

# Dichtung und Wahrheit

## *Zweiter Teil*

*J.W.Goethe*

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The first part of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* concerns Goethe's childhood. The second part naturally takes off where the first ended with the forceful split up of the gang in which the young Goethe haplessly had become involved with, while his innocence had nevertheless been established by the subsequent investigation recorded at the end of the previous part. He naturally worried about his girlfriend Gretchen, and is relieved to learn from his tutor that she too was cleared of all suspicion. He also, to his dismay, learns about a document she had signed concerning her relation to Goethe, and in which she confesses that she only thought of him as a child and entertained no emotions other than those appropriate towards a younger brother. Goethe is cut to his quick, mortally offended, what right had she, only a year or so older than himself, to take such a superior position in relation to him? He is determined to excise her completely from his mind and sever all lingering affection towards her, a task which we all know is not to be accomplished by will alone. There are no love affairs in the second part, apart from a few flirtations. One, rather serious in Leipzig, which ends because of Goethe's own willful and destructive behavior towards her, which eventually wears her out, and by the time he gets to have second thoughts and try to reclaim what he has so wantonly cast away and lost, it is of course too late. In Strasbourg he takes dancing lessons, dancing being a social skill he has so far neglected, (although his earnest and serious father had not been above imparting that rather vulgar skill as well to his progeny) and as usual he is an excellent student earning the approval not only of his master, but also the attention of his two young beautiful daughters eager to assist in his instruction, as well as being entertained by him. He is mostly interested in the younger one, but her affection seems to be already claimed, while the older one, he learns to his embarrassment has designs on him. It all comes out in the open when the services of a card-reading lady are sought, the bleak prospects of the older sister are confirmed by the fortune teller and she breaks down, and it all ends by they taking tearful leaves of him, embracing him, covering his face with kisses, and Goethe flees the scene, determined never to return. And after all he has learned to dance anyway. The final instance seems to be to a visit to an Alsatian village, where a friend of his takes him to visit the parson and his family, because they seem to be replica of the family described by Oliver Goldsmith in his 'the Vicar of Wakefield' a book enjoying quite a renown at the time, made vivid to him through a translation dramatically recited by his newly acquired friend Herder. The visit involves a couple of ruses. Goethe arrives dressed as a pauper, supposed to be a poor student of theology. This is part of the tradition of traveling incognito, often resorted to by kings, with the object of being known and appreciated by ones intrinsic human qualities, not by ones social standing. Goethe remarks . . . ; *daß aber ein junger Mensch ohne Bedeutung und Namen sich einfallen läßt, aus dem Vergnügen zu ziehen,*

*möchte mancher für einen unverzeihlichen Hochmut auslegen* and makes the excuses of youth and his pleasure in playful dressing up, encouraged even by his father. The family is indeed charming, and at the dinner in the evening he displays all his charm of telling anecdotes but the next morning he is overcome with remorse of presenting such a pitiful appearance to especially the younger sister. He leaves in a hurry on his horse, with the intention of changing his attire back home in Strasbourg and return back to the family in the evening. But then, his pace having slowed down, a better idea strikes him. At a nearby inn he has previously caught sight of a young man, the son of the landlord, of the same build as himself, and he returns and is able to persuade the young man, in fact a friend of the family, to lend him proper clothes. The young man, however, stipulates a condition that he has to bring a cake to the vicarage, which necessitates a few hours of wait before it is ready to be delivered. On the way he meets the older sister along with his companion, he panics, will the ruse already be revealed? Then he realizes that they are on different paths, comfortably separated by a brook, and he can pass off as their friend George, by skillfully hiding his face by his hat politely removed in greeting and answering in monosyllables affecting a strange accent. Anyway the ruse is eventually gradually revealed each person in turn to the pleasure of all concerned, and in the end he is allowed to once again regale everyone with his stories. A recollection of the incident is inevitably somewhat tedious, being third or fourth hand, as well as appearing to the reader somewhat pointless. But it ties up nicely with a remark with which he ends his second part, to the effect that *Schreiben ist ein Mißbrauch der Sprache, stille für sich zu lesen ein trauriges Surrogat der Rede*. It is a confirmation of the fact that the unsurpassed method of communication is the personal conversation, the encounter face to face, in which the personality of the speaker adds lustre and meaning to a text, which on the printed page is but dumb and stiff. Goethe was no formalist, his disdain for pedantic study and mechanical inquiry, his impatience with philosophy and mere theory, all point to his main concern with vital, throbbing reality, that would guide and inspire him all his life. Thus his writings may be seen as the mere shadows of his thought, whose real manifestation was to be had in his personal delivery. He adds a reflection on his inheritance. From his father he may have inherited the logic of lucid deliverance, but from his mother he has received the gift of imagination, the ability to endow ideas with a pleasing and exciting form. Of course this has served him in well in society, but the suggestion that he was born to be a 'Volksredner' has alarmed him because if so he had chosen the wrong vocation. And of course had he chosen to be one, he would no doubt have glowed brilliantly in his time, but been neglected and forgotten by posterity.

