GOETHE AS A CRITIC OF THE THEATER

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In his evaluation of dramatists of various countries and periods we find a reflection of Goethe's changing philosophy of life. The young Storm and Stress genius is vigorous in his rejection of the rule-bound French Classicists, while a few decades later the Classicist Goethe censures some of the German Romantics because of their lack of form and adaptability to the stage. He is ever warm, however, in his praise of Shakespeare's depiction of human nature, and Manzoni and Calderón arouse his admiration.

The young Goethe of Storm and Stress days regards himself as the patron of the artist. The task of the critic consists for him merely in receptivity to the emotional impact of the play and sensitivity to its organic growth. The rights of the artist to give individual expression to his rich feeling are fully acknowledged. Every genuine work of art, as well as every healthy product of nature, must be judged individually, without being subject to foreign criteria.¹ There is a form,

die nicht mit Händen gegriffen, die gefühlt sein will. Unser Kopf muss übersehen, was ein ander Kopf fassen kann; unser Herz muss empfinden, was ein andres füllen mag. Das Zusammenwerfen der Regeln gibt keine Ungebundenheit: und wenn ja das Beispiel gefährlich sein sollte, so ist's doch im Grunde besser, ein verworrenes Stück machen als ein kaltes.²

The quotation reveals why Goethe rejects the French tragedy in favor of Shakespeare, although he calls Molière's comedies excellent.³ After coming under the spell of the Shakespearian genius, Goethe writes:

² "which is not palpable, which must be sensed. Our mind must perceive what another mind can comprehend; our heart must feel what may fill another. The casting aside of rules results in no unrestraint; and even if the example might be dangerous, it is fundamentally better to construct a confused play than a cold one." (Translation by the author) "Aus Goethes Brieftasche." 1775. Op. cit., XXXVI, 115.

Shakespeare’s talent is not restricted by alien rules and goals. He could never be reduced to the unity of Sophocles. The Frenchman, on the other hand, attempts to achieve the pure simplicity characteristic of Greek tragedy, but foreign to him. Consequently, the French tragedies appear to Goethe monotonous in their lack of individuality. He cries incensed: “Französchen, was willst du mit der griechischen Rüstung, sie ist dir zu gross und zu schwer!”

Shakespeare’s faithful presentation of nature appealed strongly to young Goethe, who in his Storm and Stress days regarded nature as the basis of art. Ecstatically he cries out: “Natur! Natur! Nichts so Natur als Schakespeare’s Menschen!”

In his review of the new plays presented in Vienna, Goethe complains that there is so much futile prattle about tragi-comic virtue, generosity and tenderness, that healthy human understanding and spontaneous feeling are stifled. Shakespeare’s characters, on the other hand, are not sublime beings, but rather men who stand before us in flesh and blood. Good and evil are found side by side in them, as in life. Goethe says Shakespeare’s theater is a

schöner Raritätenkasten, in dem die Geschichte der Welt vor unsern Augen an dem unsichtbaren Faden der Zeit vorbeiwallt. Seine Plane sind, nach dem gemeinen Stil zu reden, keine Plane, aber seine Stücke drehen sich alle um den geheimn Punkt (den noch kein Philosoph gesehen und bestimmt hat), in dem das Eigentümliche unsers Ichs, die prätendierte Freiheit unsers Willens mit dem notwendigen Gang des Ganzen zusammenstösst.

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4 “I did not hesitate a moment in renouncing the rule-bound theater. The unity of place seemed so confining, the unities of action and time burdensome fetters to our imagination! I leaped into the free air and only then felt truly alive!” (Translation by the author). “Zum Schakespeare’s Tag.” 1771. Op. cit., XXXVI, 4.


6 Ibid., 5.


8 “Zum Schakespeare’s Tag.” 6.

9 “Rezensionen . . .”; 13.

