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Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Since the “discovery” of Greek sculpture by Winckelmann, it has been customary to study that sculpture for influences going to and from it, for its stages of development, and for intentions ascribable to its creators. Starting with Winckelmann himself, connoisseurs and scholars have more or less continuously written interpretations of those factors, often in the form of histories, from a particular vantage point. My interpretation necessarily builds upon that tradition, using the results of analyses of technical problems connected with various sculptural creations, that being typically the focus of scholarly studies. However, my interest in the subject goes well beyond that. It is my belief that all Greeks, not merely sculptors, oriented themselves in the world by means of a deeply underlying mythos—a set of attitudes towards the outside world of nature and the inside world of thought and feeling—contained in one inspired system which was eventually organized in the so-called philosophy of the Four Elements. This constitutes the culmination of the work of the “Ionian School”.

By “mythos” here I am now referring to the factor that makes Greek sculpture the unique thing it is: the “Greekness” which is anterior to whatever influences may have impinged on it from the outside world, that is, from a revival of Bronze Age traditions or from Aegypto-Near East traditions. Important as influences are, the very selectivity of Greek artists in using them and, above all, the way they are transformed into something dynamically different, indicate that there is a mythos in operation. It remained for native philosophers eventually to give it verbal formulation.

In a companion volume entitled *Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements* I have presented in detail my conception of the Four Elements as a scientific hypothesis. It is not feasible to reintroduce that here (although some diagrams referred to in the present text are given in Appendix A). However, it is appropriate to give a few indications of my thinking. The key factor is the invaluable information—implied almost casually by a late commentator—that both Empedokles and Demokritos considered that each of the

four elements had its own color—out of a field of black, white, red and yellow. But which goes with which is not given. Using density of the elements as a criterion made it possible to assign the colors to their respective elements and then to compare the results with the ancient testimonia and color usage on objects with figural painting.

To a small extent the information about colors obtained in the way described can be applied to sculptured figures; in practice, however, that is difficult because color that may once have been applied to Greek sculpture has largely disappeared, leaving, as it were, pure form. Regrettable as this is for us, it may be some consolation that sculptors had to be independently oriented to the aesthetics of pure form while they “liberated” the figures they were envisioning from the marble or limestone block. And, since those figures were to a great extent the nude male body, generation after generation, they present the opportunity to think about stages of development. This has, of course, often been done but generally without reference to color and largely in anatomical terms. What now remains to do is to discover how changes in the conception of the body, especially of stance, are related to the central mythos of the four elements. That is, in essence, the theme of the present study.

It would not, however, be possible to connect the stages of development of sculpture with the elements without taking into account a factor which seems rarely even to be pointed out, or at least clearly explained, by historians of science. In the present context it must on the contrary be emphasized as the connecting link: fire, air, water and earth were conceived of in both a macrocosmic form (the world) and a microcosmic form (an organism). A compatible essence and structure in world and organisms is the basis of perfect symbiosis and a sure ground for cognition; this is similar in principle to the more advanced ecological thinking of our own century. Given the closeness to nature which was inevitable in the non-technological world, and the specific Greek tendency to pursue thought systematically—culminating in the formulation of the rules of logic by Aristotle—the macro/micro character of the fundamental Greek mythos should not be surprising.

Nevertheless, looking away from the principle of mythos and from the idea of stages of development to the actual functioning of those stages, that is, the way they progress, one is confronted with a rather complex situation. No commentator on Greek sculpture ever neglects stance; it would be impossible to overlook the slow progression from the Archaic static equilibrium to the creation of true contrapposto in mid-fifth century and the resulting experiments from it. However, the tendency has been to study that progression on the basis of anatomy and technique. Extraordinary acumen has been lavished from that angle on the statues and fragments now existing. For a few scholars, however, the psychological implications rather than the bodily mechanics of the various stances have seemed a burning issue. Yet the complications and difficulties in making that connection are so daunting that opinions or theories, if expressed at all in writing, have been cautious or even veiled in ambiguous terms. Thus, not much attention has been paid to this factor—quite understandably, given the sketchiness of such concepts and the temper of our age.

