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## Johann Joachim Winckelmann as the Founder of the Myth of the “Religion of Art”

When the question of the “religion of art”, with all its multiple dimensions and various meanings, is compared to a chaotic constellation of objects of varying brightness against the background of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life, Johann Joachim Winckelmann undoubtedly shines as its brightest star. Regardless of whether he indeed merited the title of the founding father of the history of art and archaeology, the German antiquarian and connoisseur of antiquities gave a powerful impulse to appreciation of the act of experiencing art and beauty (which to him were quite inseparable). This impulse made it possible to confer on art the attributes of a religious experience, a fullness which encompassed the entire human life in the totality and unity of all cognitive faculties.<sup>1</sup> These facilities included zeal, depth and intensity of experience, and finally the uncompromising, jealous exclusivity and detachment all else that earlier (and later as well) were forcibly pushed into the frame of the extensible and capacious notion of “disinterestedness”. It is obvious that the above attributes are not homogenous in nature: the totality and unity of cognitive faculties is, in reality, an ideal state, a synonym of fulfilment or happiness. Stendhal, an expert in this field, was most probably right in observing that beauty is only “a promise of happiness”; the force of an experience is psychological in its character and depends less on history than on aesthetics, understood, according to Baumgarten, as sensitivity of the senses and imagination. The carefully guarded autonomy and purity of this experience could be seen as an argument for the autonomy of the arts (Edgar Wind’s “aesthetic detachment”<sup>2</sup>), but also in the contrary manner: as part of the debate whether the will is excluded from it, since the desire for beauty (i.e. art) is a love, an “erotic” desire in the sense as old and noble as Plato’s *Symposium*. Finally,

- 1 Winckelmann assumed a theory of beauty rooted in neo-Platonism, and hence was able to give unifying features and quasi-mystical character to the experience of beauty. Hence he also avoided open discussion of what was the true source of a religious experience: whether it was zeal and earnestness of feeling (cf. “For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up”, Ps 69:9) or rather the cognitive reflection on divine matters; on this question, in the complex context of piety, see E. Müller, *Ästhetische Religiosität und Kunstreligion in den Philosophien von der Aufklärung bis zum Ausgang des deutschen Idealismus*, Berlin, 2004, pp. 45–63. See also: E.H. Gombrich, *Kunst und Fortschritt. Wirkung und Wandlung einer Idee*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cologne, 1987, pp. 32–34.
- 2 See E. Wind, *Art and Anarchy. The Reith Lectures 1960*, London, 1963, chapters 2 and 3.

it is worth observing that none of these categories clearly delineate the boundaries of a religious and artistic experience.

The difficulty does not lie in separating these two spheres of experience and breaking with the Enlightenment and Romantic notion of the “religion of art”. It is, of course, possible to surround the religious experience with a palisade of a “numinotic experience” – something that exceeds a human being *absolutely*, in which he will look for the ultimate anchor for himself and the universe – and from behind that palisade to resist the temptations of the other forms of experience that would happily assume the nobility and fullness of a religious experience and find a place in a temple’s adytum. This fear of dethronement is not, however, the fear of a historian. The notion of the “religion of art”, hotly contested during the period in question, is now a historical one; it no longer arouses such controversy, and it seems that it was once dreaded due not to a fear of appropriation, but a fear of the blurring of boundaries and the usurping pretences of art.

It is, however, obvious that the matters may have taken quite a different course. Winckelmann’s message turned out to be at least ambiguous. It would be difficult to assume that his aim was, outright and foremost, to provide, hidden behind the apology of artistic beauty, a critique of religion from the Enlightenment point of view. He would then have to be viewed as the creator of an aesthetic quasi-religion (there would be, indeed, few parallels to a traditional religion in its contents). Winckelmann’s clear and meaningful criticism of religious institutions and the behaviour that they force the believers to assume is found mainly in his construction of history and in his justification of the indisputable, in his opinion, artistic, intellectual and moral perfection of the Greeks – which, in effect, led to the criticism of the culture of his own times. If the “religion of art” is by definition a challenge to the traditional forms of religion, in Winckelmann’s case the battlefield is culture.