10 “handsome kaleidoscope, in which the history of the world passes before our eyes on the invisible thread of time. His plans are, in the usual vocabulary, no plans at all, but his plays all revolve about the mysterious point (as yet observed
Goethe mentions as the chief difference between the ancient and the modern writer the preoccupation of the former with the conflict between obligation and deed, as opposed to the latter’s stress upon the relationship between will and deed. Real tragedy, he says, always originates in the conflict of will, obligation and deed, but “durch was Sollen wird die Tragödie gross und stark, durch das Wollen schwach und klein.” The drama of Classical antiquity of necessity excluded all human freedom. The modern viewpoint opposes the deterministic philosophy of the ancients, but Shakespeare integrates the ancient and the modern approach: in his plays he attempts to bring will and obligation into harmony, frequently exalting will to oneness with moral obligation.  

However much Goethe praises Shakespeare’s character delineation and development of tragic plot, he suggests that a revision of his plays is necessary before they can be satisfactorily performed. He accuses Shakespeare of not devoting adequate study to the demands of the stage, of writing primarily for the reader, rather than the spectator. While his plays embody the very essence of life, they neglect the theater.

“Shakespeares ganze Verfahrensart findet an der eigentlichen Bühne etwas Widerstrebenes; sein grosses Talent ist das eines Epitomators, und da der Dichter überhaupt als Epitomator der Natur erscheint, so müssen wir auch hier Shakespeares grosses Verdienst anerkennen; nur leugnen wir dabei, und zwar zu seinem Ehren, dass die Bühne ein würdiger Raum für sein Genie gewesen.”

For this reason Goethe calls Shakespeare a poet rather than a dramatist.

While Goethe praises Shakespeare’s convincing portrayal of human nature, he rejects naturalism, urging the dramatist to select and present his subjects in such a way that the members of the audience will never for a moment lose their esthetic detachment.

and determined by no philosopher), in which the unique individuality of our self, the pretended freedom of our will, conflicts with the inexorable course of the universe.” (Translation by the author). “Zum Schäkespeares Tag,” 6 f.


12 “Shakespeare’s whole procedure is in contradiction to the actual stage: his great talent is that of an epitomizer, and since the poet is actually an epitomizer of nature, we must recognize Shakespeare’s great talent even here; we merely deny in this connection, and to be sure to his credit, that the stage was a worthy vehicle for his genius.” (Translation by the author). Ibid., 47.
He demands plays which, like Schiller's *Turandot*, constantly remind the spectator, "dass das ganze theatralische Wesen nur ein Spiel sei, über das er, wenn es ihm ästhetisch und moralisch nutzen soll, erhoben stehen muss." 13 Nor must the poet ever allow himself to be swept away by his emotions. Rather he "steht hinter den Coulissen, ist selbst nicht gerührt noch getäuscht, kennt aber die Mittel, Rührung und Täuschung hervorzubringen, und wird nach dem Mass seines Talents, wo nicht etwas Vortreffliches doch etwas Brauchbares leisten." 14

Goethe draws a sharp line of demarcation between everyday life and the theater. While the former offers chance reality, the latter offers universal truth. The Roman comedies are especially praiseworthy, because "der Begriff der Nachahmung, der Gedanke an Kunst immer lebhaft blieb und durch das geschickte Spiel nur eine Art von selbstbewusster Illusion hervorgebracht wurde." 15 The playing of women's parts by youths on the Roman stage delights Goethe, because "man empfand das Vergnügen, nicht die Sache selbst, sondern ihre Nachahmung zu sehen, nicht durch Natur, sondern durch Kunst unterhalten zu werden, nicht eine Individualität, sondern ein Resultat anzuschauen." 16 A completely convincing imitation of nature in art would be neither possible nor desirable, for nature offers indifferent actuality, while art should present significant illusion.

The esthetic detachment postulated in the theater audience is not compatible with a prevalence of coincidence in the plot, although especially in operas not every detail has to be motivated. 17 The inexorable causative relationship between the main events must be readily evident to the spectators. It is the lack of such clear interrelation of events which Goethe criticizes in J. A. Wieland's *Tuchmacher von London* and Gottlieb Stephanie's *Kriegsgefangenen*.

In fact he regards eighteenth century drama in general as all too prone to depend for its dramatic effect upon the violent expression of uncontrolled passion in lieu of plausible and consistent action.

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He derides Kessler for his *Hannchen*, because "man schiesst, sticht, heult, zankt, fällt in Ohnmacht und auf die Knie, spricht Sentenzen und versöhnt sich." H. F. Müller's *Gräfin Tarnow* and Zimmermann's *Lustspiele ohne Heuraten* are likewise criticized for their unbridled emotion.  

