

# Dichtung und Wahrheit

*Dritter Teil*

*J.W.Goethe*

October 13–26, 2015

The third part of Goethe's memoirs are a bit tedious. Not much happens in a sense, and most of it is taken up by philosophical reactions and encounters with people whom he befriended or in other ways exerted a significant influence on him.

We encounter him at the tail end of his sojourn in Strasbourg which he wants, or maybe his father wants, to cap off by a disputation in law. He writes a thesis, but apparently it is not deemed worthy for a doctorate, but defended anyway for a less elevated degree. Studies does not seem to have engaged him unduly, his social life seems to have been very extensive, on the other hand he probably belonged to that charmed circle of people, who do their work when nobody is watching, quickly and efficiently. Goethe has also become involved with a young woman in a setting that delighted him so much because it reminded him strongly of the fashionable Goldsmith novel 'The Vicar at Wakefield'. She seems to have been much more involved than was he. In fact his involvement appears to have been more of a case of absent-mindedness. The whole thing is broken off, he has simply lost interest and there was never any deeper emotional involvement on his part anyway. He misses though their exchange of letters, and he gets a very bad conscience from having deceived her, but he does not in the end allow this to impend on his vigorous pursuit of life, for which he has an insatiable appetite. He remarks that the healthy youth easily recovers from sickness and slights, and that riding eventually replaced lonely dark-spirited and aimless walks in woods and along rivers. And then a new passion presents itself to him, namely skating. What could be more invigorating than to glide along a early frosty morning in the autumn. Such past-times were still possible in the 18th century where he dwelled. Or as he writes.

*Schon von dem Gefühle der Gesundheit froh,  
Hab ich, weit hinab, weiß an dem Gestade gemacht  
Den bedeckenden Kristall. Wie erhellt des Winters werdener Tag  
Sanft den See! Glänzenden Reif, Sternen gleich,  
Streute die Nacht über ihn aus!*

He notes that the word 'Schlittschuen' has nothing to do with 'schlitten' but with 'schritten'<sup>1</sup> you glide along.

Goethe leads a very active social life and wherever he shows up he does not fail to make a most charming impression. He is also perpetually curious and speculative, as illustrated by an anecdote relating to the Strasbourg cathedral, as we all know equipped with only one tower. This intrigued him and he had indulged in some fanciful speculations

---

<sup>1</sup> Just as in Swedish 'skridsko'

as to what the original plans may have been, and giving vent to them at a party he was approached by a man, who asked him from whom he had learned this. Goethe replied the tower itself, and learned that the man was the janitor in charge of the archive in which the original plans were kept and which confirmed Goethe's speculations. He was invited to come and inspect and availed himself of the first opportunity to do so, thereby regretting that he had not learned of this before he had by his own laborious efforts divined it.

There are friends, most of them a bit older and more mature. Of those maybe Merck<sup>2</sup> being the most important, in fact Goethe writes *Dieser eigne Mann, der auf mein Leben den größten Einfluß gehabt..* and proceeds to describe him as tall and thin with a pointed nose, and whose light-blue gaze had something of the tiger in it. Another one on which he dwells is Klinger, whose handsome appearance and steadiness of character so impresses the young Goethe that an instant friendship ensues. Klinger<sup>3</sup> is associated with the doctrine that anything that stems from nature is good, with the not necessary conclusion that everything that comes from Man is bad. Other friends were the brothers Jacobi<sup>4</sup> he met in Cologne, and as already noted like many others somewhat older and more mature serving as mentors,

As social events one may bring up the extended visit to the family La Roche (Geheimerrat), by the castle Ehrenbreitstein by the Rhine, replete with a delightful daughter by name of Maximiliane, and a wonderful view of the rapidly moving river. La Roche who had been an orphan had been taken under the wings of a local count, and made to act as a regular secretary, answering letters, writing fair copies of documents and work out dispatches. This lasted many years, and when the child had become old enough to really master the tasks he had been given to perform it transpired that all those letters and carefully sealed dispatches had never been sent but saved in a large drawer. During the visit he was later joined by his friend Merck (the more the merrier) and there was never any want of entertainment, they enjoyed all kinds of excursions in the neighborhood, the castle, the ferries across the river, all were sources of delight. He remarked that nothing is more pleasant easing out of an old engagement, not yet fully spent, while at the same time seeing another one taking form. Just as one by sunset looks at the rising full Moon and enjoys the spectacle of both celestial bodies. He clearly he had a lot of romantic entanglements and maybe somewhat ruefully admits that 'First Love', as it is said, and justly so as he adds, is the only Love, because already during the subsequent one its highest forms are lost, because the sense of the eternal and infinite, that lifts it up from the commonplace, is destroyed as it now appears ephemeral as everything else that is recurrent. In fact it brings into focus the separation between the sensuous and the moral (*des Sinnlichen vom Sittlichen*) which in the overly cultivated world makes a split between desire and love.

