

## Goethe schtirbt

*Th. Bernard*

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This is a collection of four short pieces, the most interesting one being that of the title, in which we become privy to the dying Goethe on March 22. Goethe has only one wish, namely to meet Wittgenstein. He is very intrigued by him and his *Das Zweifelnden und das Nichtzweifelden*, and wants to send one of his attendants in his entourage to go to Cambridge with his personal invitation and bring him back. With a man like Wittgenstein you simply do not send him a message by telegraph, you want to bring him personally, having him escorted to Weimar. People around Goethe do not approve of it, in particular Eckermann, who does everything in his power to prevent it, only to find himself dismissed by the great man as a stupid simpleton. Now it turns out that when Wittgenstein is to be brought to Goethe, he is already dead, and the the party has to return empty-handed, uncertain whether to inform Goethe or not. What disastrous effect can it have on the dying old man? Anyway Goethe dies and those responsible see to it that his last words are not relayed to the world at large as *mehr nicht* with a nod to Wittgenstein's *nicht* but as *mehr licht*. This nonsensical mixture of different epochs in Western history has an undeniable charm. In a way the great spirits of our age, or those we so honor, supposedly transcend the times in which they accidentally have found themselves living in. Why should not Goethe and Wittgenstein meet after all? Wittgenstein obviously knew about Goethe in real life, while Goethe never had any inkling of Wittgenstein, without any ill effects one hasten to add. What is presented is physically impossible and hence in a sense nonsensical, on the other hand the author makes it come out as the most natural thing in the world. Absurdities happen in dreams, and we treasure them, at times at least, and fictions are but dreams pretending to be otherwise.

Then there are two stories about the horrors of growing up in unloving families. They have the air of being autobiographical, and as such potentially able to explain the diatribes the author would deliver in his mature years against the country of his birth. But they are not, as we know the tenor of his growing up, with a grandfather who played a very important role in his life, was very different. True his childhood and youth had its share of trauma, and it would get worse, such as an unknown father and possibly being the outcome of a regular rape, still on the whole, his biographical writings indicate something rather different. In the first of the stories, the unidentified narrator flees from his family into the library (where he discovers Montaigne) always being submitted to their contempt and mental tortures accusing him of all kinds of misdeeds against them. In the second the likewise unidentified narrator (not to be confused with the author) recalls his childhood and that of a friend who shared it. How their families regularly took them on walks in the mountains. One always wearing bright red socks and caps in order to stand out and hence be more readily discovered in the case of an accident, the other with bright green ditto, in order to merge with nature so much better. The parents of the narrator always want to find peace and quiet and expect desperately to find it out in the mountains, not

realizing the futility of their quest, as they themselves were the very antidote of peace and quiet and consequently they brought wherever they went their own disturbances. But he was able to break out, while his friend was not and now it is far too late for him. He was imprisoned within their petty world and doomed to respect and honor what he had always hated. Both those stories are written in a repetitive and hence very seductive way, like waves lapping on the shore, drumming in a message by dint of unending repetition, and just as one wave is not the same as any other however similar, his arguments are all the same yet subtly varied.

' The final story tells of his relentless travels in order to escape the country of his upbringing, the intensely hated *sterreich*. He does not escape by going south but to the very north, finding himself in Norway, a country bound to provoke his ire and exasperation. *Oslo ist eine langweilige Stadt und die Menschen dort sind ungeistig, vollkommen uninteressant, wie mglicherweise alle Norweger...*

In short vintage Bernhard published posthumously.

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