It has seemed to me that there must be a way to put this matter on a firm, or at least a discussable, basis. What is needed is a paradigm, most particularly one that does not impose the purely modern, materialistic view of human consciousness on the

progression. The appropriate paradigm should in some sense run parallel to impulses that would be discernible in the incipient, barely existent discipline of psychology that was forming in the minds of Plato and Aristotle (that phenomenon is discussed in Chapter I). My researches did discover such a modern paradigm, as given in Appendix B, even though it seems to be little more than a note for future reference never activated by its author. Wilhelm Dilthey. Yet it exists in his published writings and it sums up in a finished, balanced, rhythmical way the ideal functioning of the three basic faculties of the human ego; thinking, feeling and willing. That concept floated in the air, so to speak, of German Idealism and its aftermath. It is, I feel, the last afterglow of two millenia of a rational/religious view of reality before it was replaced by a rationalistic/ mechanistic conception of the world.

From the latter conception emerged the popular view of the universe as a vast, indifferent mechanism and the human being as a fortuitous assemblage of chemicals. While that is not necessarily the view of every scientist who has contributed to the sum of knowledge and, indeed, in view of the staggering scientific discoveries of the later 20th century it has become increasingly suspect and even irrational to increasing numbers of contemporaries, including scientists, nevertheless its impact went deep into 20th century consciousness.

On that basis the question might readily arise: how is it possible that an apparently arbitrary (though certainly not illogical) rhythmical scheme of overlapping, repetitive psychic functions can be applied to works of Greek artists over some hundreds of years of unbroken creativity?

The answer may be twofold. First, it cannot be applied abstractly as an explanation of the behavior of Greek artists, but only in connection with their experiencing of a mythos (see above, Introduction, paragraph 2). Second, it can be considered on its own merits only apart from a widespread prejudicial conviction that history is totally untidy, a more or less chaotic series of unforeseeable events based on a mechanical cause-and-effect series too complicated to be knowable. It may readily be granted that this seems to explain, or at least fit, the world since about mid-19th century; however, it may be less appropriate for the pre-industrial world. One can trace an increasingly chaotic state of world events from the inception of an ever growing and finally completely uncontrollable technology that draws all life in its train. The tenor of life will have been quite different in earlier times when, for the most part, civilization consisted of farms and villages. In the case of ancient Greece it has been argued recently (V.D. Hanson, *The Other Greeks, passim*) that even in the most advanced polis (Athens) agriculture shaped and determined the pace and direction of political and economic development. Nowhere more than in agriculture are the principles of intuition and of rhythmical, repetitive processes determinative—with resulting conservative attitudes that value stability over rapid change. While the central town contrasts with the rural setting in some ways, it is noteworthy that the craft of ceramics in Athens can be characterized with the same words: intuition, rhythmical and repetitive processes and techniques, conservative in style, tenacious in use of motifs and themes. *Mutatis mutandis* these words also apply to Greek sculpture. In fact, an unsympathetic modern

observer might ask why it took so many decades and generations to go from A to B. Yet it is the remarkable stability of, and continuity of, Greek artistic concepts that made them models for later cultures.

On the foregoing basis, the intuitive scheme of Dilthey, offered to the world unconditionally in connection with his concept of *Weltanschauung*, may have the potential to contribute to our understanding of the way Greek art developed. However, I must make it clear that this study was not written to justify Dilthey's theory. On the contrary, what appears in the following chapters was already to a considerable extent worked out in my courses and research without its application. Nevertheless, once that took place, I discovered—for myself at least—a hitherto unsuspected poignancy in the relation of form and content in Greek art. It seems, therefore, appropriate to suggest briefly the place of Dilthey in 19th century intellectual history.

Undeniably the fabric of present-day thinking is woven through with many strands from three enormously powerful influences: the work of Isaac Newton and his successors in physics, the ideas of Charles Darwin on the physical evolution of species, and the theories of Sigmund Freud as the discoverer of the realm of the subconscious.

