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GOETHE’S THEORY OF ART

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Goethe’s theory of art, like his achievement in the field of natural science, was not a chance intellectual product; it was the driving force at the back of his artistic activities and was the support of his Weltanschauung. It embodied his mission in life (Aufgabe) which of necessity took shape under the influence of the social environment in which he lived. Goethe’s theory of art reaches its zenith in his theory of classical style (Stil), which is the ideological nucleus of German or Weimar classicism.

No doubt Goethe’s theory of art built around this nucleus of Stil first bloomed during his classical period. However, any view that regards it as the product of this period alone should be denounced as being too narrow.

To begin with, the fundamental nature of German classicism seems to be misunderstood when it is viewed only in the light of Goethe’s classical period from the time of his Italian journey to the death of his friend Schiller. Since the Renaissance, German bourgeoisie had fought against all the severe trials of feudalism and acquired the valiant rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment (Aufklärung). This spirit which took artistic form through the French Revolution became the life’s ideal of German bourgeoisie at that time, and consequently it became the central idea of German classicism. Of course German classicism may be regarded as one of the currents of European classicism; in fact, it has much in common with that in other European countries, especially France. But at the same time, German or Weimar classicism must needs have some characteristics of its own. So, in discussing it we must consider, along with the influences it received from other countries, the historical and social conditions of its own land in which it was nurtured.

For, Goethe’s classicism was no more than the final flowering of his life-long effort to attain his life’s ideal, or the life’s ideal of the German bourgeoisie of his time.

In the year immediately following his return from the Italian journey, Goethe wrote an essay, short but of paramount importance for understanding his theory of art, entitled Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil.

As the title shows, this essay deals with the characteristics of those three ideas which had been generally made use of in developing the theory of art, from the ancient time of Aristotle down to the 18th century, especially since the Renaissance. In this article, Goethe spurned the conventional stand taken by most critics before him, who treated each of the concepts as a separate thing without admitting any relation between them. Instead, Goethe graded them systematically and recognized dialectical promotion from imitation (Nachahmung) to style (Stil). Herein lies the striking significance of this article. He drew circumscribing lines between these three stages, and at the same time recognized their correlations.
Of course, each of these stages bears a meaning independent of the other two, and has the right of its own existence. No advancement of art can be expected without first passing through the stage of imitation. In the course of things, however, the artist will become discontented with mere imitation, and will try to extract a single object from among many which embodies the very element of all things in nature. This notion gives rise to the manner (Manier) of the artist. But to Goethe, Stil as the highest principle of artistic creation was his greatest concern and the starting point of the development of his classical theory of art. The concept “Stil” is of very ancient origin and can be traced back to rhetoric in classical antiquity. But it was Goethe who for the first time brought it up to the highest place in the theory of art.

Indeed, Goethe concludes his article on this subject with the following sentences, expressing a genuine pleasure and emotion he felt when he recognized Stil as the highest principle in his theory of art:

“Es ist uns bloss angelegen, das Wort Stil in dem höchsten Ehren zu halten, damit uns ein Ausdruck übrig bleibe, um den höchsten Grad zu bezeichnen, welchen die Kunst je erreicht hat und je erreichen kann. Diesen Grad auch nur zu erkennen, ist schon eine grosse Glückseligkeit, und davon sich mit Verständigen unterhalten, ein edles Vergnügen, das wir uns in der Folge zu verschaffen manche Gelegenheit finden werden.” (Goethes Samtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe (J.A.) 38, 59.)

According to Goethe, Stil raises the individual to the highest level in the field of art that Gattung can ever expect to reach. Obviously the word Gattung is used here in the sense of Gattung-Mensch. In the domain of German classicism, this idea of elevating the individual was the ideal of man as social being (humanitas), an idea that had long been fostered by Lessing, Herder, Schiller and others before it was finally consummated by Goethe. Accordingly, the more complete the artistic presentation of the socially-conscious human-being, the higher its excellence. Thus, in Goethe, the ultimate consequence of Stil was to stimulate humanistic activities. The positiveness of Goethe’s or Weimar classicism is clearly revealed in this point.

In order to understand this theory concretely and objectively (gegenständlich), we should search for Goethe’s experiences in Italy. In his essay, Schicksal der Handsschrift, Goethe explains the following three points which interested him during the journey: (1) the Greek art as the supreme model of artistic creation; (2) the complete harmony and orderliness of nature as the source of artistic formation; and (3) the folk (Volk). In broad terms, it may be said that what he discovered in Italy was the prototype (Urtypus) of nature, art, and human life. It was the dissociation of these three elements that had caused his ever-increasing restlessness during the early ten years of his Weimar life, that is, before the Italian journey. It was the discovery of the fundamental law which might reunite them that made him rejoice in Italy.