This is precisely how this was viewed by his contemporaries. When Hegel said that Winckelmann had liberated art from the tyranny of “den Gesichtspunkten gemeiner Zwecke und bloßen Naturnachahmung”, giving human spirit “ein neues Organ und ganz neue Betrachtungsweisen”<sup>3</sup> to experience art, he was clearly aware of the role of the author of *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*. Yet Hegel saw him from the distance of nearly half a century, from which Winckelmann’s biography was no longer of importance; his life seemed very different to Heynse or Goethe, who both, if not in equal measure, contributed to the emergence of his symbolic image and the myth conducive to the popularisation of Winckelmann’s views.

3 G.W.F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*. Nach der zweiten Ausgabe Heinrich Gustav Hothos (1842) redigiert und mit einem ausführlichen Register versehen von Friedrich Bassenge, Berlin and Weimar, 1976, p. 71: “Ohnehin war früher schon Winckelmann durch die Anschauung der Ideale der Alten in einer Weide begeistert, durch welche er einen neuen Sinn für die Kunstbetrachtung aufgetan, sie den Gesichtspunkten gemeiner Zwecke und bloßen Naturnachahmung entrisen und in den Kunstwerken und der Kunstgeschichte die Kunstidee zu finden mächtig aufgefordert hat. Denn Winckelmann ist als einer der Menschen anzusehen, welche im Felde der Kunst für den Geist ein neues Organ und ganz neue Betrachtungsweisen zu erschließen mußten”.

At this point the image of Winckelmann seems to drift out of focus; his life seems inseparably intertwined with his vision of the ancient Hellas, his aims become reality almost in the natural course of things; Winckelmann's biography appears to be a mission fulfilled, not only in the dimension of an individual existence. There is no place for coincidence or doubt; finally, in the interpretation of Walter Pater, approximately sixty years after Goethe's famous essay of 1805, Winckelmann turns into the last man of the Renaissance.

Yet the complexity of the figure of Winckelmann lies not only in his artificial, mythologised image, created much later to be the keystone to the crucial myth of a "beautiful man", a "beautiful soul", in a manifold manner related to the concept of the "religion of art". To himself, the nearly-religious veneration of ancient art and Raphael was a justification and a fulfilment of an elected path. His letters, a text equal in importance to Rousseau's *Confessions* when it comes to revealing the spiritual anxieties of a man living in the latter half of the eighteenth century, present his life from a religious perspective. In his biography, the vision of the religion of art is prepared, preceded and legitimated by the conviction of his divine calling.

The most touching evidence of that conviction is found in his letter, dated 6<sup>th</sup> January 1753, to Georg Berendis. Winckelmann was trying to convince his friend that his decision to leave for Rome, linked with the unavoidable condition of converting to Catholicism, could be treated neither as apostasy, nor as volatility of character or longing for a change, "Liebe zur Veränderung". Rejecting accusations, he presented his decision, from the typical perspective of an Enlightenment (auto)biography, as perfectionist self-fulfilment and challenge to the world; religious belief was viewed not as an obstacle, but as a measure of effort. Winckelmann flawlessly adjusted the modern model of individual realisation to the traditional Providentialist vision.

His point of departure was the classical notion of being born in the wrong place and time – in effect, Winckelmann professed it was his misfortune to be born in a place where he was unable to follow his inclinations or to shape his own personality himself. Germany, which he later called "Land der Märteley", he associated mostly with the poverty and destitution he had to overcome on his way to education and knowledge. To him, to tread the path to knowledge invariably meant to reject everything that was commonplace, accepted and everyday, because it was a path toward self-ennoblement.

To a man intent on reaching the highest levels possible, "auf höchste zu treiben", and desirous of devoting himself to the study of the ancients, Rome must have seemed a promised land; no price was too high to be worth paying. His breakthrough decision to convert to Catholicism was described by Winckelmann as a fight, an argument between the nearly-allegorical figures of the Muses and the "Eusebias" (piety was also understood as fidelity). Contrary to his own reason, the protectresses of the arts triumphed, of course; yet their triumph was only apparent, since it is the love of science which allowed a man to aim higher, above the "etliche theatralische Gaukeleien".

