

E. H. Gombrich, Goethe's 'Zueignung' and Benivieni's 'Amore' (originally published in German as a contribution to a festschrift for Fritz Saxl on the Completion of his 25th Year at the Warburg Institute), Journal of the Warburg Institute, Vol. 1, 1937-8, pp.331-9 [Trapp no.1937B(ENG).1]

"Von wem auf Lebens-und Wissens-Bahnen Wardst du genährt and befestet ? Zu fragen sind wir beauftragt."

Ich babe niemals danach gefragt, Von welchen Schnepfen and Fasanen Kapaunen and
Welschenhahnen Ich mein Bauchelchen gemästet.

So bei Pythagoras, bei den Besten Sass ich unter zufriednen Gästen; Ihr Frohmal hab' ich
unverdrossen Niemals bestohien, immer genossen.

When it falls to the present-day historian to record the dependence of a great man on the work of a predecessor it is fortunately no longer necessary for him to assert apologetically that this fact "in no way diminishes the greatness of his genius" : as though the task of the literary critic were merely to detect who was 'copying,' and to award appropriate marks. The curiously romantic conception of genius in the nineteenth century allowed of the incorporation into the critical work of the period of every biographical experience, while denying that cultural experience could legitimately be used in creation. Thus, it has long since been agreed that the figure of Truth who in Goethe's 'Zueignung' hands him the veils of poesy was in private life known by the name of Charlotte von Stein; but no voice in the massed chorus of Goethe literature seems to have asked whether there is any relationship between this figure of Truth and a certain 'leggiadra e bella donna' whose glamour and grace are celebrated in the allegorical neo-platonic stanzas of Girolamo Benivieni, the friend of Lorenzo de' Medici and Politian, who later became the disciple of Savonarola.

Benivieni's poem was an attempt in the style of Lorenzo's *Selve d'amore*.^[1] It begins with a beautiful description of nature:

Già lieta al nuovo ciel la bella aurora
Dal balcon d'oriente si mostrava,
E suoi biondi capei, ch'allhor ne indora
Al vivo specchio del suo padre ornava,
Del padre suo, ne' cui begli occhj allora
Lieta mirando it suo color cangiava
Tal the deposte le purpuree veste
Del paterno splendor, s'adorna e veste

Quando destò dal suon d' alcuno uccello
Che con suoi dolci canti it sol ne alletta,
Levai poggiando un lieto monticello
Che non molto lontan di fresca erbetta
Cinto da l'onde d'un bel fiumicello
Vagheggia e chiude una gentil valletta;
Che al nuovo sol le sue gemmanti rive
Spiegando sempre in verdi spoglie vive.

In verdi spoglie, onde di più colori
Distinto splende un rugiadoso velo,
Che di fresche ombre e di perpetui fiori
Con le sue man tessea natura e'l cielo
Onde or dagli occhj, or da soavi odori
Ch'indi respiran con sì dolce zelo
Portato, verso il bel monte ascendea,
Che del grato salir non m'accorgea.

Era salendo già in parte arrivato
Dove la cima sua fiorita e lieta
Vid' io, che tutto il bel volto cangiato
Al vivo specchio avea del gran pianeta.
Era apparito it giorno accompagnato
D'ogni letizia e l'aura dolce e queta
Pasceva di rugiada i fiori e l'erba
Che la nova stagion produce e serba.

Here, it seems to me, we find more than one motive which recalls the introductory stanzas which today open every edition of Goethe's work:

Der Morgen kam ; es scheuchten seine
Tritte Den leisen Schlaf, der mich gelind umfing,
Dass ich, erwacht, aus meiner stillen Hiitte
Den Berg hinauf mit frischer Seele ging;
Ich freute mich bei einem jeden Schritte
Der neuen Blume, die voll Tropfen hing;
Der junge Tag erhob sich mit Entziicken,
Und alles war erquickt, mich zu erquickern.

Und wie ich stieg, zog von dem Fluss der Wiesen
Ein Nebel sich in Streifen sacht hervor.

