

UNDERSTANDING GOETHE

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Goethe on Art selected, edited and translated by *John Gage*, London: Scolar Press, 1980, 251 pp., 31 ills, £4.95 paper

The Younger Goethe and the Visual Arts (Anglica Germanica Series 2) by *W.D. Robson-Scott*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 175 pp., 8 ills, £19.50

The generous selection from Goethe's many writings and utterances on art, made and largely translated by Dr John Gage, should offer a welcome opportunity for English readers to catch a glimpse of this extraordinary multifaceted mind. Such opportunities are rare, for outside academic departments of Germanic Studies Goethe is little more than a name in the Anglo-Saxon world. When T.S. Eliot received the Hanseatic Goethe Prize for 1954 he was compelled by the occasion to comment on Goethe's wide-ranging oeuvre, but in the event he put together a lecture on 'Goethe as a Sage' in which he never really said why he found him so wise but rather contented himself with praising him as the equal of Dante and Shakespeare. Few Germans will question this estimation, but those who cannot read the works in the original will have to take it on credit. Goethe's greatest achievements in lyrical poetry can never survive translation, and stripped of the glory of the language even *Faust* looks like a bizarre conglomeration of disparate scenes, while *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister* appear to be mainly of historical interest. Without the background of these achievements, of course, Goethe would not be Goethe. If Dante had written on Giotto and Shakespeare on Hilliard we could not possibly divorce our respect for the author from our interest in the texts. Thus it may be a moot point how far the pieces and sayings assembled by Dr Gage would retain their importance if they were not also the manifestations of the genius who, almost single-handed, transformed and shaped German literature. At least a rudimentary familiarity with the chronological and geographical setting of his life seems indispensable. The dates tell their own story.

When Goethe was born in Frankfurt in 1749 the Rococo castles of Frederick the Great were still going up in Potsdam, the outpost of that French taste and culture against which Goethe's generation was to rebel. When he died in 1832 Smirke's building of the British Museum was in progress, to house the Elgin Marbles which, in Goethe's view, should make London rather than Rome the goal of all aspiring artists. Hogarth's *March to Finchley* and Delacroix's *Liberty on the Barricades* were both created in Goethe's lifetime. In terms of literary movements, he still tried his hand in the gallant style, was swept into the Ossianic current of *Sturm und Drang*, founded with Schiller the classical drama of German literature, and gave vital impulses to the Romantic Movement. All the time the visual arts were never far from his focus of interest.

It is a happy circumstance, therefore, that the publication of Dr Gage's selection coincides with that of Professor W.D. Robson-Scott's handy monograph on *The Younger Goethe and the Visual Arts*, which traces the poet's love affair with painting from his early years to the end of his Italian Journey in 1788. In this thoroughly documented account we follow Goethe from his paternal home, where he got to know and to love the local painters in the Dutch style, to his student days in Leipzig where he took drawing lessons with Winckelmann's friend Adam Friedrich Oeser, and visited the treasures of the Dresden Gallery where again the Dutch masters impressed him most. Of particular interest in that book are the chapters analysing the background to Goethe's first publication, his hymn on the Gothic façade of the Strasbourg Minster in which he challenged the orthodoxies of conventional taste. We learn that Goethe's own account of that episode in his autobiography is considerably telescoped. The essay was not written in Strasbourg but almost a year after Goethe's return to Frankfurt and may owe less to the direct influence of Herder than to a circle of friends who campaigned in the pages of the *Frankfurter Gelehrte Anzeiger* against the domination by France of German culture (Goethe, of course, being unaware of the French origins of the Gothic style). Another of Goethe's early articles actually takes the views of a French heretic, the sculptor Falconet, as its starting point to exalt in passionate

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language the reverence for nature embodied in the art of Rembrandt. In all these years Goethe practised sketching and drawing, and continued to do so when he was called to Weimar as a tutor to the young Duke and soon became his 'right hand man'. Though scientific studies began to rival Goethe's artistic interests, he increasingly longed to see the art treasures of Italy and finally absconded in the autumn of 1786. In Italy he experienced something like a conversion to classical art and made himself and others believe that he still wanted to take up an artistic career. The testimonials to this effect assembled in Robson-Scott's final chapter leave no doubt about the intensity of Goethe's desire and the wrench he felt when he finally saw that he was too old for such a switch. And yet it remains surprising that the author never stepped back to ask himself how seriously we should take these aborted plans? Did Goethe really contemplate returning to Weimar and setting up a workshop or studio, living by his brush or chisel, two instruments he had hardly learned to wield? Or was it all self-deception, a dream he knew in his heart of hearts to be quite unrealistic? He must have known that he was born a writer, but he also knew and repeatedly said that all his writings were confessions in which he laid bare his soul. May not the practice of art have offered itself as an escape from this psychological burden which he always knew he would have to bear?