Perhaps Winckelmann's renunciation of his ancestral faith was no more than a gesture. He knew that religious denomination was subordinate to true faith (if only

in oneself), since the few elect could be found in all churches. Almost imperceptibly, the natural religion of the Enlightenment merged in him with the trust, equally characteristic to the Enlightenment, in the truth of the feeling, transformed by Winckelmann into a Pauline heartfelt faith, opposed to the dead letter of a gesture. All this is dominated by an unflinching perception of being among the elect, so crucial to Lutheranism and its pietistic revival. This key passage of Winckelmann's letter is worth quoting in full:

Der Finger des Allmächtigen, die Erste Spur seines Wirkens in uns, das ewige Gesetz und allgemeine Ruf ist unser Instinkt: Demselben mußt du und ich, aller Widersetzlichkeit ohngeachtet, folgen. Dieses ist die offene Bahn vor uns. Auf derselben hat uns der Schöpfer der Vernunft zur Führerin gegeben: Wir würden wie Phaeton Zügel und Bahn ohne dieselbe verlieren. Pflichten, welche aus diesem *Prinzipio* fließen, vereinigen alle Menschen in eine Familie zusammen. Hierin bestand bis auf Mosen Gesetz und die Propheten. Die folgenden göttlichen Offenbarungen erhalten ihre Überzeugung nicht durch den toten Buchstaben, sondern durch göttliche Rührungen, die ich, wie vielen Gläubigen geschehen, billig auch an sich in stiller Anbetung erwarte.<sup>4</sup>

Referring to the general feeling of humanity, common to all human beings, Winckelmann anchored it in a confession of unshakeable trust in God's truthfulness and freedom from all error,<sup>5</sup> evident in the purity of design, and consequently the decisiveness in putting plans into action.

However, perhaps surprisingly, to Winckelmann art was not the ultimate goal in life; it was more of a surest route to reject everything that was commonplace and to achieve the much-desired freedom. Freedom in the personal perspective, which to the German antiquarian merged with the desire of friendship, was linked to the project of an artistic reform that had the form of a paradoxical relationship: to become unsurpassable, one has to equal the Greeks. Thus, the Greeks had to be imitated.

Imitation of the Greeks is an antithesis of bondage; thanks to the Greeks one may draw from the source of Nature, that is truth and beauty, and to restore the nobility of feeling as the very core of artistic expression (Bernini's output constitutes a necessary antithesis here). The revival of art which is the complex process of restoring the kingdom of ideal beauty, must, therefore, also take place on the ethical plane. Winckelmann anchored his apology of individual freedom as the principle of friendship in a certain, by no means uncontroversial, historical contrast. In his correspondence with Berendis he made the following confession:

Mein Gott! Ich weiß wohl, dergleichen Freundschaft, wie ich suche und kultiviere, ist ein Phönix, von welchem viele reden und den keiner gesehen. In al-

4 J.W. Goethe, *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert in Briefen und Aufsätzen*, Einleitung und Register von H. Holtzhauer, Leipzig, 1969, pp. 52–53.

5 The following passage is also found in the same letter to Berendis: "Gott aber kann kein Mensch betrügen, wir schlossen denn von Gott auf uns und wechselweise". To oppose election would be not so much to break a divine prohibition, but to reject a promise.

len neueren Zeiten ist mir nur ein einziges Exempel bekannt zwischen Marco Barbarigo und Francesco Trevisano, zweien *Nobili di Venetia*, [...]. Dieser göttlichen Freundschaft sollte ein Denkmal an allen Toren der Welt, an allen Tempeln und Schulen zum Unterricht der Menschenkinder, ein Denkmal, wo möglich *aere perennius* gesetzt werden. [...] Eine von der Ursachen der Seltneheit dieser nach meiner Einsicht größten menschlichen Tugend liegt mir an der Religion, in der wir erzogen sind. Auf alles, was sie befiehlt oder anpreist, sind zeitliche und ewige Belohnungen gelegt. Die Privat-Freundschaft ist im ganzen neuen Testament nicht einmal dem Namen nach gedacht, wie ich unumstößlich beweisen kann, und es ist vielleicht ein Glück vor die Freundschaft, den sonst bliebe gar kein Platz vor den Uneigennutz.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of whether the New Testament really does not contain any remark on such “Privat-Freundschaft”,<sup>7</sup> his evaluation clearly demonstrates the exceptional role that the ancient world played in his thinking. Idealisation of the ancient culture and nature constitutes a constant, crucial backdrop to the homoerotic dimension of his wished-for friendship, yet Winckelmann’s intentions seem to reach deeper, to Greece as the real haven of art and beauty.