As a Classicist Goethe views art as the embodiment of the essence of things. The incorporation of the timeless essence in the material of the earthly world relieves esthetically the tension between the finite and the infinite. This need for form, felt so keenly by Goethe in the Classical Period, is offended again and again by the Romantic drama.

Werner, Oehlenschläger, Arnim, Brentano und andere arbeiten und treibens immerfort; aber alles geht durchaus ins Form- und Charakterlose. Kein Mensch will begreifen, dass die höchste und einzige Operation der Natur und Kunst die Gestaltung sey, und in der Gestalt die Specification; damit ein jedes ein Besonderes, Bedeutendes werde, sey und bleibe. Es ist keine Kunst sein Talent nach individueller Bequemlichkeit humoristisch walten zu lassen; etwas muss immer daraus entstehen.  

Not only the drama of the German Romantics, but also the English comedies suffer from formlessness, "und wer an ein gehalteneres Kunstwerk gewöhnt ist, sieht sich zuletzt ungern ins Grenzenlose getrieben."  

Tieck's *Genoveva*, however, enjoys Goethe's highest esteem. Goethe lauds the drama in a letter to the author, in which he reminisces about the pleasant evening, when he listened to the reading of the play and was so carried away that he did not even hear the chiming of the clock in the tower and thus was surprised by the approach of midnight.  

One of Goethe's chief objections to most Romantic dramatists

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18 "Rezensionen . . ."  29.  
19 "Werner, Oehlenschläger, Arnim, Brentano and others carry on their efforts, but everything turns out completely without form and character. No one will realize that the loftiest and unique operation of nature and art is endowing with form, with individuality, so that everything becomes, is and remains something special and significant. There is no art in whimsically allowing one's talent free rein according to individual convenience. Something must always be formed." (Translation by the author). "Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter." Geiger, ed. 1808. I, 237.  
20 *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Jubiläum, XXIV, 146.  
concerns their failure to accept the limitations imposed by stage presentation. Goethe recognizes the extraordinary assets of Kleist’s *Der zerbrochene Krug* and admits the “gewaltsame Gegenwart” of the play. However, he admits the fact that the comedy belongs to the reader, not the spectator. He accuses Kleist of being all too inclined to dialectic, of slowly uncovering a past action, rather than allowing the plot to unfold before the eyes of the audience.

The demands of the stage are met by Wilhelm Schlegel in his *Ion*, while Ugolin’s *Gherardesca*, published by Böhlendorff, could not be presented on the stage.

Goethe is always keenly aware of the problems of the producer, and even in his early writing he exhorts the dramatist to study the stage, the lighting, the make-up and the costuming and to resolve to introduce nothing into his play which cannot be acted on the stage, under a pasteboard ceiling and before canvas backdrops. Furthermore, the drama should be adapted to the capacities of the actors, for the failure of many a play is due to the fact that the right actor is not found for one of the leading parts. In fact Goethe blames the failure of Kotzebue’s *Wirr Warr* on the actors, whose responsibility it should be to consummate the play and win for it a favorable reception. Fortunately, since Iffland actors have realized the desirability of concealing their own personalities and assuming the manifold personalities demanded by their rôles, a conversational tone is permissible only if the actor guards strictly against revealing his own individuality rather than that of the character portrayed. The actor should of course overcome all traces of dialect and enunciate clearly.

In fact, what applies to the individual actor applies to the troupe as well. If the theater personnel remains unchanged for a pro-

23 Ibid., 69.
24 "Weimarisches Hoftheater." 103.
25 "Jenaische ... ." 270.
29 "Weimarisches Hoftheater." 193.
30 Ibid., 69.
longed period, there is danger that a characteristic tone will become evident, such as the dryness and stiffness of the Stuttgart Theater.\footnote{83 "Reise in die Schweiz." 1799. Op. cit., XXIX, 101.}

Not only must the author recognize the rights of the spectator as well as those of the reader, but the régisseur must devote the most extreme care to the staging, for the effectiveness of a drama is dependent upon its performance on the stage.

