

Dichtung und Wahrheit

Erster Teil

J.W.Goethe

January 13 - February 12, 2015

I once read in Freud that when Goethe as a small child got a sibling he reacted by throwing out crockery out of the window. It made an impression on me, as it made me recall that when I myself got a sibling I threw out my fathers ring with keys. I remember vividly the occasion of how I was seized with pure mischief running into my parents bedroom getting hold of the keys and throwing them out. I just wanted to be very nasty, no other explanation I can find for my behavior. My father spanked me, and I thought that he needed to get his anger out and I felt very sorry for him as I saw him walking down on the ground below our window looking for it, I assume in vain. The memory stayed with me, and the reference in Freud endowed it with an unexpected significance as well as making me think higher of Freud (as well as being flattered by the implicit comparison with the great German scribe). And sure enough already in the beginning of his childhood account the author relates the pleasure he took to throw out newly purchased crockery hearing it crashing on the street below to the encouragement of a neighboring crowd. However, there is no reference to any newly born siblings, of which Goethe would have a fair amount, five in fact, of whom only a sister would reach adulthood the rest succumbing as toddlers, not unusual at the time, even among wealthy families. Could this be something that Freud made up, or did he know more than Goethe did?

The first part of his autobiography relates his childhood up to the age of fifteen, when he was quite accomplished with a beautiful girlfriend - a Gretchen as a matter of fact! I must admit to a certain disappointment that these much appraised accounts do not reveal more. They are mostly written from the perspective of the mature man, not from the view of the child itself, and thus makes the account more factual than it has to be. But of course the attitude as to how view childhood has changed in the two hundred odd years which have passed since it was written. Still one reads with some excitement the opportunity to get an eye-witness view of life in the middle of the 18th century, and Goethe's autobiography, for all its faults, maybe one of the best sources after all for something that generates a strong curiosity. The impression it gives is that of a Watteau painting or the graceful forms of porcelain from Meissen. One thinks of the rather insipid images of rococo with shepherds and lambs with pink ribbons.

There are two major events in Frankfurt during Goethe's childhood. The first is connected to the Seven Year Wars with French troops billeted in the city. The Goethe family hosts a French count and commandant, whose presence is greatly appreciated by the mother and the children, but is resented by the father, who in an outburst directed to their guest, incurs the deep displeasure of the latter and is consequently threatened with imprisonment or worse, but through the intervention of an intermediary the tense situation is defused. This French episode, which involves the count hiring painters to paint custom

made pictures to his instructions, makes Goethe learn French, a process much abetted by becoming a regular visitor to a French theatre through the acquaintance with a boy whose mother is an actress. The interest in the theatre also inspires Goethe to try his hands at writing a play hoping to have it performed. His interest in fabulation was awakened early, and in his autobiography he includes a story of a hidden garden he wrote down as a child.

The other great event is the coronation of the German Roman Emperor, when the cream of the German lands arrive in great splendor to the city, including the Queen Maria Theresia whose husband was so honored in 1764. Goethe spends a lot of time describing the concomitant festivities which must have accorded much public enjoyment. The affectionate relationship between the consort (and emperor) Francis I and Maria Theresia, which resulted in sixteen children, is repeatedly commented upon.

Goethe had a flair for languages and one surmises that many of his ventures are not even recorded being considered too obvious, such that of Latin and (probably) Greek. The child was fascinated by 'Judendeutsch' by which he must mean yiddish and prevailed upon his father to get him a tutor to teach him Hebrew so he could really understand what was going on in the Bible, then and much later, being the main source of stories available in homes. His prowess as a poet was bound to spread. He renewed contact with an old friend by name of Phylas, whose parents did not get well on with his own, and the latter recalled how he had read out some of Goethe's poems to some friends, who refused to believe that it could have been done by him. Goethe was incited by his friend to prove his mettle. Initially reluctant he agreed, was won over, by producing some on the spot, and was then engaged in a cruel joke directed against a hapless fellow who believed a crush of his being reciprocated. Goethe was engaged in writing faked letters to fan the flames of the poor man. A social life outside the home ensued and it was in that connection he met Gretchen who was the first woman to produce in him that feeling commonly referred to as love. She shamed him into renouncing the cruel game he had been drawn into, and from then on he was bent to attract her attentions. There was a temporary break with his new found friends due to the rupture in his assignment, but this was made up by engaging him as a poet for special occasions such as weddings and funerals, when his efforts could be remunerated and expected to be shared. His friend Phylas gets himself seriously involved with a young woman and there follows a *menage en quatre* making his relationship with Gretchen more formal. But it all comes to an end after the coronation, the final celebrations of which the four of them have joined. For the first and as it will turn out, final time, the young man is honored by a kiss by his Gretchen. The following morning Goethe is subjected to a serious interrogation by a friend of the family, as it turns out that he has gotten into bad company and the family friend is bent on finding out exactly how much Goethe himself was implicated. Goethe is careful not to spill the beans and reveal the names of his friends for fear of having them implicated. As well And with that the first part of the autobiography ends. Gretchen and her friends are made to leave the city, and he would lose all contact with them. What it was all about is not revealed.

In addition to the regular account there are words of wisdom presented by the older man. Such that fathers are eager to see their sons accomplish what they were denied, and thus providing them with a second life. Goethe also makes fun of the potential we all seem to discern in babies close to us, and the concomitant expectations those generate,

which if they would come true, would give us nothing but geniuses. When it comes to his religious studies he remarks that there is a distinction between *Glaube* and *Überzeugung* (faith versus conviction). Once the former is lost it cannot, unlike the latter, be regained. One rather remarkable feature of his early years was how he so easily found mentors, distinguished men who seemed more interested in him and eager to earn his approval, than they were as regards their own children. They all had ambitions for him, contradictory though, so of course he was left to follow his own inclination. It seems to testify, as far as it testifies to anything, to the great intelligence he must have displayed at an early age. To be honest, intelligence seems with Goethe to have been more pronounced than artistic mastery. As an artist he was more cerebral than passionate, more conscious than subconscious. After all a man of the Enlightenment rather than its reaction.

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