

Goethe

a critical introduction

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September 11-14, 2014

What would be more appropriate than to quote from the introduction by W.H. Auden, to his translation of Goethe's 'Italian Journey'.

Everybody knows that the thrones of European Literature are occupied by the triumvirate referred to in Finnegans Wake as Daunty, Gouty and Shopkeeper, but to most English speaking readers the second is merely a name. German is a more difficult language to learn to read than Italian, and whereas Shakespeare, apparently, translates very well into German, Goethe is peculiarly resistant to translation into English; Hölderin and Rilke, for example, come through much better. From a translation of Faust, any reader can see that Goethe must have been extraordinarily intelligent, but he will probably get the impression that he was too intellectual, too lacking in passion, because no translation can give a proper idea of Goethe's amazing command of every style of poetry, from the coarse to the witty to the lyrical to the sublime.

This is the first paragraph. The introduction goes on for a few pages, and I still remember forty odd years later, some additional material. For one, Auden claims that Goethe was unable, to make a landscape come to life in the way someone like D.H.Lawrence was. The reason one learns on a rereading is that natural objects cannot be objectively described by language alone, to make them come alive, you need to infuse a subjective element. More interestingly for me at the time was the reference to Goethe's sexuality. Although Goethe had been in love a lot in his youth and 'Sturm und Drang' period, he did not seem to have felt the need for any physical intimacy according to Auden, at least not of an imperative kind until relatively late in life. He was fully satisfied by the Platonic relationship with a married woman eleven years his senior. The Italian Journey changed all that, according to the translator, In fact he writes *The difference between the over-refined, delicate, almost neurasthenic face of the pre-Italian portraits and the masculine, self-assured face in the portraits executed after his return is very striking: the latter is of a man who has known sexual satisfaction.* This is heady.

I bought the translation in the early fall of 1973, almost two hundred years after Goethe set out on his epic journey. I had had a minor crisis just a week or so before. I was beginning my third year at Harvard, and so far I had made no progress. My studies had been diverted during the spring, as I had met my first real girlfriend and in an act of exuberance even proposed engagement with her, something she had after some initial reluctance accepted. Another world was opening up, and I was even considering the possibility of settling down in the States. Things had really progressed very far and very fast, as they can do in youth, and this being nothing remarkable or abnormal, but even sound and healthy. However, bringing her to Sweden that summer, things were coming to

a head. I was getting old feet and realizing that a momentous decisions was to be made by me, not only the one of marrying, but also of changing nationality and native language. In fact a total transformation that was about to nullify my past and make it irrelevant. Naturally I was getting cold feet. However, my girlfriend was running on a different track, having overcome the initial reluctance and had time to consider the matter in a more mature way (thinking things through as she put it) felt very committed. An engagement was an engagement, and with that connected with certain commitments, one of which was to set the date. The idea of getting married suddenly became very real, and it frightened me. On the other hand the idea of separation, of which I had had very little thought, at least as to its immediacy, was frightening as well. I was in a vice. I allowed myself to be pressured, a date was set at the end of the summer. But two days before I said stop. It caused an uproar, her family was aghast and advised her strongly to break the whole thing off, while she was loyal to me, and decided to stay on. In short I managed to have both the cake and eating it too. A few days later we moved into an apartment on Ware Street close to Harvard Square. We set up a home. I was saved.

It was then I bought the book, and although Goethe was not unknown to me, he was but a name until now. I was consoled by reading about his crises, and also the indication that he only came on his own, so late in life. A man of thirty-seven appears very old to a boy of twenty-three. Clearly life was long and there was no hurry to become famous and successful, concerns which had obsessed me in my late teens and early twenties. Little did I know of the precociousness of Goethe in his youth. I read a few chapters of the book, and then, predictably I tired. But during the same time, I sat down and started to write my first novel, getting an outlet for something that I had felt keenly the need for since my childhood. Maybe this also saved me. That went very well. It wrote itself, as I had in my phantasies envisioned. Not only the creative urge was strong, the power as well. As to my mathematics, there would be little if any progress. I was stuck.