Schröder, the famous actor and producer who offered Goethe valuable advice when the latter became Weimar director in 1791, took the liberty of deleting everything in Shakespeare which would not be theatrically effective in the Germany of his day. Goethe mentions with approval his omitting the entire first scene of the \textit{King Lear} in Tieck's collection, which was then attributed to Shakespeare, on the grounds that Lear appears so absurd in that scene that the audience might otherwise concede some justification for the daughters' behaviour.\footnote{84 "Shakespeare und kein Ende." 49.} However, a few years later Goethe agrees with Tieck that it is worth while to present Shakespeare without revision, even at the risk of failure.\footnote{85 "Ludwig Tiecks Dramaturgische Blätter." Op. cit., XXXVIII, 211.}

Goethe's objection to the English stage, with its lack of machinery, is that it leaves too much to the imagination of the spectator. However, he feels that decorations and costumes should be used in moderation, in order not to obscure the inner, spiritual meaning.

Goethe lavishes enthusiastic praise on Calderón's \textit{Tochter der Lust}, calling the author durchaus theatralisch, ja bretterhaft; was wir Illusion heissen, besonders eine solche, die Rührung erregt, davon treffen wir keine Spur; der Plan liegt klar vor dem Verstand, die Szenen folgen notwendig, mit einer Art von Ballettschritt, welche kunstgemäss wohltut und auf die Technik unserer neuesten komischen Oper hindeutet; die inneren Hauptmotive sind immer dieselben: Wiederstreit der Pflichten, Leidenschaften, Bedingnisse, aus dem Gegensatz der Charaktere, aus den jedesmaligen Verhältnissen abgeleitet.\footnote{86 "completely cognizant of the theater, the stage; of what we call illusion, especially the emotionally moving illusion, we find no trace. The outline is readily evident; the scenes follow logically, in a sort of ballet step, which is artistically pleasing and which suggests the technique of our latest comic opera. The main motivation is always the same: the conflict of duties, passions, conditions, deriving from the opposition of characters, from the current circumstances." (Translation by the author) "Annalen." 1798. Op. cit., XXX, 144.}
Human relationships cannot be presented on the stage in all their original spontaneity,
sie müssen schon verarbeitet, zubereitet, sublimiert sein; und so finden wir sie auch hier: der Richter steht an der Schwelle der Ueberkultur, er gibt eine Quintessenz der Menschheit.\textsuperscript{37}

In demanding that a play be adapted to the audience for whom it is to be performed,\textsuperscript{38} Goethe seems to be making a concession to the taste of the average theater-goer. However, he repeatedly warns that a director is by no means paying a compliment to an audience which he treats like hoii polloi, desirous only of immediately enjoyable action highly charged with emotion.\textsuperscript{39} The members of the audience deserve the director’s respect. They can be taught taste and discrimination through good productions of good plays. The régisseur flatters them only as parents flatter beloved children, with the intention of improving and enlightening.\textsuperscript{40}

Since Plato estheticians have argued about the relationship of art to moral enlightenment. Goethe raises a voice of protest against the stress of morality in the drama. In fact he attributes the mediocrity of the contemporary German theater in part to the efforts of Eckhof, Ifßland and Schröder to stress what is moral and proper in all their dramatic production.\textsuperscript{41} A serious defect in the German comedy, in his opinion, is the focussing of attention upon sentimentality and moral feelings, and the only value he sees in the coarse English comedies, with humor based on abuse, consists in their service as a balance for the moral sententiousness of contemporary comedy.\textsuperscript{42} He warns the writer of comedy against selecting moral improvement as his goal, for the moral,

so wie das Pathetische macht immer ernsthaft, und jene geistreiche Heiterkeit und Freiheit des Gemüts, welche in uns hervorzu bringen das schöne Ziel der Komödie ist, lässt sich nur durch eine absolute moralische Gleichgültigkeit erreichen; es sei nun, dass der Gegenstand selbst schon diese Eigenschaft habe, oder dass der