Er wich and wechselte mich zu umfliessen,
Und wuchs geflügelt mir ums Haupt empor.
Des schiinen Blicks sollt' ich nicht mehr geniessen,
Die Gegend deckte mir ein triiber Flor ;
Bald sah ich mich von Wolken wie umgossen
Und mit mir selbst in Dammrung eingeschlossen.

Auf einmal schien die Sonne durchzudringen,
Im Nebel liess sich eine Klarheit sehn;
Hier sank er leise sich hinabzuschwingen,
Hier teilt' er steigend sich urn Wald and Hohn.
Wie hofft' ich ihr den ersten Gruss zu bringen!
Sie hofft' ich nach der Triibe doppelt schön.
Der luft'ge Kampf war lange nicht vollendet,
Ein Glanz umgab mich, and ich stand geblendet.

It can hardly be a chance coincidence which brings these two poems so close to one another. First, we have the ascent of the beautiful hill in the dawn, the passing through veils of mist (which in the North, however, become a `trüber Flor'), then the majestic appearance of the `gran pianeta' and, finally, induced by the `grata salir,' the mood of joyous appreciation in the music of the stanzas.

If, however, anyone looks for further parallels in the poem of Benivieni, he will be disappointed. Inspiration soon deserts the poet. The opening is still full of charm: it describes a cool vale where the fairest of women reclines in a meadow by a spring, and sings so divinely that the beasts of the forest listen enchanted. It becomes less convincing when the poet `alla sinistra mano' hears an alluring `concento umano.' He yields to the temptation of looking round for the second singer, and immediately the first one disappears. "Mi cinse questa mia nova Sirena d'un aspra e indissolubile catena." He attempts to approach her, and no sooner has he mingled with the `turbe scherzando di lascivi amori,' who make up her court, than she showers blossoms on him from her magic veil. The effect of this bombardment is unexpected : immediately Benivieni becomes a 'brutta fiera,' in fact, after metamorphosis in the orthodox Ovidian manner, he becomes a `leonza leggiadretta molto.' Driven by burning desire, he must go in pursuit of the fair one. He roams lamenting through rugged vales and gloomy valleys, for ever on her tracks. And more than seventy-seven years have passed, "dal di, che co' magici fiori scosse me lei del mal tessuto velo," when one bright moonlight night he sees himself mirrored in a brook and becomes aware of his altered appearance. In answer to his fervent prayer, the shining apparition of the first goddess presents herself to him in a dream, and shows him the way up to the magic fountain where he first saw her. Once awake, he begins the difficult ascent a second time, and defying all the troubles and temptations, he bathes in the magic fountain and becomes again a human being, gazing with new eyes upon the heavenly light.

We need not seek literal correspondence between the contents of this rather long-winded allegory and Goethe's fourteen loaded stanzas. And yet motives which bring the two unequal works together keep appearing. The magic veil, for instance, with which the evil apparition achieves the metamorphosis, reminds one—though faintly—of its counterpart, the magic veil of Goethe's muse, which also possesses this power of transformation. But it is when the goddess reappears that she conjures up the vision of Goethe's Truth.

L'altre sue vaghe e preziose e belle
Membra formate tutte mi parieno
Di pura e bella luce, e intorno a quelle
Girar sospeso un lucido e sereno
Vel, che tessuto di minute stelle
In se ritorna, e nel suo ricco seno
Lampeggia un sol, che d'infinita luce
Distinto insin dal ciel quivi riluce.

Nel divin grembo suo, ne l' alme e vive
Stelle pareami, e nel suo ricco velo
Veder ciõ che per lei fuor di lei vive
Fuor di essa alberga : indi la terra e'l cielo
E it mondo tutto mi par che derive . . .

