that, in the works of the Italian masters, Christ’s spiritual, as distinct from physical suffering, shows itself in a facial expression of gravity—not, as in the figure of Laocoon, in a contraction of the muscles which could be interpreted as a cry.

For Winckelmann, Lessing, and Schiller, Laocoon’s death was a triumph of the spirit over matter. For Hegel, almost the reverse is true. Just as Laocoon had been pressed a few decades earlier into the service of Kantian idealism, so now is he made to typify a phase in Hegel’s world-historical process. For as Hegel remarks elsewhere in

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138 Novalis, Schriften, III, 412f.
139 Friedrich Thiersch, Ueber die Epochen der bildenden Kunst unter den Griechen, 2nd edn (Munich: Literarisch-Artistische Anstalt, 1829); the first edition appeared in 1825.
140 G. W. F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, ed. by H. G. Hotho, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1842–43), III, 35f. For other negative judgements on Greek art during the Romantic era see Rehm, Götterstille, pp. 151–67. Most of these writers criticise the Ancients’ view of death as inadequate in comparison with that of Christianity.
141 Ibid., II, 43.
his lectures, the statue is the product of ‘a late period’, so that the death of Laocoon represents the downfall of an era before a new age of the World Spirit dawns.

As a corollary to this belief that the group is devoid of spiritual significance, the critics shifted their attention more and more to Laocoon’s physical state. Hirt’s opinions were reiterated and confirmed: the group is nothing more than a study in extreme physical pain, in which the involuntary reflexes of the main figure show little or no trace of heroic restraint. Hebbel, in his poem ‘Before the Laocoon’, is clearly of this opinion. He blames Michelangelo for having praised the group excessively, and sees the fact that Laocoon rebelled against Apollo as symbolic: not beauty, but truth is the criterion which the artists followed, and the group is criticised by implication as a piece of unvarnished naturalism:

Michelangelo as a wonder of art bid you welcome
Since you served to counterbalance the beauteous Apollo
Who bore Raphael aloft and denied Michelangelo’s merit;
Some repeated his praise, but they protested too much.
What truth can accomplish you show all too clearly, o Group
Even more clearly you show that it cannot achieve everything!

At around the same time, the argument as to whether or not Laocoon is crying out was renewed, and it seemed to some writers that physical agony such as Laocoon’s must be matched by the loudest possible clamour. This was denied, however, in 1862, when P. J. W. Henke, on the strength of a medical diagnosis of the stricken priest, concluded that the moment represented is that between inhalation and exhalation. The criteria of nineteenth-century realism were applied to the group so uncompromisingly that it began to seem as if it were made not of marble, but of flesh and blood, despite the fact that Schopenhauer had already supplied the necessary reductio ad absurdum:  

142 Ibid., II, 439.
One could not produce a crying Laocoon in marble, but only an open-mouthed Laocoon fruitlessly attempting to cry out, with his voice stuck in his throat [...]; this would result in the invariably ridiculous spectacle of an effort with no result, exactly parallel to that which a practical joker produced when he plugged with wax the horn of a sleeping night-watchman whom he then awoke with cries of ‘fire!’, only to enjoy the latter’s fruitless efforts to sound the alarm.

The realistic evaluations continued, and brought down new censures on the group in 1876, when the anatomist Friedrich Merkel, after minute measurements of the group, discovered that many of its proportions are wrong: by their stature, the two sons should be around seven to eight and four to six years old, yet their proportions resemble those of a man and a youth respectively; besides, the necks of all three figures are too long. Merkel may, however, have hit upon the true reason why Laocoon failed to escape from the serpents: he had a severe limp, for his right leg is at least seven centimetres shorter than his left.147

By the end of the century, the excesses of realism were over. But it was now widely accepted that the sculptors set out to express physical anguish by every means at their disposal, and that they selected the moment of maximum muscular tension in Laocoon’s body in order to display their virtuosity.148 This conviction that the physical aspects of the group are all-important could only further diminish the work’s already diminished reputation.