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{they must be worked over, prepared and sublimated; and thus we find them here. The poet stands on the threshold of a super-culture. He gives the quintessence of mankind.” (Translation by the author). “Calderons Tochter der Lust.” 1822. \textit{Op. cit.,} XXXVII, 214.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{“Weimarisches Hoftheater,”} 192.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. Op. cit.,} XVIII, 42.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{“Deutsches Theater.”} 1813. \textit{Op. cit.,} XXXVII, 10.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Dichtung und Wahrheit,} 146.
Dichter die Kunst besitze, die moralische Tendenz seines Stoffes durch die Behandlung zu überwinden.\textsuperscript{43}

Although in the above passage Goethe refers to comedy, his denial of any connection between art and morality applies to tragedy as well. He says unequivocally that the tragic poet must forego any attempt to educate his audience morally. Although family scenes in dialogue, depicting the life of the common people, can modify custom and influence dress, no true art can achieve any more fundamental effect upon morality.\textsuperscript{44}

Another eternal controversy among critics concerns art's relationship to history, the poet's obligation to adhere to historical fact. In regard to this question Goethe states: das einzelne Schöne, historisch Wahre macht einen Teil eines ungeheuren Ganzen, zu dem es völlig proportioniert ist. Das historisch Wahre in einem beschränkten Gedicht lässt sich nur durch grosse Kraft des Genies und Talents dergestalt beherrrschen und bearbeiten, dass es nicht dem engeren Ganzen, das in seiner Sphäre eine ganz andere Art von Anähnlichkeit verlangt, als störend erschiene.\textsuperscript{45}

Later, in his review of Manzoni's \textit{Il Conte di Carmagnola}, Goethe releases the writer from all responsibility to historical fact, maintaining that the poet is not portraying historical personages, but merely doing certain historical persons the honor of applying their names to his own creations.\textsuperscript{46}

Shakespeare's works are alive, because he is unfettered by historical background. He neglects the external costuming and concentrates on revealing the inner man.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} "just as the pathetic, always leads to seriousness, and that witty serenity and freedom of spirit, the arousing of which is the worthy goal of comedy, can only be achieved through absolute moral indifference, unless, of course, the subject itself possesses this characteristic or the poet possesses the ability to conceal the moral tendency of his material through his treatment of it." (Translation by the author).


\textsuperscript{44} "Vorschlag zur Einführung der deutschen Sprache in Polen." \textit{Op. cit.}, XXXVII.


\textsuperscript{45} "the uniquely beautiful, historically true, constitutes a part of a tremendous whole, to which it is completely proportioned. Only through great force of genius and talent can the historically true, within a limited poem, be so treated and mastered that it does not have a disturbing effect on the narrower whole, which in its sphere demands a quite different type of assimilation." (Translation by the author) "Jenaische . . ." 226.

\textsuperscript{46} "Il Conte . . ." 159.

In *Adelchi*, to be sure, Manzoni presents characters who are not only humanly, but also historically, true. However, his fidelity to history, while praiseworthy, is an achievement no critic could have demanded of him, and where the reader finds barbarian characters in his play endowed with tender sentiments, he must remember, dass alle Poesie eigentlich in Anachronismen verkehre; alle Vergangenheit, die wir heranrufen, um sie nach unserer Weise den Mitlebenden vorzutragen, muss eine höhere Bildung, als es hatte, dem Altertümlichen zugestehen; der Poet mag hierüber mit seinem Gewissen übereinstimmen, der Leser muss gefällig durch die Finger blicken.\(^\text{48}\)

Throughout his critical works Goethe rejects the interpretation of the drama as a servant of history and morality. The chief limitation which the dramatist must observe is the stage itself: his play must be produceable. Otherwise the only requirement is that he paint a true, although not naturalistic, picture of life. While the theater, in its empirical aspect, is subject to many influences and changes, it is, in its ideal aspect, unequalled in ennoblement, making the highest demands on mankind, combining poetry, rhetoric, architecture, painting and music.\(^\text{49}\)

\(^{48}\) "that all poetry actually deals with anachronisms. All the past which we conjure up, in order to present it in our own way to our fellow-men, must be embued with a higher culture than the ancient period actually possessed. The poet may make his peace with his conscience in this regard; the reader must not judge him too strictly." (Translation by the author) "Adelchi." 1827. *Op. cit.*, XXXVIII, 64.