This personal interlude apart, it did excite my literary interest, and the book under review must have been bought a year or so later. That one too I started to read but soon tired of. Still after forty years residing on my shelves it is there for being picked up. In sense a gift presented by my youthful self to my old, better to appreciate it. Thirty-seven can still be thought of as youth of sorts, sixty-four, there is no way. When Goethe himself turned sixty, he presumed that death might be close, although he lived on for over twenty more years.

Now the point of this book is to present Goethe to English speaking readers (just as Auden did by his translation) and not only to give an introduction, but a critical one. Auden refers to the humorless adulation of Goethe perpetrated by German professors and critics who treat everything Goethe did as would it be the Holy Writ, and the present author Gray asks the question, is really Goethe as great as he is made out to be? As he puts it, acknowledging his obvious literary flaws, is the work of the man a Mosaic which only makes sense when viewed from afar, or is it just nothing but a heap of stones?

The author makes a systematic review of Goethe's life and works. Starting with a short introduction. The life of Goethe can be divided into the young Goethe and the mature, and eventually aged, Goethe, the divider being the life-crisis, referred to above, when he left on his epic journey to Italy in 1786-88. As to his younger years, there is

his early poems, his epistolary Novel *Die Leiden des Junges Werther* which made a splash all over Europe, and his early dramatic works. Now dealing with the young Goethe, we can be somewhat indulgent. There was not really any German literature of renown when Goethe started out, he had to invent a German literary tradition by himself, not unlike the case of Pushkin. In particular he had to find some formal verse meter that suited the German language, the classical alexandrine not being particularly suited to it. When it came to drama, he was inspired by Shakespeare, the classical French dramatists, as well as Greek drama, and wrote emulations of each. However, those early dramas of Goethe are not normally staged, unlike the latter production of Schiller. Gray shows all their shortcomings pointing out that their executions fell very short of their ambitions. Goethe has a tendency to announce what he wants to do, instead of doing it. Thus *Götz von Berchlingen* fall far short of its Shakespearean model as did his next play *Egmont* also a historical drama, that ends rather pointlessly. While *Iphigene auf Tauris* clearly has an antique Greek model. Finally *Turqato Tasso* is so defective that it is almost comical. Clearly those early dramas of Goethe have not aged well, and have only historical and biographical interest.

The case of Werther is mostly interesting as a phenomenon. First, how autobiographical was it, and why did it have such an impact on the youth of his day, starting off an epidemic of suicides. Clearly Goethe never committed suicide, but did he ever contemplate it seriously? And if so was writing it a way of staving it off? It clearly belongs to the Sturm und Drang period, of which he was a youthful adherent, and only escaped from ruin, by joining the court of the young Duke at Weimar. As has been remarked, Goethe had a genius for taking the right step at the right time. The novel itself, charming as it may be nowadays as a period piece, is deeply flawed according to Gray. Everything is just shown from the perspective of Werther, even when by necessity the epistolary narrative has to be abandoned. It is also clear that Gray does not like the protagonist Werther very much.

The second part of the systematic review, damns Goethe as a scientist, His 'Farbenlehre' contradicts physics. Goethe did not have a taste for careful scientific investigation, although he did discover the intermaxillary bone in the human jaw, thus linking man with the rest of the mammals, a fact that is often presented as an undeniable proof of his scientific prowess. Goethe was more interested in Nature from a philosophical point of view, and instead of getting bogged down in empirical details, he was obsessed by attempts at seeing the grander picture. He often boasted that the preconceived ideas he had of how nature worked were always vindicated, that Nature came to meet him, that all he discovered he had always known. In many ways a very Platonic attitude, further enhanced by his search for 'der Urpflanze' a concrete manifestation of a Platonic form, that Schiller found naive. Anyway, there is no mistaking the enthusiasm to which Goethe applied himself to studies of the natural world, and commendable for a poet, dramatist and writer, bespeaking energy and curiosity, with few equals. (The case of Strindberg and his obsessive alchemical studies, is the only one to comes in mind. But Goethe was obviously more sophisticated and wide-ranging.). The main part of the book concentrates on his *Faust*, the work that more than anything else is associated with him. The work that more than anything else shows the towering greatness of Goethe, the work that was an

