

Goethes Laufbahn als Schriftsteller

Th. Mann

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his is a short essay written in 1932 and thus clearly on the occasion of the centennial of Goethe's death on March 22 1832. It is to be thought of as a 'Gelegenheitsleistung' and as such it is rather trivial. One learns little, and much of what one learns is already to be had from Eckermann's conversations. Mann can do better, clearly he was not inspired, and that is the point of the exercise, to perform without inspiration at a particular moment. As an athletic feat it can be lauded, but as a permanent contribution it adds little if nothing. Yet of course it is no worse than many other similar pieces which are being published in collections and anthologies.

Goethe met with spectacular literary success early on in his life. The success was somewhat sullied by what it supposedly provoked - an epidemic of suicides - which does not seem to have bothered Goethe much. Such early success, never to be repeated, at least not in his life time, is not a very fortunate thing in the writing career of a young man. Goethe, however, was able to weather it, remarking that whenever such talent is displayed to the public, it seems to it that it will not be repeated. Goethe was not a nice guy. In many ways he was conservative and anti-democratic and had a high opinion of himself, and as such he was often branded as an egotist. But, he points out, artistic creation springs from an egotistical source. As an old man he was reluctant to encourage younger poets and writers. Many wrote to him and he ignored them, remarking that most letters addressed to him were for the sole satisfaction of the sender, and in those cases, as opposed to those which contained demands of various forms, he felt no obligation to reply. One young hopeful poet having sent him a collection of his endeavors, were regaled with an answer that he had leafed through his booklet, but as you with the case of cholera must protect yourself from 'Unpotenzen'. How would the young man feel having such a response, Mann wonders¹.

Goethe died on March 22. When told about the date he remarked that it meant spring and thus that it would help him to rally. It did not, he died a few hours later, writing in the air, according to Mann. What a fitting way in which to end a life in writing.

¹ What does 'Unpotenzen' mean? Googling I am asked whether I really mean 'Potenzen'. Insisting I am directly led to a quote by Goethe in a letter to Zelter: *Von den modernsten deutschen Dichter kommt mir Wunderliches zu; "Gedichte" von Gustav Pfizer wurden mir diese Tage zugeschickt, ich las hin und da in dem halbaufgeschnittene Bändchen. Der Dichter scheint mir ein wirkliches Talent zu haben und ein guter Mensch zu sein. Aber es war[d] mir im Lesen gleich zu armselig zumut, und ich legte das Büchlein eilig weg, da man sich bei Eindringen der Cholera vor allen deprimerenden Unpotenzen strengsten hüten soll.* Pfizer (1807-90) seems to have had a distinguished career as a poet an editor and publicist and also as a teacher at a Gymnasium in Stuttgart **February 14, 2105**

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