Another factor which helped to bring Laocoon down from his eminence was the increase in knowledge of Greek art. When the Parthenon sculptures were brought to England and purchased for the nation in 1816,149 art historians began to realise that the restraint and serenity which Winckelmann had admired are more evident in the works of the Periclean age than in the much later and more exaggerated sculptures of the Hellenistic era. It could no longer be doubted that most of the works from the Roman collections, including the Laocoon,
were of a much later date than the masterpieces of Phidias and his contemporaries; and although some writers tried for a time to place the familiar works on the same level as the newly discovered older sculptures, their efforts were fruitless. It was not that the Aegina marbles or the Parthenon frieze received the same kind of adulation with which Winckelmann had greeted the later sculptures: Theseus and Poseidon did not replace Laocoon, they merely reduced and diluted his appeal.

As the nineteenth century progressed, more and more was written on the Laocoon, as on other ancient sculptures, but fewer and fewer of the writers were anything other than art historians and archaeologists. The fragmentation of knowledge into specialised disciplines is, of course, one of the main reasons why Laocoon was left at the mercy of the specialists. Few now dared to indulge in the dilettantism of the previous century, when everyone of classical education—and that meant practically every scholar—felt entitled to pronounce on works of art which, more often than not, they knew only from engravings. Hegel ridicules the armchair scholars (‘Stubengelehrte’) of that era who had taken part in the debate without ever having set eyes on the sculptures they held forth upon. Besides, the growth of science and positivism left little room for physiognomical speculation in classical archaeology, and the literary associations which had made the statue so attractive to philological critics such as Lessing served only to alienate those who valued art for art’s sake. All these advances entailed losses as well as gains, for the literary quality of what was written on the statue was never again to reach its former standards, or the symbolic potentialities of the statue to be explored so profoundly.

Spiritually empty, of doubtful morality, anatomically inaccurate, contrived, calculated, and inferior to earlier Greek art, the Laocoon group was now reviled on every side. The standard verdict around the turn of the century was that it was ‘an outstanding work of Greek

150 Thiersch, *Ueber die Epochen*, p. 384, following Visconti, admits that the Laocoon and other Hellenistic works are much later than those of the Periclean era, but maintains that they are of no less merit.

151 Overbeck, *Geschichte der griechischen Plastik*, II, 320ff., for example, sees it as one of the group’s major faults that it is not fully intelligible as a work of art in its own right.
decadence’, mannered and sensational, lacking depth of feeling, and even sinister and brutal, displaying ‘a wily cruelty of taste’. The neo-classicists of Victorian times condemned it as alien to true Greek values, and the painter Karl Stauffer-Bern blamed Laocoon, rather than Michelangelo, for all the extravagances of Baroque art since the group’s discovery: ‘It seems to me as if no work of art has caused so much damage in the world as the Laocoon group; I can virtually see Baroque art asleep in it [...]. From this point onwards, people began to sculpt potato sacks and pass them off as heroes [...].’ As the reverence with which the group had once been held evaporated, it became an object not just of abuse, but of caricature. One of the earliest of these (Titian’s famous parody, with apes instead of human figures, was aimed not at the group itself, but at Bandinelli’s imitation) is a characteristic poem of Heine, in which his mistress takes the place of the serpents:

You ought with love to embrace me,
Beloved, beautiful girl!
Embrace me with arms and with feet then,
And with your flexible shape.

Vigorously she has enlaced me,
Entwined me and wrapped me around,
The sweetest of all the serpents,
The happiest Laocoon.

Such dignity as the group still possessed in Germany it owed mainly to Lessing’s Laocoon, which was a standard work for senior pupils at

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155 Brahm, Karl Stauffer-Bern, pp. 293f.
156 See Klein, Geschichte, III, 315.
157 See Heyne, Sammlung antiquarischer Aufsätze, II, 41.
the classically oriented *Gymnasien* in the later nineteenth century and helped to keep the earlier neo-classical values alive.\(^{159}\)

By the early twentieth century, however, occasional voices were already protesting that the group was not decadent at all,\(^{160}\) and that it might well now be underrated.\(^{161}\) But by this time, one can no longer speak of the reception of the work in Germany in isolation, for the German writers were now reacting not so much to the earlier Laocoon cult in their own country as to current opinions in European archaeology at large. Negative judgements continue to be heard down to recent times,\(^{162}\) but the critics are now on the whole more charitable. As one authority says—and the first three words are significant—‘we must admit that it is a magnificent creation’.\(^{163}\)