As noted above, the second part concerns his late teens, his adolescence, in which he appears quite accomplished and mature, yet not without the innocence that is the privilege of immaturity. The sense of a wonderful life ahead of him is powerfully conveyed, although not entirely unclouded, but the temporary setbacks only emphasizing the underlying vitality. One may discern two phases, with a temporary interlude back home in Frankfurt. His father wishes him to study the law, while his desire is for literature and history. He travels to Leipzig, introduced to the professor Böhm and his sickly wife. Böhm discourages strongly his ambitions, which he finds frivolous, and learns with horror his intention to study with Gellert. But wisely he follows his own head, although putting in time attending

lectures on law. But basically he has a good and carefree time away from the restrictions at home, spending much of it cavorting with friends in taverns. Not much of what is actually going on is conveyed, the actual being of no enduring interest. Some characters, however, are brought forward in his account, as having a particular influence of him. One such is Behrisch, some ten years older than Goethe, who is employed as a tutor of a nobleman's son. He is eventually sacked, and replaced by someone warned to associate with Goethe, and as a consequence intrigued to seek out his acquaintance. Behrisch, in many ways a ridiculous character unfit for any serious accomplishment, nevertheless is able by virtue of his more advanced age, to influence taste and impart a certain amount of cynicism. He is cited by the saying '...; *die wahre Erfahrung sei ganz eigentlich, wenn man erfahre, wie ein Erfahrner die Erfahrung erfahrend erfahren müsse*. What to make of it? Goethe seeks the advice of a friend, who shakes his head, speaks about mere words *Da sieht man, wie es mit Worten geht, die nur einmal ausgesprochen sind! Diese da klingen so neckisch, ja so albern, daß es fast unmöglich scheinen dürfte, einen vernünftigen Sinn hineinzulegen; und ließe sich vielleicht ein Versuch machen..* And he suggests that a plausible interpretation might be one that a true experience is one you would prefer to have had. Something that does make a lot of sense actually, although it might not have been what Behrisch had in mind, as far as he had anything at all.

Goethe leaves Leipzig without, to the dismay of his father, having anything to show for it. As noted he has not been inactive, he has attended many lectures and developed an interest in drawing and art, which would never leave him. This interest in drawing does of course predate his sojourn in Leipzig, in fact it is something his father has always encouraged and they have both ventured out together on expeditions. He and some friends have sought out an artisan Oeser, who has given them instruction. He has realized that he lacks the real knack, but taken some comfort in that his endeavors to learn has at least developed his taste and sharpened his critical abilities, something he also brings forth in his conversations with Eckermann. In secret he undertakes a trip to Dresden in order to savor the art galleries. His father has instilled in him a distaste for inns and he manages to arrange to stay with a friend of a room-mate, namely an elderly shoemaker with a wife, whose correspondence with the former has been a source of delight also to Goethe. One should not forget that in those days the reception of a letter was an event to be shared. He finds the shoemaker very charming, but wearies of his professions of happiness and contentment, which becomes morally intrusive. The artwork in the city, makes a deep impression on him and he returns to it repeatedly, once on the first evening being delighted by the appearance of the home of his humble hosts, just like a painting he has seen and admired. This teaches him that artists provide new perspectives from which to view the world.