We are familiar with this veil of light, out of which the sun shines, and which symbolizes the whole visible world : it is the allegorical representation of the ancient mythical cloak of the world, "der Gottheit lebendiges Kleid." [2] And yet, is not Goethe's wonderful picture of the veil of poesy "aus Morgenduft gewebt and Sonnenklarheit," a transformation of the "lucido e sereno vel" into a new visual reality? For a moment it might seem as though Goethe's Truth wears this `reinsten Schleier' as a garment: "er floss urn sie and schwoll in tausend Falten." [3]

As Benivieni approaches the divine singer for the first time in his vision, and again when he is restored to human shape and sees her, he describes how she appears to his dazzled eyes:

Ben ne fea testimon la terra e'l cielo
Ch'ivi fosse presente it !or signore;
Ma gli occhi infermi, e dal corporeo velo
Chiusi, veder non pon !'alto splendour;

Splendida si, che del suo chiaro volto
Era l'aspetto a' miei mesti occhj tolto.

ed un splendor lampeggia
Ove it be! colle par *che infiammato arda*;

Tutto fin dove it Santo flume ondeggia,
Non puo l'inferma nostra oscura e tarda
Vista mortal, dal suo soverchio lume
Vinta, in tutto passar di là del fiume -

Does not the introduction to Goethe's vision sound like a memory of these lines?

Der luft'ge Kampf war lange nicht vollendet-
Ein Glanz umgab mich and ich stand geblendet.

Bald machte mich, die Augen aufzuschlagen,
Ein innrer Trieb des Herzens wieder kiihn.
Ich konnt es nur mit schnellen Blicken wagen
Denn alles schien zu brennen and zu glühn –

Compare, furthermore, the lovely meadow vale of Benivieni's introductory vision in this stanza with Goethe's poem:

L'aura soave, it suon de li arboscelli,
E it mormorar de le vive onde, e it canto
Di tanti e sl diversi e vaghi uccelli,
E piü di Filomena il dolce pianto,
L'ombrosa selva, e mille ornati e belli
Fioretti, e l'erbe e gli odor grati, in tanto
Piacer levata avea la mente mia,
Ch'era come uom che se medesmo obblia.

Does not this beautiful passage, in which there lives something of Filippo Lippi's poetic woodlands, find its echo in Goethe's penultimate stanza, which describes the joys of self-forgetfulness in a similar picture?

Sogleich umsäuselt Abendwindes Kühle,
Umhaucht euch Blumen-Würzgeruch and Duft.

With some hesitation I finally juxtapose the glorious praise which Goethe accords his divinity, to the rather conventional self-praise of Benivieni's divine messenger.

Venite a me voi che da l'empio e greve
Fascio incurvando vi pregate a terra,
Che qual ritorna a me non pur receve
Eterna pace per dannosa guerra
Ma tanto it giogo mio soave e leve

Ho grato it nodo suo, che meco it serra;
E lieta in cambio al suo piü caro dono
Com mirabil piacer me stessa dono.

Ja! rief ich aus, in dem ich selig nieder
Zur Erde sank, lang hab' ich dich gefühlt;
Du gabst mir Ruh, wenn durch die jungen Glieder
Die Leidenschaft sich rastlos durchgewuht;
Du hast mir, wie mit himmlischen Gefieder,
Am heissen Tag die Stirne sanft gekühlt:
Du schenktest mir der Erde beste Gaben,
Und jedes Gluck will ich durch dich nur haben !

The contrast between these two stanzas alone would suffice to define — were there any need to do so—the inmost characteristic of Goethe's poetic power, which transforms everything formal into intensely personal experience.

Two objections must be met by anyone who, despite this disparity of quality, suggests that such a masterpiece is in this way dependent on a very ordinary and almost forgotten poem. First, he must consider whether the common motives are not too universal to account for the particular case. The allegorical meeting precluded by the ascent of a height before dawn was, after all, invented by Dante. These poems certainly do not have the monopoly of the allegory of the magic veil, whilst the blinding radiance of the heavenly light, the self-oblivion in woods among fragrant flowers are anything but Benivieni's property. And yet the resemblances do not appear to derive from a common source of general *topoi*.^[4] They extend beyond the actual content, to the poet's use of mood, and sound, and choice of words. Secondly it may be doubted whether Goethe was acquainted with the 'Amore'; but if we can prove this the most natural explanation for the similarity would be to assume a direct connection between the two poems.