Granting that this discovery was made during his stay in Italy, a question will at once arise as to what was the background in his past that had formed its breeding ground. There is a sentence which brings out this question in his Roman letter of Jan. 25, 1788 addressed to Herzog Karl August in Weimar. The letter was sent just a few months before his return to Germany:

“Als ich zuerst nach Rom kam, bemerkt ich bald, dass ich von Kunst eigentlich gar nichts verstand, ...”
Is it true that Goethe had not understood anything at all about art when he first came to Rome? In other words, had he really no appreciation of art in der junge Goethe period, that is, in the period of Sturm und Drang before his Italian journey and his early ten years in Weimar? If we are not to take this passage in the letter literally, we may well wonder as to what made him say so and what sort of relation can have existed between Goethe's view of art in the period of Sturm und Drang and his classical theory of art. It is fundamentally wrong to take what he said here at its face value and say that his classical theory of art was first conceived in Italy and was founded on a basis contradictory to the idea of Sturm und Drang. Indeed, it is just as wrong as to say that the Sturm und Drang was the un rationalistic Antithese of the philosophy of Aufklärung.

The passion of the young genius let loose in torrents in Strassburg was fed by the currents of thought of his age. There Lessing had already started his fight, opposing French classicism which had suffered much from the Prussian and aristocratic distortion. There Klopstock had triumphantly sung out his lyrical poems touched by genuine feelings, objecting to the artificiality of artistic absolutism. The folk spirit defying the feudalistic absolutism had indeed been the basis of the Sturm und Drang movement.

The vague folk spirit based on this rebellious mind was given direction by Herder in Strassburg and was put into tangible shape as folk literature and folk art. Herder's influence on Goethe is expressed in the following phrase written by the latter in Dichtung und Wahrheit:

"...die ältesten Urkunden als Poesie gaben Zeugnis, dass die Dichtkunst überhaupt eine Welt- und Völkergabe sei, nicht ein Privat-Erbteil einiger feiner, gebildeten Männer." (J. A. 23, 233.)

The Volk spirit which proved to be the nucleus of Goethe's literary activities was thus fostered in this period.

Then, what made Goethe who had come to Rome with his Strassburg-acquired views of art and literature say "dass ich von Kunst eigentlich gar nichts verstand"? Was he forced to negate the view of art of his own youth?

To put down our conclusion first, what Goethe discovered and experienced in Italy was the proof of the idea which had been inspired in him in his early days by Herder. But it was also true that Goethe discovered something new which made him say as he did. Here we see the growth of Goethe's view of art, and the starting point of a new theory of art.

Now let us go back to the above-mentioned essay Schicksal der Handschrift, in which we may be able to find an important clue to the solution of our problem:

"Ferner glaubte ich der Natur abgemerkt zu haben, weil sie gesetzlich zu Werke gehe, um lebendiges Gebild, als Muster alles künstlichen, hervorzubringen." (J. A. 39, 318.)

The necessity (Gesetzlichkeit) of nature and its organic relation to art was the basic idea of Goethe's theory of art. He expressed this philosophy not only in this essay but in his Italian letters and diaries. Let us cite, as an example, the following passage in which he treats the Greek art as the supreme model of artistic creation:

"Diese hohen Kunstwerke sind zugleich als die höchsten Naturwerke von Menschen
The approval of the domination of objective orderliness in artistic creation and the rejection of subjective arbitrariness (Willkürliches) therein, was by no means Goethe's own origination; it had been traditional in French classicism since the seventeenth century. The German classicism, suffering from social changes from the time of Lessing down to Goethe, had to undergo various qualifications so that the discrepancies between it and the social trend of the times might be removed, while it maintained its central traditional idea intact. Lessing and Herder were the process engravers, and Goethe was the fulfilment of all that Lessing and Herder had promised.

It is natural that French classicism, because it was classicism, insisted on the agreement of form with substance. But under the influence of the political absolutism it had a tendency to claim superiority of form over substance. It was Lessing, the anti-feudalistic and enlightened mind, who fought against such formalism. But his fight was not thoroughly won, whereas Goethe for the first time solved the problem by means of dialectical unity, affirming the superiority of substance. If the artistic form is, as Goethe pointed out, a faithful reflection of the natural order of real things, the artist would have to be very prudent in choosing a material which will most accurately express it. And this means, in the theory of art, the superiority of substance over form.

"In Kunst und Wissenschaft so wie im Tun und Handeln kommt alles darauf an, dass die Objekte rein aufgefasst und ihrer Natur gemäss behandelt werden." (J. A. 4, 206.)

This maxim can be regarded as the declaration of the true realism which is the necessary consequence of superiority of substance. Goethe did not follow the transcendental aesthetists' way in searching for Gesetzlichkeit or Notwendigkeit. The aesthetists sought it in power (Potenz) in which fact is cloaked with myth. On the other hand, Goethe sought it objectively in facts, nature, and human life. In this we can see the most important characteristics of Goethe's or German classicism. It may be called "classical realism".

We have hitherto studied the growth of Goethe's theory of art chiefly in reference to his Italian experiences. But Goethe never considered any theory as eternally immutable. He constantly tried to enrich his theories through practical application and founded new ones on the basis of the older. There now happened two important incentives that encouraged him not in negating but in transcending and further developing his theory of art. One was the French Revolution that broke out in the year following his Italian journey, and the other was an intimate friendship with Schiller which was established in July 1794. To the last mentioned poet and dramatist Goethe had been philosophically indifferent until that time.