Having said this, the glory of Greece lay dormant. Winckelmann’s ambition was to open the artists’ eyes to Hellenic beauty; he strongly emphasised that he meant artists, not any “Kavalier”, because to Rome, those “kommen als Narren her und gehen als Esel wieder weg”. Such men, he added, were unworthy of time spent on their education – just like the French, because, as he unceremoniously and mercilessly wrote, they were the greatest blockheads among the moderns, and a Frenchman and antiquity were mutually antithetical.<sup>8</sup>

6 Goethe, *Winckelmann* (n. 4 above), p. 68.

7 For the very ambiguous issue of friendship in Winckelmann’s letters and writings, where the Christian idea of the love of a fellow human being as the foundation of friendship was replaced by the ancient model of heroic friendship as a virtue unsupported by a promise of reward in the afterlife, see M. Disselkamp *Die Stadt der Gelehrten. Studien zu Johann Joachim Winckelmanns Briefen aus Rom*, Tübingen, 1993, pp. 258–267. Disselkamp points out that Winckelmann drew directly from Shaftesbury’s reflections on the virtue of friendship, in which its true meaning was revealed only after the principle of its Christian justification was rejected; the perfect autonomy of friendship, as it were, finds corroboration in its enthusiastic dimension, which was particularly fascinating to Winckelmann because he perceived the love of beautiful works of art, enthusiastic by definition, to be a tool directing towards real friendship and strengthening it; Disselkamp, *Die Stadt* (see above), pp. 260, 263–264. Naturally, such friendship, born of the harmony of souls contemplating the beauty of ancient statues, permitted to cross over the social differences: beauty created the deepest, entirely elite unity of mutually equal souls. The appreciation of Greek art, indicative of a distance from the world, guaranteed equality of feeling and desire – the needs may have been different, but the aesthetic longing was the same. Only due to this longing the ideal aim of friendship could be fulfilled – “Ruhe und Zufriedenheit”.

8 Disselkamp demonstrates how Winckelmann’s myth of Rome, which was a refutation of the high standing of the cosmopolitan Paris, combines a critique of the aristocratic “Kavalierstour” with a rejection of the narrow, limited model of scholarly and antiquarian pedantry that was often the only reason to make the journey to the Eternal City. Winckelmann replaced such cultural attitudes with the elevated ideal of shaping one’s own cultural identity through the de-

It comes as no surprise that to Winckelmann, even the best works of the “modernité” seemed weak, artificial and unnatural in comparison with an average work of ancient art. The dislike of France, evident in his letters and writings, was a *pars pro toto*, emblematic of the critique of the entire culture of the Rococo, the modern culture which was an amusement for the elites, a formally absurd plaything empty of aesthetic dignity, noble contours of the Antiquity or moral solemnity.

Thus, the author of *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* characteristically re-oriented the famous “Querelle”, making his contemporary culture a partial hostage to the ancient perfection, and a partial tool for the criticism of modernity. The notion of the “modernité” is not accidental here, although it does not yet contain overtones which were later crucial to Stendhal or Baudelaire. A more important issue is the relationship of various aspects of the “Querelle” to the emergence of aesthetics and birth of the religion of art in the mid eighteenth century.

As an uncompromising champion of the Antiquity, Winckelmann took up topics important to the participants of the “Querelle”, but in a most unusual manner. His plan, so to speak, was to retain the religious overtone of the Enlightenment perfectionist project that, after all, was of an emancipative and often anti-religious character, yet concurrently to weaken the Progressivist dictate of the eulogists of modernity. Simply put, Winckelmann felt obliged to defend the ideal, immutable status of Greek sculpture’s beauty against the expansionist designs of modern relativism, yet to reconcile this status with the unavoidable and indisputable phenomenon of the transformation of artistic forms.

To say that the author of *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* encountered the classical dilemma of the discrepancy between the promise of theory and the factuality of history would be true, but not absolutely true. In Winckelmann’s case, it is impossible to dissociate the issues of history and theory from the biographic aspect, his image of himself. The aesthetics of perfect beauty of the Antiquity, viewed as an axis of a quasi-religious reverence for art, led him unswervingly towards fulfilling his mission and achieving a state of personal happiness. Experiencing life went hand in hand with the happiness-inducing contact with art, while an elevated style of literary ecphrasis and the act of losing oneself in the aesthetic contemplation were necessary conditions for an interpretation of artistic form culminating in the experience of ideal beauty. A viewer in communion with the beauty of, say, the Belvedere Apollo, experiences an elevation and a diminution at the same time. The historical framework and emotional depth, however, are not provided by Christianity.