Goethe's 'Zueignung' was originally composed as an introduction to the poem 'Die Geheimnisse,' and it was only because this remained unfinished that Goethe placed the 'Zueignung' at the beginning of the first collected edition of his works, which appeared in 1788. The 'Geheimnisse' are known to have been planned in stanzas, as an esoteric and allegorical epic, the didactic purpose of which was to expound the common content of all religious practice.

The poet Benivieni is a familiar figure within the intellectual realm of this 'Wunderbare Lied,' in which Rosicrucian pietism mingles so curiously with humanistic enlightenment.^[5] One of Benivieni's works — 'Una canzone de lo amore celeste e profano' — became famous through a very complete, and often reprinted, commentary by Pico della Mirandola. A glance at Faust will suffice to show Goethe's familiarity with the spiritual background of Pico. But perhaps there is no need to pursue this devious route in order to show that Goethe was probably acquainted with Benivieni's works. In the year 1785

the poem appeared in the tenth volume of that pretty and handy anthology *Il Parnaso Italiano*, where it follows after Politian's celebrated stanzas of the *Giostra*.^[6] It would seem more than likely that Goethe knew of this volume, containing as it did the celebrated models of the metrical form, which his poem was the first to introduce into the German language.^[7]

True, if we accept this view, we find ourselves in conflict with the commonly accepted chronology which places the poem as early as 1784. The evidence for this requires examination. It is based on a letter written by Goethe to Frau von Stein on the 4th of August, 1784:

Zwischen Miihlhausen and hier ist uns eine Achse gebrochen and wir haben müssen liegen bleiben; um mich zu beschäftigen, and meine unruhigen Gedanken von dir abzuwenden, habe ich den Anfang des versprochenen Gedichts gemacht, ich Schick es an Herders.

There can be no doubt that this promised poem is the 'Geheimnisse.' But did it really begin with the 'Zueignung' as we know it to-day? It can be shown that this is hardly possible. For, on the 24th of August, during the negotiations over the Fürstenbund, Goethe writes to her again from Brunswick, this time in French, in order to practise the language of diplomacy:

Je finis par un vers allemand, qui sera place dans le poëme que je cheris tant, parce que j'y pourrai parler de toi, de mon amour pour toi sous male formes sans que personne l'entende que toi seule.

Gewiss, ich wäre schon so ferne, ferne,
Soweit die Welt nur offen liegt, gegangen,
Bezwängen mich nicht übermachtge Sterne,
Die mein Geschick an deines angehangen,
Dass ich in dir nur erst mich kennen lerne.
Mein Dichten, Trachten, Hoffen and Verlangen,
Allein nach dir and deinem Wesen drängt,
Mein Leben nur an deinem Leben hängt.

If we judge from the evidence of this letter the original introduction to 'Geheimnisse' seems to have had a much more personal reference to Frau von Stein than the 'Zueignung' as we read it to-day. After the middle of September there is no mention of the poem for a long time. These are the months when Goethe's whole interest was absorbed by natural science, the months during which he discovered the intermaxillary bone. It is not until the end of March that we hear again of consistent work on the stanzas, and how small an advance the great plan has made. He writes to Knebel on the 28th of March—"Das Unternehmen ist zu ungeheuer für meine Lage, indess will ich fortfahren and sehen, wie weft ich komme." The poem does not seem to have been advanced to any considerable extent, even when Goethe set himself the regular task of composing first two and then only one stanza a day.

But the earliest possible date which we can with certainty name as the *terminus ante* for the 'Zueignung' is the 12th December, 1785. On that date Goethe writes to Frau von Stein from Jena:

Die Tage sind sehr schön, wie der Nebel fiel, dacht ich an den Anfang meines Gedichts: Die Idee dazu hab ich hier im Tale gefunden.

Here a date might conjecturally be assigned for the moment when the idea of the 'Zueignung' came to Goethe. It is true that Goethe was frequently in Jena—for instance, on the 1st and 2nd of August, 1784, and the 9th of January and the 26th of April, 1785, but it was only in March of the same year that he settled down with Knebel in Jena. In a letter of the 7th of March, to Frau von Stein, he is full of praise for the comforts he is enjoying:

Bei Knebeln ist recht gut seyn. Ich babe ein artiges Stibgen das eine freye muntere Aussicht hat. Das Cabinet, die Bibliothek, das alte lebendige Diktionar [Hofrat Buttner, an old collector of books], alles wird genutzt, wie die Kalte and die Umstande es erlauben.

