

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Karl Phillip Moritz (1756-1793)

Introduction

Karl Phillip Moritz was born into poverty, and into a family ruled by discord and tension. (Interpretation of the theology of the French Quietists, and of the influential Mme. Guyon, was the issue of conflict in the parental family, which was dominated by the strictest religious discipline.) With relief Moritz found his way out of the cramped family home, to serve as an apprentice to a hatter, where he found work and life hard, but the horizons wider. Through a process of charitable education he was schooled, learned Latin well, and eventually made his way to Erfurt, where he aspired to and got launched on, a career in the theater. (The foregoing events make up the substance of Moritz's autobiography, *Anton Reiser*, which is our text for this week.) Moritz's early immersion in religious doctrine directed him toward the study of theology at Erfurt University, then toward travels to England. In 1786 he went to Italy, where he had the good luck to meet Goethe, a generation his elder. By this time Moritz was a sensitive art and literary critic—the author of a widely appreciated essay on sculptural representations of beauty, and the editor (1783-1793) of a *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, in which he helped to promote that study of human behavior which is so carefully applied in *Anton Reiser*.

Anton Reiser is a 'psychological novel,' as Moritz dubs it, concerning the world as lived and seen by an impoverished, dream-filled, religious, sardonic kin to Goethe's Werther. (Both Moritz and Goethe chipped off slices of their own lives, and lived them virtually on the page.) You will see that the flavor of Moritz' work is in the wry and often subtle life observations that Anton generates—far surpassing Werther in worldly wisdom. Faced with the dramatic challenge of taking First Communion, Anton 'did his utmost to bring on a state of joyful trembling, but it did not work, and he reproached himself bitterly that his heart was so hardened. At last he began to shiver with cold, and this reassured him somewhat.' (p. 105). The same Anton is open to unusually rich perceptions—chips off Moritz' mental block—like the following intuition, drawn from the character's wanderings through city crowds: 'He fancied that all the ideas of so many thousands of people, at present separated only by the barrier of each person's body, and communicated to one another by the motion of certain parts of this barrier, would flow together after people's death, and form a unity...' (p. 184). The same Anton, a copy of the author who was creating him, thought that when 'he wanted to see anything that was surrounded by a crowd of onlookers, everyone else was always bolder than him, and elbowed him aside—he thought that eventually a gap would appear, where he could join the line without having to push anyone aside in front of him....' The psychological finesse of *Anton Reiser* is Moritz' way of working through his own fresh and often disturbing psychological fields of play.

Readings: Anton Reiser in *Anton Reiser: a Psychological Novel* (trans. with an introduction by Ritchie Robertston. (London, 1997).

Questions:

Moritz entitles his book 'a psychological novel.' Does this trait distinguish the present life writing from that we find in Goethe's *Werther*? How does the 'psychological' element enter Moritz's account?

Does the motif of the journey play an important role in Moritz' account of Anton's development? Do you see any linkage between Herder's journey account and Moritz'?

Both *Werther* and *Anton Reiser*, are semi-directly [what are "semi-directly autobiographies?"] autobiographies. Which autobiographer seems to you to 'reveal' himself most in his text? How do the two writers reveal themselves?