One must regret that Professor Robson-Scott did not live to continue the story in another volume and to address himself to these intriguing questions. It is all the more fortunate that Dr Gage's anthology fills at least some of the gap that remains. Only two of the essays (and one fragmentary letter) contained in the volume came from the pen of 'The Younger Goethe', the bulk was written after his return from Italy and after his renunciation of an artistic career when he felt called upon to practise art at least vicariously. Together with like-minded friends, notably the Swiss painter Heinrich Meyer, he founded and ran a series of periodicals through which the *Weimarer Kunstfreunde* tried to raise the standing and knowledge of art in German lands.

It is doubtful, though, whether the compiler did well to opt for a systematic rather than a chronological arrangement; for the latter would have introduced the reader first to Goethe as a revolutionary heretic before acquainting him with the serene arbiter of taste. The tone and message of Goethe's more programmatic writings undeniably provoked some resistance among contemporaries and may continue to do so today. Ultimately this resistance is likely to be overcome by the depth and range of Goethe's knowledge and by the lucidity of his insights scattered throughout these pages, but it needs time to grasp what he was driving at.

Dr Gage in his thoughtful Introduction is right in reminding us that 'to term Goethe's taste in art "classicist" is unhelpful.' He is equally right in stressing that 'Goethe never reduced his thoughts to systems in the manner of his friend and collaborator Schiller.' The selection here presented bears ample testimony to that 'looseness of Goethe's frame of reference' mentioned by Dr Gage, but in a way this looseness itself was part of the system. Just as during his Strasbourg period he admired tapestries after Raphael (hardly after the *School of Athens* as he wrote to Langer, but more probably after the cartoon of *Paul preaching in Athens*) while extolling the teutonic vigour of the Gothic Minster, so he allowed himself in his old age to be converted to a love of Jan van Eyck without therefore surrendering his right to admire Phidias:

'Wie aber kann sich Hans van Eyck
Mit Phidias nur messen?'
Ihr müsset, so lehr ich, also gleich
Einen um den Andern vergessen.
Denn wärt ihr stets bei Einer geblieben,
Wie Könntet ihr noch immer lieben?
Das ist die Kunst, das ist die Welt,
Dass Eins ums Andere gefällt.

[*Modernes*]

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(‘But how can ever Jan van Eyck/ By Phidias’ side be set?’/ You must, if my advice you like,/ Learn each in turn to forget./ For if with One we did remain,/ How could we fall in love again?/ Such is the world, and such is art,/ That passions come, as passions part.)

Goethe certainly knew how to fall in and out of love, but there is more in this advice than a latitudinarian aestheticism. He, who had coined the term *Weltliteratur*, had consciously striven in his poetry to enter into the spirit of all available traditions, the ancients and the German folk poets, the Persians, the Indians and even the Chinese. He likewise wanted to discard the exclusiveness of taste in the arts without for that reason disowning the classical approach to sculpture and painting.