The life of Goethe, superficially so sunny and uncomplicated, to whom everything seem to come without effort, be it trivial (as learning to play card, an activity his father had warned him about, but which the wife of Böhm had encouraged as a socially useful thing) or significant, is nevertheless not unmarred. In Leipzig he develops certain hypochondrial tendencies, believing himself to be close to death at times. He does develop some afflictions, but with his basic physical vitality they prove no match to his underlying health. They do however persist returning to Frankfurt. There is a sore throat and a tumor of the neck

being excised. There is a slow but steady period of recovery with which his father shows impatience. In his absence, his father has focused his didactic attentions on his sister, much to her regret as it confines her to home, and the companionship of before is being revived, as she naturally looks for an ally. He consents eventually to go to Strasbourg and study law, the departure hastened by getting into a quarrel with his father about the decorations at home and the outlay of their house, suggesting practical improvements which sends his father into a rage.

During his brief spell at home he has occasion to read through the letters he had written to his family from Leipzig. He thinks this is a useful exercise as it gives you an opportunity to see yourself objectively. The letters have been collected by his father, who has not been able to resist making corrections of spelling and grammar, and put into a binder. Goethe is somewhat aghast at his immaturity, but is mostly intrigued by a transformation in writing. The early letters are written in a slovenly hand, but then suddenly the handwriting improves dramatically. At first he is at loss as how to explain this, but then he realizes that his professor Gellert, whose teaching on literature he attended on the sly, impressed on his students that the most important thing was a good hand, a good style would naturally ensue from this. I would say that this is if anything an example of oldfashioned pedagogy, in which most modern pedagogues would find nothing commendable, yet in its apparent absurdity it nevertheless embodies a profound truth. Pedagogical theories are just like fashions subjected to cyclical reevaluations, and what is outdated at one time is bound to be hailed as new and revolutionary next time around. Goethe also notes, not without satisfaction, that his letters in French and English, although not free from blunders, display an easy flow,

Alsace is of course French, as is Lorraine above, a legacy of the Thirty Years War, but German is the language of intercourse (although his dealings with the dancing master seem to have been conducted in French). The trip from Frankfurt to Strasbourg is summarized in the brief comment of traveling in a modern coach. The Goethe family was not short of money. He finds nice quarters right away and settles down promptly. He is told that the study of law in Strasbourg is different from many German universities, and Goethe did pick up some law at Leipzig, what they are concerned with is the practical, laws as they are presented today and which are to be committed to memory. The study of how laws have originated and their development over time and their relation to society historically and philosophically is a study that can occupy you for a life time. Goethe is housed in a pension, in which he comes in contact with many other students. Of the medical students he remarks that those are the only ones who speak about their subject even when not studying it, because it is such a varied and important one, which seems to fascinate him. Goethe has a few weaknesses of which he tries to cure himself. One is that of vertigo, of feeling dizzy when confronted with heights, another is a sensitivity to noise, and a final one is nausea caused by disgusting things. His cure is very modern and in accordance with contemporary cognitive therapy, namely that by over exposure. The Strasbourg cathedral fascinates him from the first, and he starts his stay in Strasbourg by climbing the tower and savoring the view of the surrounding countryside. Later on he climbs to the very top, remains there for a quarter of an hour and then walks out in the open air, standing on a narrow ledge, taking in the view. Gradually he frees himself of his handicap, and remarks

how much use he has had of its shedding in later life, be it during geological excursions or viewing at close quarter architectural details on ancient buildings. His aversion to noise is likewise cured by exposing himself to it in the streets, and as to his nausea, anatomical dissections do the trick, as well as being very instructive. How much is he not able to pack into a day? As he remarks there is always enough time to do worthwhile things.