Winckelmann, similar to many other scholars of his time, accepted the mechanics of the development of artistic form entrenched in the historiography of art since Vasari, deriving from historical stylistic descriptions of ancient rhetoric and from the implied Enlightenment theory of culture. In this mechanics, pictorial arts, like other

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velopment of a scholarly individuality, formed by a harmonious combination of deep knowledge of art and history and an enthusiastic approach to artistic beauty; Disselkamp, *Die Stadt* (n. 7 above), pp. 105–114, 242–243. Thus, Rome became not only the place for historical study, but also, as later to Goethe, a symbolic location for a fulfilled project of transforming one’s own personality and an emblematic scenery for an eternal friendship.

human achievements, were viewed as born out of necessity; for instance, the earliest representations of the human figure featured only the necessary: the contour of the figure as it is in reality, not as it seems to be. From this "simplicity of shape" art could depart in search of the highest beauty. Its manifestation was the ability to unify forms and to represent a homogenous image; yet art later lost this unity of vision and was mired in decorativeness, excess and artificiality.

It is easy to find that this register of virtues and vices, typical to many authors of the Enlightenment, was compiled upon the principle of departure from the ideal measure of beauty on the one hand, and from simplicity and non-falsification of nature on the other. Nevertheless, this "noble simplicity and composed greatness", *adagium*, to which the dangerous simplification of Winckelmann's views is due,<sup>9</sup> perfectly demonstrates the fusion of arguments of an aesthetic and ethical nature. It does this only from our perspective, however: to the author of that famous *adagium*, or to Shaftesbury for instance, these arguments were impossible to dissociate. The conception of beauty, neo-Platonic in its spirit, actually required the combination of the two spheres. Achieving the perfect shape of ideal beauty, art (Greek, of course, this is implicitly understood) becomes in reality the measure of nature, and that in a twofold dimension. Since then, nature must be viewed through the Greek forms, while those forms, seen properly in their homogeneity of shape, become the measure of the inner spiritual and emotional harmony of the viewer. Greek art, like music in Platonic or Aristotelian thought, began to cooperate in creating the ethical character of the modern man, the "beautiful man", whose Utopian myth was later developed by Schiller and Goethe.

Thus the logic of artistic forms developing in sequence from the "archaic" necessity through the freedom of classical form towards anarchy and decline, in no way infringe the indisputable superiority of the Greeks, deriving from power, maturity and closeness to nature, the not yet broken link between the freedom of an individual and the energy of a community, between beauty and truth. Conditions of the beautiful, Greek humanity were the gymnastic fitness, which Winckelmann associated with the "swift Indian", as well as the freedom of paideutic development unfettered by science or religion. Looking at a Greek statue not only transports the viewer to a universe of perfect form and unspoilt natural shape, but moreover opens before him a staggering vision of the transformation of shape into a mythical, religious region of experiencing the world and the past.

This is exactly the case with Winckelmann's two crucial ecphrases, of the Belvedere Torso and Apollo.<sup>10</sup> Their common features are a desire to achieve the elevated, poetic effect of a euphoric character, and a high style that, not quite in concord with

9 As has often been demonstrated, Winckelmann was not the author of those terms, but applied them fittingly and thus popularised them; they derive from the mystical theological tradition; see W. Stammer, 'Edle Einfalt: Zur Geschichte eines kunsttheoretischen Topos', in: W. Stammer, *Wort und Bild*, Berlin, 1962, pp. 161–190.

10 On the description of Apollo see: H. Zeller, *Winckelmanns Beschreibung des Apollo im Belvedere*, Zurich, 1955, where all the earlier versions and the published one are compared.

the implied violence of feeling, suggests restrained pathos; they differ in the location of the viewer/reader in the space of the literary expression.

The fragmentary torso of Hercules, strong, imposing and evocative precisely because of its deficiency and incompleteness, presents a challenge to the classical principle of *integritas* and thus, addressing the reader, Winckelmann professes it to be impossible to express. It is indeed true that a description of this sculpture demands an imaginative completion, achieved by comparisons with the forms found in nature and references to the myth of the hero. Yet the deficiency of shape is not an absence of form, because the energy of its influence increases with its affinity to the inexhaustible vitality of nature (let us recall that Hercules is described as a “fallen oak” and “ocean”). Invited by the poet-historian into the world of the hero, the reader is thus drawn into the primordial universe of nature; this slightly resembles William Hazlitt’s later treatment of the description of Poussin’s *Orion*. Excellence of form overcomes the distance between the work and the viewer; his admiration indicates emotional involvement.