Pedagogically it is indeed one of the profits the student can derive from his acquaintance with Goethe’s writings on art that they bring him into contact with this mainstream of the Western tradition. Goethe’s essay on Leonardo’s *Last Supper* may be one of the most successful examples of the ancient genre of *Ekhphrasis*, one, by the way, which Leonardo is likely to have accepted. On a more general plane Goethe’s view of Nature and of Art must be described as basically Aristotelian. Briefly he saw Nature as a creative force, but his worship of her fertility did not commit him to a literal interpretation of *Mimesis*. His most explicit statements on that problem are to be found in his marginal notes to Diderot’s *Essay on Painting*, a model of urbane polemics which, for understandable reasons, Dr Gage did not include in his volume. Goethe there applied to art what Aristotle had said of literature, namely that ‘poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts’ (*Poetics* IX). In Goethe’s view only an uneducated taste could identify artistic truth with the faithful rendering of natural appearances. But unlike the neo-Platonic idealists Goethe was convinced that the artist should not rise above nature but enter into her secrets. Imagine an artist studying snow crystals under a magnifying glass: the minor master may copy individual examples including their possible flaws, but the superior one will discover the principle by which nature creates these myriads of different hexagonal stars, and thus be able to generate fresh variants which may, but need not, have ever existed. It was along these lines also that Goethe sought to unveil the secrets of organic life; he had postulated the archetypal plant, *die Urpflanze*, of which all existing forms of plant life are transformations. Actually his approach here was less at variance with modern scientific thought than might at first appear. An article in *Scientific American* on ‘The Color Patterns of Butterflies and Moths’ (November 1981) refers to what is termed the ‘Nymphalid Ground Plan’ of wing patterning from which many actual configurations can be derived, though the complete structure is nowhere realised in any known species. Thus when Goethe speaks of art as ‘second nature’ and constantly refers to the need for ‘organic’ coherence, his demand is far from vacuous. What he desires on the lowest level is consistency — that consistency which grants to the art-form of the opera the right to turn speech into song, and on the highest level permits the creator to disregard any rule of style which interferes with the purpose and setting of his work. As Dr Gage succinctly puts it: ‘The artist’s rules must be his own rules; the parts must above all be a function of the whole.’

Dr Gage rightly includes in his anthology the draft of a letter Goethe intended to write to Luisa Seidler in 1818 in which he defends the relief from the temple of Phigalia against the charge that the proportions of its figures look cramped and distorted. These features, Goethe suggests boldly, should not merely be excused, they should be praised, ‘for when an artist deviates intentionally, he is on a higher plane than us, and we should not argue with him but worship him.’ He reminds us that this is a frieze of a doric temple which should be in harmony with the spirit of that architecture, and goes on to analyse the individual deviations from reality as justified in the service of the composition. More interestingly still, he draws on the example of ‘even temperature’ in music to illustrate the advantage art can derive from a slight bending of the rules of harmony.

His approach to the history of mediaeval art illuminates his principles even further. Reporting on his visit to the collection of the brothers Boisserée in *Kunst und Altertum*

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in 1816, he testifies to the deep impression which he had received from the art of van Eyck (the work in question is now given to Rogier van der Weyden). And yet, he reminds his readers, the revolutionary advance which the early Netherlandish master made in the imitation of nature also involved a sacrifice: 'it may seem surprising if we say that he, casting off the mechanical and material imperfections of earlier art, also renounced a hitherto quietly nurtured perfection, namely the idea of symmetrical composition.' The earlier tradition which Goethe, like his hosts, identified with the 'Greek' style of Byzantine derivation had inherited from antiquity a decorative wisdom that may have become routine but was still valuable in itself. Discarding it meant progress, of course, but progress at a price. It took time till the balance was restored to art.

As a true Aristotelian Goethe valued the 'golden mean' between extremes, and once more he arrived from this position at a method of analysis which was as original as it was fertile. His description (Gage, p. 137) of the Munich *St Veronica* in terms of the reconciliation of Byzantine and naturalistic styles of representation is a model of 'formal analysis'. He used a similar approach in his detailed account of Mantegna's *Triumph of Caesar* which is not only a beautiful *Ekphrasis* but a stylistic assessment of the peculiar blend he finds in the master's art, of abstract classicising principles (which he believed to be derived from Squarcione) and an unselective naturalism he attributed to the influence of Venetian art. It was a synthesis which fascinated Goethe, though he evidently felt it to be not quite perfect, yet.

Characteristically he used that same method when in his autobiography he returned to his appreciation of the Strasbourg Minster. Here too, he praised the 'peaceful fusion of . . . contradictory elements', 'the union of the sublime with the merely pleasing'. The impressive composition of the architectural masses represented the one principle, the variety of its decoration the other; it seemed to him the measure of the architect's success, that the two do not clash but harmonise.

Finally Goethe's Aristotelian habit of mind to think in polarities and to desire their reconciliation also makes itself felt in Goethe's account of the taste of art lovers and collectors as he had observed them in his days. In a leisurely and half-humorous epistulary novellette, *The Collector and His Circle* (which takes up 40 pages of Dr Gage's anthology), Goethe characterises and satirises the extremes of such preferences, and ends with a semi-serious tabulation suggesting a golden mean between the over-earnest and the over-frivolous, between the over-meticulous 'miniaturist' and the over-bold 'sketcher'.