*Was einer in der Jugend wünscht hat, hat er im Alter genug!*. This is an old German saying, counterexamples to which it obviously is very easy to exhibit. Still, Goethe explains, it has some truth to it. The gist of which is that an individual has certain natural talents, and his wishes are but premonitions of those projected externally into the future. As our natural talents are normally developed, it gives the impression that our wishes are being fulfilled. In the end we will indeed have our fill. This being only one example of many of the kind of philosophical digressions Goethe allows himself as an author. The philosophy of Goethe is never abstract, when he in his studies encountered a preliminary form of formal logic he is aghast, all what it could do was to unbalance his confidence in his innate powers or reasoning, his philosophy is in the nature of human maxims with direct applications.

One important acquaintance he gets to know in Strasbourg is Herder. The first individual of note he meets in his life. Herder is a very young man, but of course five years older than Goethe, and at that age five years make a lot of difference. To receive praise for your accomplishments in a familiar circle is easy, as Goethe has pleasantly found out, but to earn the approval of an exacting and external judge, is something quite different. Goethe is up for some harsh encounters, but he has the sense to appreciate them. Herder throws everything Goethe so far has cherished into doubt, is critical of his literary efforts, rejects his admiration of Ovid, in short cuts him down to size. But nevertheless the interchanges with Herder are most stimulating as it forces him out of the easy complacency in which he has grown up and feels so comfortable in. He gets to read Herder's essay on the emergence of language, intended by the author to win a prize. Herder opposes the view that as man is of divine origin, so is language, and instead argues that language is something man has been able to acquire by himself. Goethe is fascinated, but not yet mature enough nor knowledgeable enough to comment instructively and insightfully on. Herder is suffering from a serious eye-ailment, the reason for his sojourn in Strasbourg. His tear ducts are obstructed causing chronic inflammations and he seeks out an operation to have alternate canals opened. The operation is very painful, but he bears it well, only to find out that in the end it does not succeed. In his dealings with Goethe, Herder is very sarcastic, even the most inconsequential of services asked are spiced with some sarcastic wit at the expense of the recipient, such as a wordplay on his name involving 'Gott' and 'Kote' (filth). Goethe is offended. Your name is not like a piece of garment you can remove and put on at will, it is more like your skin, he complains to the reader. Furthermore when Goethe lends him money he only much later gets back, without any apology or acknowledgment of thanks. Goethe embarks on a discussion of three different kinds of ingratitude. The first is just due to forgetfulness, there is in the day so many occasions to incur gratitude that a man would be permanently stuck in his tracks, would he pay heed to them all. Then there are people who are ungrateful due to spite, but most interestingly certain remarkable individuals are entitled to despise gratitude. He refers to people of exceptional standing, who due to the misfortune of a humble birth, are forced to rely on the kindness of others

in order to realize what is rightful theirs. Why should they be grateful, when they only receive earthly favors, which are their due anyway, but give back something of infinitely much more worth. Herder apparently belongs to this exclusive creed.

Finally there is, just prior to the visit to the 'Wakefield' family, an extended excursion into the backwoods of Alsace and Lorraine. Goethe and his companions on horseback are doing a sightseeing tour, well ahead of the mass phenomena it would eventually turn into. Goethe shows great sensitivity to the beauty of the scenery which he paints vividly in words, but he is not indifferent to the more practical aspects of the land. They visit strip-mined hills, in additions to old castles and towns, with hot sulphur sources and coal seams displayed. When traveling, he remarks, it is important to keep track of where rivers and brooks flow, so as to get a sense of the typography of the land. This mixture of the purely aesthetic and the practical is a signum of Goethe, and the key to his greatness and his ability to fascinate almost two centuries after his death. The world he paints of his youth is in truth a sunny world of a pastoral countryside mixed with unsullied wilderness, in the nature of a rococo pastiche. Anyone who holds a fascination of the 18th century as the first modern century is bound to be delighted by the world he choses to evoke.

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