After his return to Weimar, it was to Knebel that the previously quoted reports were sent, in which he wrote of the progress of the poem on which he had possibly again begun work.[9] Could the newly published volume of the *Parnaso Italiano* have come into his hands amongst the wealth of books there, which he used so industriously? His predilection was sufficiently strong to have made him study it. It was the time of his greatest longing for Italy, the period of 'Mignon's Lied,' which ended in the flight to the South in the following year.[10]

But does not Goethe's own evidence put our assumption out of court? We will not quibble about the words, and suggest that "die Idee dazu hab ich hier im Tale gefunden" might also have referred to a literary discovery. It remains far simpler to assume an experience inspired by nature. But it would be simplifying the interpretation of the poetic process too much if we were to regard this as an alternative. What he had read could only find concrete substance in an actual experience, while the actual experience acquired form through his reading. Such a conclusion would not fit too badly into the actual content of Goethe's poem, because if one examines it closely—forgetting for a moment its poetical values—one discovers some slight inconsistencies in the construction of Goethe's allegory. What first appears as a 'trüber Flor,' an enemy of light and sun, becomes later the morning-scented veil of poetry. In Benivieni's stanza, on the other hand, the dewy morning atmosphere appears at the very beginning. Goethe may, perhaps, by associating the 'rugiadoso vel' of the opening stanzas with the lucido e sereno vel' of the divine apparition, have conceived the central motive of his 'Zueignung.' But in painting the scene with the colours of an actual experience which happened to him one morning in the hills of Jena, his poem was bound to lose in logical consistency, while it gained in visionary power.

Gundolf speaks of the 'Zueignung' as "gleichsam in Voraus angestrahlt von dem nahen Italien." Is it not possible that the penitent disciple of Savonarola has preserved for one greater than himself the warmth and glory that were in the aura of the Magnifico?

1 The earliest edition accessible to me dates from 1523: *Amore di Hieronimo Benivieni Fiorentino, Allo Illustris S. Conte Messer Nicolo Vicecomite da Coreggio, Illustrato per Nicolo Zopino Vincentio compagno*. There are many reprints.

2 Cf. Robert Eisler, *Weltenmantel and Himmelszelt*, 1910.

3 It is not necessary for me to explain that Goethe is here evoking a different image, that of veiled truth. (Cf. F. Saxl, *Veritas Filia Temporis*, in: *Philosophy and History. Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*, 1936). The transformation of this veil from a delusion hostile to truth, into a beneficent illusion, is by no means unique in this period. Goethe's distichs 'Die Wahrheit' date from the same year as the 'Zueignung' :

Jugendlich kommt sie vom Himmel, tritt vor den Priester and Weisen
Unbekleidet, die Göttin : still blickt sein Auge zur Erde.

Dann ergreift er das Rauchfass and hiillt demüthig verehrend

Sie in durchsichtigen Schleier, dass wir sie zu dulden ertragen.

Schiller carries this transformation even further, for to him the appearance of unveiled truth is deadly. ("Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais.") Cassandra's terrible discovery "nur der Irrtum ist das Leben and das Wissen ist der Tod," is the constant theme of the poet's work, and appears in it in ever changing forms.