The description of Apollo had a different aim. What was being described was, after all, a statue of a divinity; this required an elevation above all human matters. It has been noted that Winckelmann decided to publish the least poetic of the four existing versions of this ecphrasis, in the assessment of Horst Rüdiger.<sup>11</sup> The difference is worthy of consideration. In the first version, later rejected, the key passage was as follows: “Er [Apollo] hat der Python mit Pfeilen ... erlegt und siehet auf das Ungeheuer von der Höhe seiner Genugsamkeit wie vom Olympus herab mit einem Blick unter welchem alle menschliche Größe sinket und verschwindet”. The version, which was printed in *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* brings the image: “Er hat den Python ... verfolgt, und sein mächtiger Schritt hat ihn erreicht und erlegt. Von der Höhe seiner Genugsamkeit geht sein erhabener Blick, wie ins Unendliche, weit über seinem Sieg hinaus”.

Rüdiger correctly noted that the change was practically forced upon Winckelmann by the actual form of the statue: Apollo indeed does not look down, but gazes into an indefinite space in front of him. It is a significant detail; yet the most crucial element is the difference in the position of the viewer. In the first version, “all human greatness” is totally nullified in the presence of Apollo’s divinity. In contrast to the description of the Torso, the distance between the viewer and the work is not broken but cancelled, any dialogue seems impossible; the difference in the two realities is just too great. All aesthetic fails in face of the totality of Apollo’s super-human beauty.

Rüdiger, however, raises the question of the distance towards the religious side of dread aroused by a statue of a divinity; in the second edition of the ecphrasis “the reader is spared” this dread, which is “suspended”. Winckelmann resigned from this impassable chasm between the viewer and the work, because the diminution of the reader did not harmonise with his desired effect of religious elevation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in this

11 H. Rüdiger, ‘Winckelmanns Persönlichkeit’, in: *Johann Joachim Winckelmann 1768/1968*, Bad Godesberg, 1968, p. 32.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.



case, humanisation of the divinity was paralleled by an elevation of a human being, notwithstanding that it did not remove the distance altogether.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that the author of the ephrasis of Apollo endowed it with various functions. Apollo, as an embodiment of ideal beauty and simultaneously its creator and protector, should be a symbolic and manifest definition of the role of beauty as a guide towards an experience of a religious nature: to the divinity, honour, *pietas*, is due. What is crucial here is not at all the supposed, and much admired by Goethe, revival of the pagan spirit in the soul of the German antiquarian. Winckelmann moved away from the radicalism of the first version of his description because he feared the diminution of human dignity. He was aware that the situation of the absolute, all-encompassing domination of divine reality would constitute despotism of form which would in turn preclude admiration and contemplation, thus thwarting the artistic sense of the form. The visionary Platonic scene of pure ideal cognition is a scene of pure intellect, a scene of a dialogue between gods, not humans with gods. Yet although Heynse in his enthusiasm called Winckelmann by the ancient, noble name of *theios aner*, in reality Winckelmann was not a “holy man” who imitated gods, and he did not seem to see himself as such.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it may be assumed that his project of the “religion of art”, although containing a totalistic aspiration to veneration of art as a path towards the elevated religion of beauty, the land of freedom and perfection, does not aspire to an absolutism of artistic form. Winckelmann was more attracted to the Utopian vision of a revival of conditions which would permit it to regain its ideal glow and be surrounded by religious devotion and veneration. It is not the image of the Madonna or the resurrected Christ that were an embodiment of ideal beauty – this was achieved by art in symbiosis with a different form of religiosity.