Delightful as his life must have been, he does not dwell on it chronologically during this period, but spends a lot of time reflecting, philosophizing and strews around a lot of bon-mots.

---

<sup>2</sup> Johann Heinrich 1741-91. Man of letters as well as dabbling in paleontology, yet not without some merit, ended up committing suicide as a consequence of a depression brought on by severe physical decline.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Maximilian 1752-31. Writer and dramatist, known for the expression 'Sturm und Drang' as a title for one of his dramas.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Heinrich 1743-19 and Johann Georg 1740-14

*Ein Publikum, das immer nur die Urteile alter Männer hört, wird gar zu leicht altklug, und nichts ist unzulänglicher als ein reifes Urteil, von einem unreifen Geiste aufgenommen.* Is one example. What to make of it? That a little learning is worse than none at all? That learning that does not stem from a real engagement is useless and sterile? Or *Die höchste Aufgabe einer jeden Kunst ist, durch den Schein die Täuschung einer höheren Wirklichkeit zu geben. Ein falsches Bestreben aber ist, den Schein so lange zu verwirklichen, bis endlich nur ein gemeines Wirkliche übrigbleibt..*

There are of course a lot of comments on art and its practice, especially at this time the theatre. Success on the stage is more a case of the personality of the actors than the worth of the piece. In particular this applies to comedy, and humor should always relate to the common denominator of the audience. And even the lightest and most innocent of comedies relies on its success by the glee it can provoke among the spectators. Goethe continues by remarking that a piece of Art may very well have moral consequences, but he claims it is a mistake to expect, let alone demand, that an artist should have moral intentions. That would be to destroy the handiwork.

Shakespeare is more appreciated in Germany than anywhere else, even including England, Goethe claims, He talks about the deep influence Shakespeare has had on him. He became acquainted with him already in Leipzig, through Dodd's 'Beauties of Shakespeare', from which we learn that Goethe must have been versant in English at an early age. Much can be said against such anthologies, Goethe admits, but points out that one should not turn a blind eye to its many merits, because after all most of us are not able to fully appreciate a work in its entirety, and do we not often mark out passages in books, which seem to especially relate to us,. Young people, especially, who lack a solid education, are particularly liable to be excited by brilliant passages. And Goethe recalls fondly his own juvenile excitement being confronted with the great Bard as one of the happiest moments in his youth. Thus he speaks about the excitement when Wielands translation appeared, remarking that the Germans are singularly lucky in having so much of the world literature splendidly and promptly brought into their language. He points out that translation into prose are to be preferred, much as he appreciates rhythm and rhyme, without which poetry is not poetry, the most important part is what survives in prose, because that constitutes the real content, which the brilliant form can as well hide as bring out. In fact he suggests that Homer should be translated into prose, in that way children may not as easily be put off by the verse form, which tends to put a barrier between them and the work. He credits Luther that with his translation of the Bible he did more for the German language than for the Christian religion. No poetic translations of Job or the psalms have done their poetry justice. With Shakespeare he was engaged during his Strasbourg years, joining a Shakespeare society which staged in their entirety, as well as in fragments, pieces of the dramatist, both in translation and in the original.

*Natur in der Kunst zu sehen, war bei mir zu einer Leidenschaft..fast wie Wahnsinn erscheinen mußte.*

And what better way to satisfy this passion than to continue to look at the excellent Dutch paintings accessible to him at various galleries. One does get the impression that in the case of art galleries inspection was by appointment only. Looking at paintings inspires him to make his own efforts at still-life and similar things, not without eliciting

some praise, being so more sincere when accompanied by surprise. This encouraged him to further attempts, but he points out that he fell into the trap that most dilettantes do, namely starting out to do the most difficult, and soon found himself stuck with challenges beyond his technical skill. To draw was in the case of Goethe a mostly unreciprocated love, although he was not devoid of talent and dedication.

Goethe eventually comes in contact with Spinoza, the only philosopher who seems to have made a deeper impression on him. He is in particular taken by his ethics and finds it comforting. He is in particular impressed by his unselfishness, as expressed by his saying, that who loves God in the right way, may not assume that God loves him in return. Unselfishness strikes him as the highest virtue, at least in love and friendship, and one he strives to make his maxim. The leveling tranquility of Spinoza contrasted against his own excited strivings, his mathematical methods were the opposite of his own poetical and sensuous ways of representation. Yet as we may see, religion is not any great concern to him. On the perennial controversy between Knowledge and Belief, Goethe remarks that when it comes to Belief the important thing is that one believes, not what one believes, the latter is a matter of complete indifference. Belief is a matter of feeling a total security as to the present as well as the future, which stems from the trust in a transcendent being, all powerful and inscrutable, and what matters is the unshakeable trust, not in what that being really is. And Belief is so great and holy that everyone committed to it is ready to sacrifice to the extent of his abilities, his emotions, reasons and power of imagination, whatever it takes. But Knowing is the opposite. It is not a matter of knowing itself but what one knows and how much one knows. Thus over knowledge you can fight, while it allows itself to be confirmed, extended and if necessary contradicted. It starts from the particular, is without limit, can never be summarized and is always opposed to Belief. For that reason he goes on, half truths may when lyrically presented entertain, but in real life merely confuse.