It was his suspicion of extremism of any kind which prompted Goethe to launch what Dr Gage calls an 'ill considered' attack on 'New German Religious Patriotic' art, in other words on the Nazarenes, polemics which (he says) 'have given Goethe the reputation of fighting a preposterous rear-guard action, in the name of classicism, against the most important aesthetic movement of his time.' But Goethe might have retorted that it was by no means a merely aesthetic movement and that he attacked it precisely because he saw its importance. A convinced 'pagan' whose outlook was rooted in the cosmopolitan Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Goethe intensely distrusted the narrowly nationalistic mediaevalisers, many of whom had converted to Catholicism and dreamt of a revival of values Goethe had every right to reject. No doubt, they in turn, often considered him a renegade who had abjured the ideals of his youth. The old man had nothing but contempt for their tactics of playing off the young Goethe against the settled Olympian.

Da loben sie den Faust
Und was noch sunsten
In meinen Schriften braust
Zu ihren Gunsten;
Das alte Mick und Mack
Das freut sie sehr;
Es meint das Lumpenpack
Man wär's nicht mehr!

(*Zahme Xenien VI*)

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(My Faust they like to praise / And such of mine where passions roar and blaze / Is in their line. / Those good old cracks and jinks / They quite adore, / The pack of scoundrels thinks / I'm I no more.)

The anthology under review contains enough evidence to bear out Goethe, most of all his famous remarks to Eckermann on Delacroix's *Faust* illustrations, when he was generously conceding that the painter 'had surpassed his own conceptions in these scenes'.

With all these riches awaiting the reader one cannot but wonder why Dr Gage opened his collection with the *Introduction to the 'Propyläen'* of 1799 which is more a declaration of intent than a discussion of individual works of art. Dr Gage himself remarks of Goethe in the Introduction that 'the further he retreated from the object, the vaguer became his thought, the more periphrastic his language and the more didactic his tone which earned him a reputation for pomposity brilliantly caricatured by Thomas Mann in his *Lotte in Weimar*.' Never mind Thomas Mann who had his own vein of pomposity. No doubt Goethe who had become a monument in his lifetime and had to entertain idle visitors from all over the world was sometimes tempted to pontificate, but why not, since, after all, he was a *pontifex*?

In any case, some of the extracts of letters and conversations happily included by Dr Gage, particularly those arising from contacts with artists, amply testify to Goethe's ability to step off his pedestal whenever he felt like it. But even at his most formal Goethe never for a moment lapsed into hollow verbiage. Thus when Dr Gage remarks at the end of his Introduction that 'Goethe's prose often seems to call for pruning' the emphasis should surely be on 'seems'. Only what is genuinely redundant can be pruned, and Goethe was far too great a master of language to use two words where one would have meant exactly the same. Admittedly this technique of enriching or modifying the meaning of a phrase by adding yet another qualifying adjective will inevitably resist transfer into another language, but what reconciles the German reader with the stately tempo of Goethe's writings is that astounding *copia verborum* which justifies indeed a comparison with Dante or Shakespeare. Once more we can quote Goethe's own words for his own awareness of this mastery; it comes from one of the ill-tempered *Venetian Epigrams* of 1790 which shows his lingering regret for his failure to become an artist in any medium but language:

Vieles hab' ich versucht, gezeichnet, in Kupfer gestochen,
Öl gemalt, in Thon hab' ich auch Manches gedruckt;
Unbeständig jedoch, und nichts gelernt noch geleistet;
Nur ein einzig Talent bracht' ich der Meisterschaft nah;
Deutsch zu schreiben. Und so verderb ich unglücklicher Dichter
In dem schlechtesten Stoff leider nun Leben und Kunst.

(So many things have I tried, I made drawings and copper engravings / Painted in oils and at times also modelled in clay; / Being unsteady, however, I never progressed to achievement / Only in one of my gifts close to perfection I came / Namely the writing of German. Thus, alas, in that worst of all media / I, an unfortunate scribe, waste both my life and my art.)

In his self-chosen task Dr Gage has thus come up against an inexorable law of translation; the better the style of the original, the less is it possible to transpose it into another language. Translation always borders on the impossible. There are words in any language for which there is no equivalent in another. All we can hope for in these cases is that the translation should not strike a false note.