Winckelmann, as has already been mentioned, locating the idea of freedom in the forefront, noticed chiefly the ease and naturalness which in his opinion were the protective spirits of paganism. Greek religion was free from dogma – myth, a condition for creative independence, was its opposite; a Greek was not bound by any practices which would be against the naturalness of the human movement, gesture or grace of

13 Wilhelm Trapp assesses differently this role of “Distanzierung” in the description of Apollo, which for him is the core of the Winckelmann’s aesthetics: “Winckelmanns eigentümliche Mischung aus emphatisch erträumter Einheit und gleichzeitiger Distanzierung, die Bewegung zwischen Nähe und Ferne strukturiert nicht nur den narrative Verlauf des Textes, sondern entspricht auch jener Kombination von nahen, greifbarem Schönem und entrücktem Erhabenem, die die Beschreibung selbst kennzeichnet. Dieses ebenso erotische wie indifikatorische Kunsterleben ist das Zentrum der winckelmannschen Ästhetik” – W. Trapp, *Der schöne Mann: zur Ästhetik eines unmöglichen Körpers*, Berlin, 2003, p. 119. Trapp discusses also some aspects of earlier literature on Winckelmann stressing, in opposition to Hans Zeller and Wolfgang von Schadewaldt, openly erotic (in the sense of “narzistisch-identifikatorisch und erotisch taxierend zugleich”) character of Winckelmann’s attitude towards works of art.

14 Friedrich Schlegel perhaps went still further in eulogising Winckelmann, writing: “Der Erste unter uns, der die intellektuelle Anschauung der Moral gehabt, und das Urbild vollendeter Menschheit in den Gestalten der Kunst und des Altertums erkannte und gottbegeister verkündigte, war der heilige Winckelmann”; quoted after: W. Rehm, *Griechentum und Goethezeit. Geschichte eines Glaubens*, Leipzig, 1938, p. 16.

deportment. When a Greek suffered – for instance in the *Laokoon* – it was not the ugliness of physical suffering that was immediately visible, but the grandeur of the soul and the nobility of expression. Art, in its drive to present ideal nature, attempted to achieve what might be called a “de-sensualisation” of form,<sup>15</sup> ennoblement of shape, but also moved towards a certain paradox. In Winckelmann’s view, the form, while not ceasing to fulfil its noble metaphysical calling, was in reality, perhaps chiefly, an appeal to the viewer’s perception. Neither the commonplace, if to a certain extent justified by later solutions, antithesis of spiritual contents, idea or sensual form, nor the organic metaphors of growth give justice to Winckelmann’s position. He never accepted this art, while revealing the levels of ideal beauty or ethical elevation, might stop being art.

Thus, the question is, again, whether the conviction regarding the sensualist character of beauty, so widespread in the eighteenth century, ever existed in a pure form. Winckelmann himself would not agree it did, not only due to his attachment to the Platonic, or rather neo-Platonic universe of beauty exceeding sensual perception. Pure sensuality of form does not, after all, explain transformations in artistic forms or the manner in which they might pave the way to religion and religious veneration. For this, aesthetics needed and ally; yet having found it in history, paid a no mean price. This issue, however, belongs to a different order of the history of art and culture of the Enlightenment and Romantic revolution.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

- 15 In her important article, Barbara Maria Stafford analyses the key metaphors of water, mirror and space that appear in Winckelmann’s writings, and the fundamental oppositions, for example depth – surface, inner – outer, visible – invisible. Presenting the aesthetic and metaphysical dimension of the “noble contour” within the network of these oppositions, she ascertains that the ever-present antinomies of Winckelmann’s descriptions are truth – appearance, and visible – invisible. Paradoxically, in attempting to dematerialise form, Winckelmann located meaning within it, not outside: “Meaning, as it were, floats up to and extends just under the plane with which it becomes imperceptibly bound; it does not come forth. For Winckelmann, the compressed dimension which art inhabits is no longer located at some indefinite zenith but dwells in the flat, yet slightly swollen, border of an indeterminate horizon whose existence is made possible only within a neutral space. The self-sufficiency of this space lends itself to the dematerialisation of the representation, its precipitation into extreme visual tenuousness just as, concomitantly, space becomes emptied due to the condensation of the pictorial aggregate” – B.M. Stafford, ‘Beauty of the Invisible: Winckelmann and the Aesthetics of Imperceptibility’, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 43, 1980, no. 1, pp. 69–70. Cf. also A. Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, New Haven, 1994, p. 111, on the “almost substanceless image” which affects the viewer the most due to its purity. It must be recalled that in Winckelmann’s writings the antynomy of the visible – the invisible may acquire an opposite sense: what is visible to senses is subordinate to what is truly visible, if invisible, and what must be seen.