obsession of his for most of his adult life and to which he returned repeatedly and rewrote. A work that has produced countless commentaries and supplying the staple of Goethe studies. The author is puzzled. He cannot understand why Faust is so great. It seems to be a hodge-podge, just like his earlier dramas, a sequence of episodes, which seem to have little connections to each other. Faust does not in any way seem to be a heroic or even commendable character. He seems incapable of ordinary human concerns, unable to form a real love relationship, impervious to the suffering he causes, and not even marked with any energy or drive, instead appearing rather passive. Why should we care about him? The Mephistopheles appears more human and interesting than Faust. In fact in the second part of the impossible drama, Faust plays a rather marginal role, being actually present only during a minor part of the whole book. Viewed as a work of art, the drama seems singularly inept, filled with inconsistencies and non sequiturs. Gray is puzzled, but in a rather modest way, maybe he is missing something, but if so what, he seems to say. The autobiographical novel - *Wilhelm Meisters Lehr- und Wanderjahre*, is even more puzzling, even more disjointed. It is as if Goethe has written it in a haste, using it as a dump for half-baked pieces. It is episodic, with lots of irrelevant digressions. The protagonist, is a passive individual, to whom things happens, without any apparent development, and this work is supposed to be the archetypical *Bildungsroman* after all. Yet, after this character assassination of Goethe's prime works, you nevertheless have your curiosity awakened. The very formlessness of the works, seem more fascinating than anything else, and you are reminded of the Bible, which similarly is a hodge-podge of the high with the low. Maybe this is the secret to their success. They are in fact Bible-like in their amorphousness, thus larger than life, capable of being interpreted at many different layers. No wonder perhaps that they have become icons of canon. Perfection is the aim of mere man, divinity has deeper ambitions? As to Wilhelm Meister, clearly it was written slovenly, a work to which Goethe intermittently returned, and not always with enthusiasm or inspiration. Goethe was a busy man, and hardly a pedantic one. Maybe he thought that all he touched turned to gold? If so why exert yourself unduly?

The book ends with discussing his work as an older man. In many ways Goethe did not really come into his own until he was almost sixty. Had he died in 1808, the author muses, what could he have shown for himself? Recall that Faust was not published until the very end of his life. His association with Schiller was of course fruitful to him, and who knows where he would have been, without that influence. In fact we are told that Schiller was more highly regarded than Goethe until the end of the 19th century, which indicates that the growth of the Goethe legend might be an interesting topic of study, but no doubt, like everything else connected with Goethe, studied to death. When Goethe started to write poems again long after his Italian sojourn, he was once again at the stage of his youth, trying to fit the German language into uncongenial metrical forms. Gray is here rather explicit and technical in his discussion about different verse forms, and the problems of accentuation. Syllabi are of different lengths, so a mere mechanical fitting, often produce texts which are very awkward to read out loud. What saved Goethe in the end was his encounter with Persian poetry of the medieval poet Hafiz, resulting in his *Der West-Östliche Divan* a work of collaboration with a woman friend Marianne Jung, with whom he had conveniently fallen in love. His poetry matured, as he struggled to reconcile

the many contradictory emotions and drives he felt. Was he religious in any conventional sense? Did he think of any distinction between Evil and Good, or did he think that both were necessary, and both were tolerated. Was his religion anything beyond his willingness to embrace everything that existed and throbbed? He worshipped 'Vielfach', the world in all its manifestations, exulting in mere existence. There is in the nature of Goethe a strong streak of paganism. And his charm is in his love of being alive. After all is said and done, was there ever a more contented and satisfied man? It sounds like simple egoism, and many has censured him for that, but egoism is charming. The man who loves himself, does in fact, make other people love him. You can see this as a grand confidence trick if you want.

The author concludes that once we learn to revere him less, we will be able to esteem him more. Meant as an introduction, it works in spite of the authors attempts at disparagement. Maybe for all his ambitions to tear him down from the pedestal, he cannot resist admiring him.

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