The group is now rarely mentioned outside the world of classical studies. Nevertheless, there is evidence that its symbolic potential is not yet exhausted, and that even the creative writer may still find a use for it. Peter Weiss, in his address of 1965 ‘Laocoon, or On the Limits of Language’, discovers a new antithesis within the group: the father and the younger son have lost all ability to communicate, but the elder son, who will perhaps escape to tell of what he has seen, may symbolise our hopeless yet hopeful attempts to transcend the limitations of language.\(^{164}\)

In this sculpture, the dichotomy is expressed between that which is dumb and static, and that which turns towards the outside world and attracts its attention through movement. Laocoon and his younger son no longer presuppose any onlooker. They now merely constitute a monument to their own destruction. They will never again utter a sound. But the older son still belongs to an animated world, and he breaks out of the statuesque realm to give a report to those who will perhaps come to his aid.

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159 A work written for this school public is Julius Ziehen, *Kunstgeschichtliches Anschauungsmaterial zu Lessings Laokoon*, 2nd edn (Bielefeld and Leipzig: Velhagen & Klasing, 1905), first published in 1899. Ziehen lists other works on *Laokoon* useful to schoolteachers.

160 See Klein, *Geschichte*, III, 315.


162 See, for example, Walter Herwig Schuchardt, *Die Epochen der griechischen Plastik* (Baden-Baden: Bruno Grimm Verlag, 1959), p. 126, who sees the work as ‘in its contrived and elaborated quality lacking in full and genuine life’.


Such was the reception of the Laocoon group in Germany since Winckelmann. We have seen how, during the nineteenth century, it fell completely from its former eminence. What still has to be considered is why, apart from the fact that it was championed by Winckelmann, it had been held in such esteem during the previous century. The Renaissance and Counter-Reformation, of course, had little difficulty in assimilating it to their own scheme of values, both because of its provenance and its subject matter. It was a genuine relic of antiquity, authenticated by Pliny himself. And its subject was congenial to those already accustomed to the martyrdoms and crucifixions of Christian art, of which it could be seen as a typological forerunner. To the eighteenth century, however, it presented more of a challenge. The authority of antiquity was as binding as ever, and in some ways even more so than before. But the subject of the group, as traditionally understood, made it less tractable to a rationalistic and increasingly secular age. One of the problems the eighteenth century faced was that of making sense of an extreme case of suffering, with strong religious overtones, but without invoking religion to explain it. Only the young Herder resorted to Christian analogies, but he later abandoned them. It is more symptomatic of the times that Winckelmann, in his essay of 1755, warned artists against depicting saints, and recommended the classical—that is, heathen—myths instead. Laocoon appealed to the eighteenth century as a representative figure of human suffering—but unlike its Christian equivalents, the suffering of Laocoon could no longer be given any transcendental significance.

With the exception of Hirt, all of the eighteenth-century writers discussed here, even those who, like Lessing and Goethe, stuck mainly to aesthetic questions, regarded Laocoon as a hero and exemplary figure. They saw in him a victory of the human spirit, whether over bodily weakness, an unjust fate, or the restraints of moral convention. According to the *Aeneid*, he defied the gods by hurling his spear at the Wooden Horse, which he refused to accept on trust, and he questioned the arguments of those who were prepared to do so. For Laocoon was a sceptic, and this assuredly helped to endear him to the century of the Enlightenment. But it was in his death that he seemed to display his greatest strength: for the main difference between Laocoon and the Christian martyrs—and, I would submit, the secret of his appeal to the

165 WW, I, 50.
eighteenth century—is that he does not accept his suffering, any more than he did the Wooden Horse, with resignation. His face, in which the Greek artists have combined all the traditional signs of pain, admittedly has much in common with the Christian art of the Baroque. But he is no St Sebastian, immobile and submissive, for his body is still full of resistance. Lessing took great trouble to show that the moment depicted is that before Laocoon succumbs to his torment, as did Goethe when Hirt dared to suggest that Laocoon has already succumbed. Heyne, too, stressed that he is struggling with all his might.\textsuperscript{166} And we must not forget that, in Montorsoli’s restoration by which the group was known until the original right arm, bent back behind Laocoon’s head, was discovered in 1906, Laocoon held the serpent high above him, in what might be interpreted as a last, self-assertive gesture of defiance.\textsuperscript{167} For most writers of the eighteenth century, then, the group was a glorification of the human spirit and its essential freedom, even in the direst of predicaments, and it was in this freedom that they found a sense in Laocoon’s terrible fate.