In the interpretation of Greek art it is therefore not a question of bringing these particular influences to the forefront of our consciousness; they are already there and indeed have been used rather consciously in discussing such things as Greek science and Greek sexuality. Behind these influences implicitly and explicitly is the legacy of 19th century scientism with its professed ideals of neutrality and verifiability. In the 20th century it has become clear from life itself that these ideals leave much to individual, and all too frequently arbitrary, interpretation. A broadening of this frame of reference is, therefore, not unreasonable, if done carefully and with a specific purpose. Indeed, this is not only theoretically possible but also justifiable because, after all, the tenets and presuppositions of our secular, materialistic world were not—and could not have been—those of the ancient Greeks themselves.

The premise of this book, therefore, is to take into account another sphere of (human) consciousness which, in the late 19th and into the 20th century, was very much an important cultural factor and, in fact, one which has continued to be a powerful, if not always so obvious, force shaping the world's destiny. I refer to what is called—not happily in every ramification—the Romantic Movement, in a broad interpretation of which I would include, on the one hand, such things as German idealism, the scientific work of Goethe, hermeticism, alchemy—itsself a progeny of Four Elements philosophy—and Platonism, and then on the other hand such things as American transcendentalism, the arts and crafts movement, and the beginnings of ecological awareness opposing the ruthless exploitation of natural resources around the world. Painters like John J. Enneking and planners like Frederick Olmstead involved themselves in this aspect of the urbanization of Boston and can serve as examples of what I mean. A conflict of seemingly irreconcilable values arose and has continued to carry through into every phase of public

and private life, not stopping at the doors of humanistic scholarship. The actuality of the Romantic Movement, just as of that of the tradition of scientism—both in innumerable variations and adaptations—down to our present time is indisputable.

The Romantic thought stream carries on to a degree impulses of the Renaissance that in their turn were derived from the traditions of the ancient world. This orientation was, of course, increasingly pushed aside as a result of the Enlightenment and the euphoria of a new scientific vision which, it was thought, would at last solve all the persistent social and economic problems of the world. Much of this promise has indeed been fulfilled—but at a cost—already foreseen by the Romantics—which now poses serious threats to a secure future for the world.

Inevitable as this development may have been, there may be a gain at this very point in attempting to complement methods (attitudes) that are indebted to Newton-Darwin-Freud (among others) with some serious attention to insights characteristic of the Romantic direction. The need for such a complementation arose for me out of an interest that reaches as far back as my doctoral dissertation when I began considering how periods of Greek artistic creativity can and should be named and divided—in short, what are the principles underlying periodicity? The little that could be gleaned from the few art historians who have given real thought to this problem was helpful but not sufficient for me (see Ch. III) and it was not until I discovered a somewhat obscure passage in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey (see Appendix B) that a real breakthrough became possible. Dilthey stands squarely in the stream of Romantic aesthetics (hermeneutics)¹ and philosophy; with his *Lebensphilosophie* he is part of the late 19th/early 20th century elite trend to organicism (particularly visible in artistic movements, such as Art Nouveau, and organic architecture).² He influenced several important younger philosophers who stood outside mainstream positivism. To a considerable extent parallel with Dilthey's conception of the three functions of the ego in the passage referred to above are the views of Rudolf Steiner, who, moreover, fits into the Romantic stream in the additional sense that his world view is compatible with the Four Elements philosophy of the Greeks, while at the same time in his ideas on scientific matters he was greatly indebted to Goethe for inspiration.

How did these factors come together in my experience to inspire this book? When I began to consider seriously the seemingly mysterious affinity of Greek artists and philosophers for the specific colors: black, white, red and yellow, I could find no satisfactory orientation until my own artistic efforts with watercolors led me to study Goethe's theory of colors. In connecting that with the Greek four color problem I was compelled for the sake of clarity to involve myself deeply with the concept of the four elements—out of which emerged the considerations brought forward in Appendix A. These considerations enabled me to realize how Dilthey's periodicity, if taken in combination with the four elements concept, could become filled with the life-experience (*Erlebnis*) quality he intended it to have, although in a field he was almost certainly not acquainted with: Greek sculpture (Ch. IV) as well as Greek painting.

