Goethe's "Kronos als Kunstrichter"

Saturnus eigne Kinder frisst,
hat irgend kein Gewissen;
Ohne Senf und Salz, und wie ihr wisst,
Verschlingt er euch den Bissen.

Shakespearen sollt' es auch ergehn.
Nach hergebrachter Weise:
"Den hebt mir auf", sagt Polyphem,
"Dass ich zulezt ihn speise."

Saturn gulps and masticates his offspring,
Careless, unbeset by guilt and scruples.
No Tabasco! Hold the salt! My pupils,
You will be that impious maw's next off'ring.

Shakespeare's blood shall be imbibed to quench thirst?
Age-old practice known in Cyclops' sheep-pen!
"Οὖτιν ἔδ μαι· τ ὺς δ' ἄλλ υς πρόσθεν.
Guest-friendship forbid I swallow *him* first!"

Goethe's brief poem, "Kronos als Kunstrichter", lies almost completely unnoticed in complete collections of his works and has escaped in most instances anthologization.[1] This eight-line epigram affords pithy observations on the literary environment of Goethe's world by reference to the classical myth of Cronos or Saturn.[2]

The poem came, over time, to have a title different from its original: early editions entitled it variously "Geist der Zeit", "Art der Zeit", "Lauf der Zeit", or "Kritik der Zeit". In any of these titles, Goethe may have been playing on the Medieval representation—conflation?—of Greek terms Cronos and *Chronos* "time", into which error Augustine (*Civ. Dei* 7.9) followed Varro and was in turn followed by many authors and artists of the Middle Ages.[3] The epigram recalls the traditional mythological role of the great Titan, Cronos, who had sought to preserve dominion by consuming his own children. Cronos had, of course, severed the testicles of the father who had begotten him in order to secure his own ascendancy. And he later sought rashly to avoid his fate that he, too, "would be subdued by his own son" (Hesiod *Theog*. 465). Cronos' behavior defines irreverence. For in attempting to subvert fate, he effected his own demise and introduced the reign of Jupiter, the author of Justice.

Goethe's poem talks of the senseless brutality of Cronos' actions. Hesiod's Cronos, likewise, devours his new-born offspring whole as they move "from the holy womb toward the knees [of Rhea]" (*Theog*. 460). In Goethe's epigram, Cronos eats his children raw, unseasoned, without mustard or salt. His bloody jaws move aggressively at his own flesh and blood. Like Polyphemus, Homer's gruesome

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[1] J. W. Goethe originally published the poem among the *Gedichte der Ausgabe letzter Hand* (Stuttgart: Cotta 1827 – 1830); it is now collected in *Berliner Ausgabe*, 22 vols. (Berlin: Aufbau 1965), 1:586; E. Beutler, ed., *J.W. Goethe: Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe, und Gespräche*, 27 vols. (Zurich: Artemis 1948 – 71), 1; *Goethe's Collected Works*, 12 vols. (Boston: Surhkamp/Insel 1983-1989), 1:

[2] See Hesiod, *Th.* 137-210, 168-82, 453-91, Ovid *Met*. 1.89-116, Apollodorus *Library* 1.1.1-2.1 for standard accounts. Cronos is also depicted in ancient myth as a civilizer, or king of the Golden Age: cf. Hesiod *W&D* 111, 167-73, Pindar *Ol*. 2.70, Plato *Laws* 713 b, Plutarch *De def. or.* 420.

[3] See E. Panofsky, "Father Time," chapter 3 in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press 1939), 72 n., 73-92.

Cyclops who threatened to eat Odysseus last (*Od* 9.368-70), Goethe's Cronos delights in the prospect of devouring the best morsels last. In the cave of Polyphemus the *pièce de résistance* was wily Odysseus himself, the commander of the crew; here the cannibal relishes his palate with William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare represented for Goethe and contemporary German *literati* a formidable monument of literary excellence. For a critic to attack the great Shakespeare was unthinkable.[4] To denigrate Shakespeare would have seemed as impious as Polyphemus' violation of hospitality or Cronos' attempts to subvert the Fates. Yet, a contemporary of Goethe and Schiller recently had approached the unimaginable and assailed Shakepeare's reputation. Goethe's poem is a response to the conservative literary critic Friedrich von Schlegel whose criticism of several prominent German authors had been published shortly before the composition of this epigram.[5]

Schlegel's early career found him at the University of Jena, where Schiller was professor of history and the most notable literary figure on the faculty. Though Schlegel had openly sought Schiller's favor, he soon alienated himself from the great author by publishing in 1796-1797 a series of unfavorable reviews of two important projects of Schiller, *Die Horen* and *Der Musenalmanach*.[6] Schlegel's lectures, published under the title *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur*, further revealed a strong bias against the works of German classicists, including Schiller and Goethe himself. Schlegel was a serious student of classical literature, a field in which he published extensively during his career and where he found himself mustering against the neo-classicism of these monuments of German literature. Thus, Schlegel's renunciation of former affinity for Schiller was an act of impiety, as impious—Goethe suggests in exaggerated tones—as Cronos' dastardly act.

Likening Schlegel to Cronos is quintessentially epigrammatic. Goethe vilifies his critic with a handful of words, and with a few pen-thrusts deflates Schlegel's whole critical endeavor. The brevity of the form, too, trivializes the damage Schlegel's criticism might have done to the prestige that Goethe and Schiller and their peers had labored so to establish. Reference to classical texts was by no means foreign to Goethe, but engaging a classical scholar on the turf of the Saturn-myth seems especially appropriate for the concise genre of epigram. If Schlegel is Saturn, then his literary opponents must be assumed to play the role of the Titans' successors; so Goethe and his friends become the Olympians—in Hesiod's terms the establishers of lasting peace—under whose influence literary ingenuity achieves its splendor.

[cf. *Classical and Modern Literature* 16 (1996): 175-77]

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4 Cf. K. Rothman, *Kleine Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (Stuttgart: Reclam 1978), 73.

5 F. Schlegel, *Geschichte der alten und neuen Litteratur: Vorlesungen gehalten zu Wien im Jahre 1812*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Schaumburg 1815)=*Kritische Schriften und Fragmente*, E. Behler and H. Eichner, edd., 6 vols. (Paderborn: Schönigh 1988), 4:1-215. The connection between Schlegel and "Kronos als Kunstrichter" is provided by the note in the *Berliner Ausgabe*, 1:949.

66 *Kritische Schriften*, 1:137-70.