For instance, when Goethe in his first essay addresses the French and Italians as *Welsche*, Dr Gage puts 'you dagoes' (p. 105, l. 9) which will not do. Elizabeth Holt in her version printed in vol. II of *A Documentary History of Art* is surely right in translating 'Welsche' as 'Latins'. Neither she or Dr Gage, on the other hand, were quite successful with Goethe's 'Wenigen ward es gegeben einen Babelgedanken in der Seele zu zeugen.' Dr Gage has 'It was given to few to create the idea of Babel in their soul' (p. 104, l. 14), Mrs Holt has 'an idea

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of *Babel*', but the compound used by Goethe is much less specific. If one would dare, one might suggest 'A Promethean thought', for Babel here only stands for the ambition or hubris of erecting the tower, not for the associations with sin and confusion which the reference retains in English.

But nobody who has ever been engaged in the laborious and thankless task of hunting equivalences will be censorious about the occasional admission of defeat. How can we tell how often we may also have missed a point when reading a foreign text? The real misunderstandings to be found in Dr Gage's translations are relatively few in relation to the length of the texts he rendered, and often rendered felicitously, but it is a matter for regret that he did not go through his text with a native speaker of German who could have saved him from occasional lapses. It may be somewhat invidious to have to give chapter and verse for this assertion but at least a few instances must be mentioned in the hope that such a check will be made in the preparation of a next edition:

'Deshalb ist unsere Absicht hier *ins Mittel zu treten*' does not mean, as Dr Gage writes on p. 7, 'to take a *middle course*' but rather 'to intervene', or 'to make ourselves useful'. Similarly he missed the sense of two idiomatic expressions in one passage from *The Collector and his Circle* (p. 41). The original reads: 'Hierzu trugen die eigenhändigen Radirungen verschiedener italienischer Meister, die meine Sammlung noch aufbewahrt, *das Ihrige treulich bei*, und so war ich auf gutem Wege, auf welchem eine andere Neigung mich *frühzeitig weiter brachte*.' Dr Gage translates: 'This development was aided by the etchings by various Italian masters which (*including yours*) are still in my collection and I was thus progressing on the right path, when another enthusiasm soon *drew me back*.' What the text really says is approximately: 'To this development the original etchings by various Italian masters *made their own important contribution*, and thus I was progressing on the right path along which another preference *took me still further*.'

In the discussion of the Phigalia sculpture mentioned above Goethe speaks of the compositional need to expand the torso or trunk of the Queen of the Amazons, using the term 'Rumpf' which Dr Gage (p. 95) renders as 'buttocks', a part of the figure's anatomy which is not even visible in the illustration. One of the most grievous misreadings occurs in the version of Goethe's Strasbourg essay already mentioned. Goethe here inveighs against the rococo artists and their 'made up dolls' and exclaims how much he prefers even the most 'wood-carved' angular or rugged figures of the 'manly' Dürer whom the modernists deride: 'Männlicher Albrecht Dürer, *den die Neulinge anspötteln*, deine *holzgeschnitzteste Gestalt* ist mir willkommener.' Dr Gage jumped to the conclusion that Goethe here speaks of Dürer's physiognomy rather than of his creations and translates: (p. 111) 'Your *wood-carved face*, O manly Dürer, whom *these novices* mock, is far more welcome to me' – and as if to confirm that the misunderstanding is real, he adds as an illustration a copy by Goethe of the artist's profile attributed to E. Schön.

Finally (to cut this discussion short), where Goethe in his notes on Venetian painting of 1790 characterises the pictures by Giovanni Bellini, he says that they are traditional rather than narrative: 'Da ist *allenfalls* ein Heiliger, der predigt', which becomes in Dr Gage's version (p. 125) 'there is *always* a saint preaching', an unlikely assertion based on a misreading of 'allenfalls' which does not mean 'in every case' but 'perchance'.

It would be unfair to suggest that these examples are typical of the author's effort, but the list could certainly be extended and also made to include evidence of hasty proof reading resulting in a garbled text, as when 'Now' becomes 'Nor' (p. 22), 'intention' 'attention' (p. 81) or 'beware' 'be aware' (p. 130).

Fortunately the majority of the 243 pages are free from such blemishes, but a thorough revision would certainly enhance the value of this important book.