What intrigues Goethe a lot is the unification of the past with the present. The presence of the past in the moment has something spectral about it. Goethe claims that much of his poetic work actually centers around this phenomenon. He brings as one example the ruins of the Kölnerdom, which makes him think of Strasbourg, which had induced the same special emotion.

Goethe had his first encounter of having some ideas of his stolen. He speaks about a certain Wagner, not without talent, who belonged to his entourage, first in Strasbourg then in Frankfurt. Admittedly he was an ambitious young man, something which had rather endeared him to them, and once he had revealed some sketches relating to 'Faust', in particular about Gretchen, and Wagner had promptly taken that idea and used it for a tragedy of his own. This would turn out to be far from an isolated occurrence, but one to which he had to resign himself in the course of his life, but due to his own garrulousness, he admitted that he really did not have anyone to blame but himself.

As to his actual writings and how they came about, matters for which the reader may entertain the keenest curiosity, he refers to how he started to write 'Götz von Berlichingen' after some initial historical research. How easy it was, how he simply sat down one morning without any plan, nor even a sketch of one. Reading it aloud in the evening he was praised yet his audience doubted that he would be able to sustain the creative effort. This only

provoked him and he continued the next day, and the day after, and soon he was on his course, writing without ever looking right or left and six weeks later he had the satisfaction of seeing a completed ms stitched together (the stitching he considers very important, serving the same function as the frame does for a picture). He sent it away for people to read and comment. Merck praised it predictably but Herder did not receive it kindly but made some sarcastic comments and called him names, but he refused to let himself be cast down by it, realizing that there was no useful advice to be had from friends and that he had to fall back on his own resources, and he went about a revision when enough time had lapsed for him to be able to look at it with the unbiased eyes of an outsider. He then realized that in his effort to do without the recommended unit of time and place, he had also, what is far more important to avoid, compromised on the higher unity. He realized that the first acts could do, those when he had abandoned himself to his impulse and unfettered imagination, but the latter ones had to be revised, as he had subconsciously fallen in love with the major female character - Adelaide, and given her too much attention. Thus he realized that he had to put the demands of the artist above the inclinations of the man, no matter how passionately felt.

The pleasure of life is founded on the regular recurrence of externalia, such as the change of day and night and the succession of seasons. Goethe points out, and continues. The greatest happiness is to be found in our openness to and the subsequent embracement of those regular changes, because once they seem to us irksome, our joy of life ebbs away and we may end up like the poor Englishman who hanged himself being weary of the daily rituals of dressing and undressing. Because that is but a symptom of closing off the outside world and become absorbed in your own. And any man not entirely caught within himself cannot help but notice that even moral standards undergo changes such as that of the seasons, and we are as unable to stop this process as we are to restrain the movements of the Sun, the Moon and the stars. But what bothers the sensitive youth the most is the unceasing return of his faults. But as we grow older we realize that concomitant with the developments of our virtues, there is a corresponding one of our vices, as the latter stems from the former as being their common root. While our pursuit of virtue is willed and conscious, the recurrence of our faults never ceases to surprise us. Thus the former seldom brings pleasure, while the latter never fails to cause pain. Therein lies the greatest difficulty in self-knowledge, the pain of the contemplation of which easily may lead to paralyzing melancholy, especially in young people inspired by modern English literature, he concludes and elaborates. True poetry shows itself by its ability, as a secular gospel through its manifestation of inner joy and outwards pleasures, to release us from the heavy loads of worries which weigh us down and which everyday life so amply supplies us with. Like an air-ballon be it loaded with ballast nevertheless manages to rise high up in the sky and present us with a birds-eye view. Both the most frivolous and the most serious have the same aim, to moderate both pleasure as well as pain through a spirited form. In his regard the English, in the opinion of Goethe, err too much on the dismal side of life and presents in the original English, as an exemplary example those, according to him, frightful lines.