In order to explain the background of combining the factors just described, I must refer to Dilthey's two best-known concepts: *Weltanschauung* and *Geistes-*

geschichte. The former term is generally translated as world view (on that translation, see Chapter I, *The Author's Conception of How "The Structure of a World View" May Throw Light on Greek Art*, paragraph 1) and has, as it were, conquered modern consciousness and become an everyday necessity in the vocabulary of our era. The latter term is more difficult to translate. W. Kleinbaum³ wrote: "A branch of the history of ideas, *Geistesgeschichte* might be rendered in English as "intellectual history" (or, even less accurately, as the "history of the human mind")."

While it is true that the German word includes the notion of cultural activities in a collective sense, in the actual description of the structure of a world view excerpted here (in Appendix B) the phases involved arise clearly and specifically out of the progressive metamorphosis of the mental life of a single individual as model and prototype. Indeed, emphasis on individuality is the keystone of Dilthey's thought. Yet in this one vital instance of psychic structure, Dilthey himself at once proceeded to its, of course, equally valid collective use, thereby leaving the impression that his structure really has significance only for global world views and intellectual history. His failure to do justice to the balancing polarity of individuality and collectivity is the basis of much of the later criticism of Dilthey, including the Marxist.⁴

When, therefore, in this book I refer to history of the mind, instead of ideas, I am attempting in a small way to address this imbalance, for "mind" at least forces the reader to recall that "ideas" which are treated in a collective sense, generally, if not always, originate in individual minds and also operate at that level. Above all, this alternative translation allows me to pull attention back to one of the great insights of Dilthey—also apparently ignored by him after its "birth"—namely, microperiodicity, which will be applied in connection with Greek sculpture, *passim*. Again I emphasize that Dilthey did not concern himself with the visual arts but dealt only with large categories and types into which world views could be classified, *viz.*, the religious, the poetical and the metaphysical (this latter again subdivided).⁵ His direct comments on the way Greek philosophy evolved⁶ are thus not of much assistance to my theme, since he did not suggest a context for Greek culture broad enough to encompass all his categories, that is, a context so deep and powerful that his own words (elsewhere)⁷ could apply to it: "Because no demonstration could ever call them (world views) into being, so no demonstration will ever be able to dissolve them." Such an indemonstrable but also indissoluble world view is, in my experience, that of the philosophy of the Four Elements and its visualization in *contrapposto* (see Chapter V).

It is not part of my purpose to criticize Dilthey, for his legacy is greater than generally realized and can be built upon. My use of it is as follows. His concept of the continual and sequential processes: thinking, feeling and willing as the technical structure of a world view is combined with the concept of a Four Elements world (as elucidated above) in order to throw light on the problem of periodicity in Greek art. As I show in Chapter I, there is some—if only vaguely realized—parallel in Greek philosophy to Dilthey's technical structure, while the actual articulation of the four elements concept is entirely a Greek contribution to world history. Therefore my method, while innovative, does not go beyond the presently existing western tradition. I know of no evidence that Dilthey was consciously dependent on the Greek parallel just mentioned, but he was, of

course, very well acquainted with Greek philosophy. In view of the importance of Dilthey's ideas for the structure of my study, I have devoted considerable attention at the end of Chapter I to a careful explanation of how I interpret them and further, in Chapter II as an exercise intended to demonstrate the wide applicability (though not necessarily universality) of those ideas, worked out in that sense the history of the scholarship about Greek sculpture. This gives me an opportunity to be quite explicit in modern terms before the reader copes with Chapter IV, in which the problem of periodicity in Greek sculpture is dealt with.

Notwithstanding all that, since Dilthey is not well known to the present generation of lay readers—a category to which I myself belong—I have prepared for the benefit of any readers who care to go more deeply into the background of this book an explanation (Appendix C) of how I see his system in relation to the developments in 19th and early 20th century philosophy. This includes a few remarks on the relation of the subject of periodicity to the way Greeks experienced time, supplementing my treatment of that theme in Chapters III and IV.