The other main reason why the group was so greatly revered was that, from Winckelmann onwards, it was associated with those values which the neo-classicists claimed to have found in ancient Greece. Despite the terror of the scene, balance and restraint were preserved. Reason—whether moral or artistic—presided over the catastrophe, and conferred a unity and harmony on the whole. But it was possible to discover other, opposing principles in the work, just as the Baroque era had done, and, in Hegelian fashion, the antithesis was soon to claim its rights. For Heinse already, it represented not harmony and restraint, but violent and uncontrolled expression.

Once it had been identified with neo-classicism, however, it had to be defended, and the conflict of Goethe, Schiller, and their allies with Hirt was a campaign against a threat to their classicistic principles. But on several counts, the position they held was untenable. Apart from the reasons already given, the fact that people ceased to require the sanction of antiquity to justify their aspirations rendered Laocoon superfluous in aesthetic theory. It is appropriate that nearly all of the

\textsuperscript{166} Heyne, \textit{Sammlung antiquarischer Aufsätze}, II, 20.
eighteenth-century commentators emphasise how precarious the group’s situation is. The balance cannot for long be maintained, and destruction must shortly supervene. The group may therefore stand as a symbol of neo-classicism itself, as an interlude, a ‘pregnant moment’, between Baroque extravagance and Romantic self-abandon.

One of the most remarkable things about the Laocoon debate is the number of different interpretations it has generated. And another is the extreme way in which they diverge, and the vehemence with which they have been defended. The debate, in fact, has been conducted in superlatives, with very few signs of compromise. The group has been pronounced both the greatest and the most pernicious work of art of all time. Part of the reason for this is that the spectacle it affords is itself an extreme and dire eventuality, which is bound to evoke a forceful reaction. The bizarre and horrible death of a father and one or both of his sons, of whose agony their violent reactions can leave us in no doubt, produces a powerful initial shock. As Winckelmann said, we can almost feel the pain of the bite ourselves, accentuated as it is by Laocoon’s complete nudity and the sensitivity of the area affected. To this shock, we can either respond with revulsion, or master it by finding some aesthetic or moral justification for the work.

If we analyse the spectacle further, we see that, as Goethe realised, it was full of paradoxes and antitheses. Here is life at its most intense at the moment of death. Here, with grim irony, a priest is immolated upon his own altar. The three figures themselves are full of contrasts: youth contrasts with age, the younger son is dying, the elder is almost free: the right hands are expressive and gesturing, the left hands are active in defence. There are movements throughout, voluntary and involuntary, human and animal, and yet all the participants are bound together and rooted to the spot. In the organisation of the group, we find variety and unity, dissonance and harmony, expression and formal control. And in this fearful conflict of man against nature, of mind against matter, there are signs both of resistance and capitulation, of defiance and resignation. To this, we ourselves react with admiration and revulsion, pity and horror, hope and fear, so that a series of conflicts is set up within us in turn.

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In order to resolve these, we must decide which of our emotions have priority, or—and this amounts to the same thing—which poles of which antitheses within the group are more important than their opposites. This task is made no easier by the fact that the group has undergone numerous alterations and restorations since it was discovered, and that we do not even know for what purpose it was originally created. In short, we have to interpret the work’s significance, and since the event it depicts is intelligible only in terms of the myth it is based on, we have to decide which version of the myth to follow. And it is here that our troubles really begin, because the different versions are diametrically opposed or internally contradictory. In some, Laocoon is an innocent hero, punished only for defending his fatherland; in others, he is first and foremost a reprobate who desecrated the temple of the god he served; and in others again, he is both a patriot and a criminal. We turn once more to the group to measure the conflicting versions against it, and we are confronted with the same ambiguities as before. Is Laocoon a rebel or a martyr, a hero or a criminal? Is his punishment just or unjust? does he bear it with fortitude or despair, with indignation or remorse? does he indeed display any conscious emotion at all, or is he even in a position to do so? Some have contended that he is not, and yet others have read almost every kind of expression, short of hilarity, into his face.

