

# Dichtung und Wahrheit

## *Vierter Teil*

*J.W.Goethe*

April 2-9, 2016

This is the final part of Goethe's recollections of his youth, and apparently put down fairly late in life and in nature of an add-on posthumously published by Eckermann. As a narrative it is a bit disjointed and disorganized, maybe assembled by his literary executioner without having had the benefit of a final editing by the author. This is the usual problem with posthumous publication, it may not reach the public in the form the author would have wished for. Maybe it was not even meant for publication. But the main theme is easily discerned. Goethe, who as a gallant youth has been dallying with girls for years, seems to have finally fallen deeply in love, or at least in love. An affair beyond the charm of the moment and the promise of some constancy. He is now into his 26th year, but the object of his desire is a mere girl, about to turn 17, by name of Lili Schöneman. He meets her at her home where she is performing at the piano in a semi-public event. At the very first meeting he senses an attraction to him in her, and reassured by the encouragement of her mother, inviting him to call again, he eagerly does so promptly, yet careful not to be too prompt. One thing led to another, and soon they were considered more or less engaged. However, the engagement was not looked upon too kindly by the outside world, for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. Especially his sister disapproves of it and takes every opportunity to inform him of the unsuitability of the match. But there are happy days and they seem to enjoy each others company.

Their union is, however, interrupted by a lengthy trip together with friends. In those days when you travelled you took it seriously and were away for a considerable time. It is a 'Bildungsreise' as was to be expected, including stops and audiences at important personages. The most exciting part of the trip is the latter one when they enter Switzerland, and hence it is being referred to as the 'Schweizer Reise'. The youngsters have a very good time in Switzerland, swimming naked in lakes and engaging in other frolics of similar nature. Furthermore Goethe gets to embark on a real hike into the mountains along with an insistent friend eager to be his guide. One gets the impression that Goethe would have preferred to walk alone, to be in more intimate contact with his own impressions and feelings, but being basically social he complies. There are some nontrivial climbing, and also a crossing over snow bridges suspended dangerously over waterfalls. They scale ridges and descend into valleys, and in the process visiting charming villages and being guests at monasteries. The scenery is breathtaking and Goethe tries to catch it by drawing, but he must admit that he is not up to the challenge. Goethe, who always had a love for drawing yet with a clear appreciation of his intrinsic short-comings, characterizes the dilettante as one who tries to do things beyond his capacity, and sometimes even the impossible. The accomplished draughtsman has perfected a technique and knows quite well what he can do, and what is impossible, and acts accordingly. Of course this point of view may be

thought of as rather limiting, does not a genius strive to do the impossible, should we not all be encouraged to try our hands at matters beyond our grasp, and in that way extend it further? Should we not all be dilettantes, at least to some extent? It is one thing, however, to acknowledge a difficulty and to sense the very challenge some tasks may pose, quite another thing to lack discrimination and out of ignorance and innocence attempt what is not feasible.

Now the trip comes to a crisis. His friend wants him to accompany him down to Italy, having scaled the high mountains of Switzerland, Italy beckons ahead, the land of the sun and the south. But Goethe does not budge. He feels in his bones that his fate is elsewhere. It is not yet the time to sample the riches of the south. His friend is very disappointed, but Goethe is set and they transverse the same way they had come, noting that the snow bridges they only a few days earlier had availed themselves of had now melted and crashed into the abyss below, necessitating a wide round-about. Once at home, there had been a campaign to separate Goethe from his beloved one, a campaign that proved itself successful. Why it was so, is not entirely clear to me, but it seems that in addition to external pressures, which they may have been able to withstand, there were also internal friction. Goethe writes that when people become lovers, the past becomes marginal, only a preparation for their union, while the future is theirs. But with Lili, the past was not allowed to be marginal, she had dwelled in it, as well on the attractions she had experienced, something which seems to have enraged his jealousy,

The breaking up with Lili brings up a crisis. A crisis he turns into good use by writing his play 'Egmont'. He notes that while his previous play 'Götz Berlinger' had been written in a straightforward chronological way, with 'Egmont' he right away attacked the central scene, letting others be added in due time and as necessity required. At the time he also befriends the Duke Carl August of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach and his young wife. In fact the couple are of the same age and still only teenager, eight years younger than Goethe. There is some talk that he should enter their service, something that appeals to him as a means of escaping the love affair with Lili that had foundered. His father is not keen on the idea, he feels that his son has been repeatedly socially snubbed by the couple, and that the son instead should head down to Italy. Apparently the father regretted that Goethe had abandoned the descent down to Milano. Goethe gets a promise to be picked up in style in a grand wagon to convey him to Weimar. He takes a solemn farewell of all his friends in Frankfurt, but the wagon never arrives at the arranged time. Goethe is in a bind. He can no longer go out in the city, except in disguise, it would be ridiculous to be seen after such a taking of a leave. Instead he spends his time locked up at home, writing furiously on his play. His parents shake their heads, it is a clear case of being made a spectacle of by the Duke and Duchess. His father presses on his plans to go to Italy, and eventually Goethe relents, taking a detour via Heidelberg, where he is heartily welcomed by an older woman friend, who has all kinds of plans for him. But belatedly he is informed about the mishap, the man to pick him up had eventually come by Frankfurt only to find Goethe gone, had then pursued him to Heidelberg with the renewed offer, which Goethe had been all too anxious to accept, in spite of the protestations of his female protector. And so eventually he did set out for Weimar, ending his days of carefree youth, and the rest is history, including the much postponed trip to Italy - 'Italienische Reise'.

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