*The old Age and Experience, hand in hand,  
Lead him to death, and make him understand,*

*After a search so painful and so long,  
That all his life he has been in the wrong.*

In such a climate no wonder that 'Werther' had such an impact, Goethe explains, and admits that it resonated with the morbid delusions of the prevalent generation of youth, and points out that especially the English were well acquainted with it, and quotes, once more in the original English some lines written before the appearance of 'Werther'

*To griefs congenial prone,  
More wounds than nature gave he knew,  
While misery's form his fancy drew,  
In dark ideal hues and horrors not its own.*

Suicide is of course an important topic, and intimately related as we all know to 'Werther'. Goethe refers to Montesquieu who claims that great Men have the right to end their lives whenever they deem it fit, as they should be entitled to fashion to their liking the fifth tragic act of their lives. Goethe agrees, that such men should not be censored for their acts, different it is for other people whose desire to end their lives do not come from any worthy purpose, but simply out of ennui not engaging in life seriously. Believe me, he says, I have myself been in that predicament, and he starts to elaborate. Suicide is such an unnatural act he points out going counter to all natural impulses, so in order to commit it, you need to rely on external mechanical means, and he goes through a list, recommending fire-arms as the most efficient, involving a minimum of effort. Those who like to prolong the departure may use poison or cut open their veins. He does not recommend hanging, because it is not honorable, except possibly in England, where it is so common that there is less stigma attached to it. But the one suicide that impresses him the most was that of the Emperor Otho, whose campaigns had gone astray and in order to save lives and spare the empire, he decided to end it all. In the evening he gives a big party, everybody is happy and in good cheer. In the morning he is found with a dagger in his hand plunged deeply into his heart. This Goethe takes to heart and for some time he has by his bed a dagger, and every night before turning out the light, he holds the dagger into his hand and wonders whether he would have the strength like Otho to bury it into his heart. As he realizes that he is unable to, he decides to laugh his hypochondriac obsessions out of his life and decide to live. This new resolution calls for a poetic expression, but how? Then he hears about the suicide of a distant acquaintance<sup>5</sup> because of a married woman, and having himself been in an irregular situation, neither hot nor cold, with the daughter of the la Roche family, after her marriage and removal to Frankfurt, everything falls into place. Goethe uses the metaphor of a bucket filled with water just about to freeze, give it but the gentlest of shakes, he tells you, and it will instantly turn to ice. He sits down and the book, one presumes, writes itself, and in four weeks it is finished. He reads it aloud to friends and is taken aback that it makes such an impression, and he decides that it is not so much his writing as the contents that affect them. For him it was a matter of turning life into poetry, but for many readers it was instead a matter of turning poetry into life, and the book was subsequently censored for having caused so much injury. To that Goethe

---

<sup>5</sup> Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, 1747-72

replies, that people should only know how close it was never to have seen the light of the day but been disposed of in the heat of fire. In fact shortly after the completion of the ms, he was visited by his friend Merck who had just returned from Petersburg. He proceeded enthusiastically to read aloud to his friend, who after a while curtly announced that it was all well and then left without any further explanation. Goethe was dumbfounded. Was it so bad? Had he erred in subject matter, style and tone? Had there been a fire in the heating oven burning he would have tossed it in right and there. Luckily (or unluckily) there was none. Later on he received an explanation from his friend, who informed him that at the reading he had been so fully preoccupied with his own personal problems, that he had not been able to pay any attention, and consequently had no idea of what it was all about. Merck advises against revision and by a lucky coincidence at the time of his sisters marriage he is asked about a possible submission from the owner of a bookstore in Leipzig. Goethe jumps at the opportunity to possibly make good the losses incurred by 'Götz von Berlichingen'.

As we all know 'Werther' made a splash, and Goethe would be catapulted into literary celebrity, and his life would never be the same again. On the reception of the book, he admits it was immense, but it was all there in the first place, the powder was already distributed in the public, it only took a small match to set it aflame. And of course, just as with his friends, it was the subject matter that was responded to, not the poetic form. Maybe it is too much to expect from the public that they will receive a spirited work in kind, in fact, as he points out, an immense gulf separates the author from his readers, something luckily both parties are generally unaware of, and he had subsequently learned the futility of trying to bridge it, it only leads to embarrassment. The very fact that you have a book will of course raise the expectation that it has a moral mission, but art should not be confused with such didactic ambitions, it only shows what life is, neither praising nor censuring. As to the reviews he could not care less, and indeed that is an attitude an author can easily take when his work is met with commercial success.

About his own writing he notes that they are all the children of solitude, that during the art of creation you are wholly dependent on yourself, left to your own resources. Normally he wrote in the early mornings, but it was not unusual that he also wrote late at night after a party, when wine and vibrant society had elevated his spirits. That he had a natural talent for writing he seems never to have doubted. His powers of retention and visual imagination always stood him in good stead, yet initially before he had developed his own style, he always had to start all over when he wrote.