In the last resort, our interpretation will be guided by yet another set of variables, those of our own predispositions and background. Indeed, when we evaluate the interpretations of past critics, it is usually possible to relate them to the background and outlook of the writers concerned. But we must be wary of reducing what they say to straightforward social determinants—for example, Winckelmann’s interpretation to his discontent with Germany, his penurious circumstances, and his need for a heroic ideal; Lessing’s to his revolt against the French influence, typified by rigid Cornelian heroism; and so on. For although these were no doubt contributory factors, the case of Heinse provides a salutary warning against such simplifications: as we have seen, Heinse came up with several variant interpretations of the group within a short space of time, some of which later reappeared in the works of others of completely different backgrounds and attitudes. The reception of the Laocoon group in Germany has been a complex process, in which the ambiguous evidence of the group itself, the various versions of the myth, and the
personalities of the critics, along with their individual circumstances, the ideological influences to which they were subject, and the general state of learning at the time at which they wrote, have interacted with one another—and with a further factor of even greater significance than the rest: the reception of the group by their predecessors. In almost every case, the critics were replying to earlier critics, and the most important factor within the debate has been the debate itself.169

Given the nature of the group, it is not surprising that the debate consisted of a movement between extremes, the chief of which were the idealistic and naturalistic modes of interpretation. Both could point to evidence in support of their case, but it was the failure of the former to give a morally convincing account of the work which helped to tip the balance in favour of the latter. Many writers from the nineteenth century onwards have felt that the myth, as here depicted, is ethically incommensurable, and that technical virtuosity was therefore the artists’ principal consideration. But the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premise: perhaps it was the power, rather than the justice, of the gods which the sculptors wished to commemorate. Be that as it may, critics of the group are still wary of interpreting its content, and they usually have more to say on its style and its place in the history of art. This is certainly not because the earlier enigmas have been disposed of. It is because writers are more conscious than before of the complexity of the issues, the number of variables involved, and the failure of their predecessors to produce an interpretation which might comprehend them all without leaving an intractable residue. One twentieth-century writer refuses to reopen the questions of which moment is depicted, what feelings are expressed, and which version of the legend is followed, and decides instead that all past interpretations are justified.170 For those who constructed them, they of course were. But in that case, any other interpretation, however arbitrary, must be equally justified, and we are left with a complete relativism which must

169 Compare Karl Robert Mandelkow, ‘Probleme der Wirkungsgeschichte’, in Mandelkow, Orpheus und Maschine. Acht literaturgeschichtliche Arbeiten (Heidelberg: Stiehm, 1976), pp. 103–17 (p. 113): ‘The reception history of a work or author is always from the start the reception history of the reception history […] One’s own horizon of expectation is modified by one’s reaction to other horizons of expectation.’

170 Sichtermann, Laocoon, p. 23.
inhibit all further initiatives. In short, critics now hesitate to interpret
the group not because the problems have been solved, but because they
have despaired of conclusively solving them.\footnote{The fullest and most impressive account to date of the current impasse in Laocoon studies is Richard Brilliant’s book My Laocoon (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).}

The Laocoon group is in this respect a paradigmatic case—not of the
limits of poetry and visual art, but of the limits of interpretation. For if no
comprehensive interpretation can be found, there are two equally good,
but incompatible reasons why this must be so: either the work itself
may have no coherent conception which can be reduced to a unitary
explanation; or we, through lack of evidence or perspicacity, have failed
to discover one. And even if we do succeed to our own satisfaction, the
former possibility can never be completely eliminated.

When all is said and done, we may well ask why so much intellectual
effort has been expended on what now seems to many so undeserving
an object. The villain of the piece, if there is a villain, is surely Pliny, who
convinced at least three centuries that this was the greatest sculpture
of all time. And the hero, if there is a hero, is perhaps the sceptical
archaeologist Heyne, whose words of warning, like those of the Trojan
priest Laocoon, went unheeded by his countrymen: ‘It is very much to
be doubted that the Greek artists ever had in mind the thousandth part
of all the fine aesthetic reasonings on quiet grandeur with which they
are credited.’\footnote{Heyne, Sammlung antiquarischer Aufsätze, II, 22 (1779).}