4 This objection seems to refute Waniek's attempt to find in Pyra's arid controversial poem, 'Der Tempel der wahren Dichtkunst,' the model of 'Zueignung' (*Imm. Pyra and sein Einfluss auf die Literatur des 18. Jhdts.* Leipzig, 1882). Certainly nothing could justify the title *Goethe ein grosser Nehmer*, which R. Hildebrand chose in reference to a remark of Klopstock. (*Ztschr. fd. deutschen Unterr.*, 4, 1890) . Nor do the assertions which Düntzer makes against him in 'Euphorion II' hold water. There is, however, one detail in favour of Waniek's thesis which has remained unobserved. Pyra's poem begins "Die Nacht war da." If Goethe chose exactly the opposite sentence as an opening for his own initiation as a poet, he might have done so in the same gay mood which made him challenge the sentimental song by Solbrig "Ich habe geliebet, jetzt lieb ich nicht mehr," by his "Ich habe geliebet, jetzt lieb ich *erst recht*," or W. Ueltzen's "Namen nennen dich nicht," with his affirmative "Alles kiindet dich an." (Cf. J. Urzidil in *Sonntagsbeilage der Nationalzeitung*, Basel, 7 Nov. 1937)

5 Cf. G. de Blanquis: *Etude sur deux fragments de Goethe*, Paris, 1927, with full bibliography.

6 The official imprimatur of the volume bears the date 31st July, 1784. Our text follows this edition.

7 It was precisely on April 25th, 1785, that he wrote to the composer Kayser : "Ich freue mich, dass Sie an dem kleinen Singspie eine Art von italienischer Gestalt gefunden haben.... Sie tuen sehr wohl,

sich solche Muster (Paesiallo's `Re Teodoro' and the `Litigants') vor die Seele zu stellen, *ein anders ist nachahmen, ein anders nach Meistern, die gewisse Formen des Vortrags durchstudiert haben, sich bilden.*"

8 11th August, 1784, to Ch. von Stein : "Du hast nun, ich hoffe, den Anfang des Gedichts den ich dir duarch Herders schickte, du wirst dir daraus nehmen was fiir dich ist, es war mir gar angenehm, dir auf diese Weise zu sagen, wie lieb ich dich habe." The stanza "Für ewig," now a separate poem, seems to belong to the same original version. It may be added that it would not even be the only case where Goethe replaced a `personal' dedication by stanzas of a more general character: the two different `Zueignungen' for Faust provide a parallel worth mentioning.

9 Like almost every historical problem, the history of the genesis of the `Geheimnisse' becomes more complicated the greater the number of dates referred to. Of all the references to the poems in the letters of the year 1784 (8, II, 13, 14, 23, 31, August and 16 September) only the two quoted in the text state expressly that Goethe has been writing. Many, indeed, lament emphatically the lack of time during the Brunswick negotiations for the founding of the Fürstenband and the impossibility of continuing. The `personal' beginning which Goethe set down on the occasion of the broken axle and then apparently abandoned, cannot therefore have been very extensive. Did Goethe ever continue this first `Zueignung' when he again took up work on the `Geheimnisse' in 1785? One small detail tells against this: Goethe writes on the 28th March to Knebel, "Auch bin ich wieder fleissig an meinem grossen Gedicht gewesen and bis zur 40. Stanze gelangt. Das ist wohl noch sehr im Vorhofe." If we count to the 40th verse in the extant fragment `Die Geheimnisse,' the last lines will be found to run :
Du kamst o Freund, nur erst durchs erste Tor,
Im Vorhof bist Du freundlich aufgenommen
Und scheinst mir wert ins Innerste zu kommen.

The psychological association in the letter appears to be so definite that it is difficult to believe it could have been fortuitous. Goethe therefore did not at that time include the `first Zueignung' in which he had spoken to the beloved in veiled terms — perhaps because he had abandoned the poem, or because it had meanwhile been given independent form in the `Zueignung' as we now know it. Admittedly, this opens up further problems. Today, the `Geheimnisse' contains only 44 stanzas, and yet on the 2nd April (only five days after the above letter), he stated that there were now 48, and next day he composed one more. Was this rather tedious routine work into which the poem soon developed never printed in its entirety?

10 In his letters there soon appear such expressions as: "Hätte ich nur vor zwanzig Jahren gewusst, was ich weiss. Ich hätte mir wenigstens das Italienische so angeeignet, dass ich fürs lyrische Theater hätte arbeiten können, and ich hätte es gezwungen. Der gute Kayser dauert mich nur, dass er seine Musik an diese barbarische Sprache verschwendet." (26th January, 1786).