If the 1789 Revolution was the resistance of the bourgeoisie against feudalistic political absolutism, it is but natural that Goethe, who had always fought in the name of humanity, should have felt sympathy with its ideal. It is clearly seen in his famous speech at Valmy: "Von hier und heute geht eine neue Epoche der Weltgeschichte aus, und ihr könnt sagen, ihr seid dabei gewesen." (J. A. 28 60.) Goethe approved the French Revolution as a predestined and unavoidable event. But when the Revolution wildly swept all obstacles out of its way and began to rush forward on its own, Goethe suddenly took an unfriendly attitude towards it. This dual, contradictory concept of
the social phenomenon was common among most intellectuals, being a reflection of the unhappy situation of Germany at that time. Goethe's, of course, was no exception to this.

The duality of Goethe arising from his social concept is more clearly seen in his treatise entitled *Literarischer Sansculottismus* (1795), which is one of the best articles for understanding his artistic philosophy. In this Goethe discusses what he considers are the essential conditions upon which rest classical art which is his ideal and the possibility of its development. In short, he comments on the social bearings of classical art, and as a result of it, his duality is unmistakably revealed.

In discussing the essentials of classicism, he regrets deeply and with anger the lack of favourable social conditions in Germany. So we might well expect to hear Goethe's vehement voice in defence of antifeudalism and social reform. But contrary to our expectation, he simply says: "Wir wollen die Umwälzungen nicht wünschen, die in Deutschland klassische Werke vorbereiten könnten." (J. A. 36, 141.)

But on further examination, we can vividly see here Goethe's unique political viewpoint. His duality, which by chance became apparent after the French Revolution, inevitably brought his theory of art to a new focus. When he gave up social reform as one of the essential conditions of classical art, the only way left for him to approach the problem was from the angle of style.

As we have seen, Goethe's theory of art up to this time was, in substance, a theory of the essentials of art, though it was named the "theory of classical style." Now such a general theory of the essentials proved itself to be incompetent for solving his problem. One of the circumstances particularly unfavourable to him was the growing romanticism, especially its insistence on formlessness or freedom from compulsory rules. It was just under such circumstances that Goethe started an argument with Schiller on literary Genre. It was indeed a serious problem which brought the Weimar classicism to a crisis of life and death.

Goethe's first article on Genre was *Über epische und dramatische Dichtung* written in collaboration with Schiller in 1797. This article shows us that they did not treat Genre as merely a matter of form in literature. They discussed it as the author's attitude toward objects common (ähnliche Gegenstände) to both epic and dramatic poetry. The letters exchanged between them while they were working on the above-mentioned article provided it with added significance. These letters, which were published simultaneously with the article, are very important because they show us how much the confusion of Genres hinders the growth of literature, and what is more, how harmful it is for the development of classical art.

That Goethe and Schiller discussed literary Genre, which might seem a mere matter of form, so thoroughly in their articles and letters shows how strong was the antagonism between their classicism and the new romanticism with its insistence on formlessness. We can see in their letters that the enforcement of Genre was not for them a mere problem of form but was one directly concerned with the essentials of literature.

Now let us see Schiller's letter dated 26th December, 1797 and written in answer to Goethe's of 23rd December. Here Schiller made an important presentation of his theory of Genre. According to him, each Genre was not a mechanically separated,
inflexible category—to regard it as such was just the kind of formalism that Goethe most vehemently loathed—and he laid a special emphasis on the systematic relations between each Genre, while insisting on their strict separation. This idea of dialectical correlation of Genres was a token of Schiller’s logical way of thinking and must have been a valuable guide for Goethe. However, dealing with things dialectically was not a thing altogether new to Goethe. His sound eyes which saw into things as they really were had already noticed in the organic unity of nature—to Goethe, art was an honest reproduction of its orderliness—such dialectical development. However, in Goethe we see no conscious application of dialectical principles. Where Schiller saw Idee, Goethe experienced development from oneness to manyness.

It is undeniable, however, that Schiller’s assertion that the independence of the various Genres of literature from each other was not absolute but highly geistreich, and that their dialectical correlation made for its synthetic development, bore for Goethe many a fruitful suggestion. Goethe’s denunciation of romanticism was chiefly directed at its formlessness or freedom from every compulsory rule. By no means did he speak against Romanticism as a whole; he rightly appreciated its meaning and significance in the history of German culture. Goethe of course ignored the negative and reactional phase of Romanticism; but its positive side, such as the rediscovery of treasures among folk literature and furtherance of natural feeling in the individual mind, touched a sympathetic chord in his nature as is clearly seen in his critical essay about “Des Knaben Wunderhören.”

The Horen, the magazine which edited by Schiller offered Goethe a proper place for developing his theory of art, was discontinued in 1797 after three years’ existence. Its failure was due to the lack of support among literary circles. But in September of the succeeding year Goethe started a new journal called the Propyläen, which was published by the Cotta Company. Was he favoured with a satisfactory public understanding this time? Far from it. But in spite of the lack of public understanding, or rather because of it, Goethe dared to try to assert his classical principles. Einleitung in die Propyläen, the article he wrote for its first number, explicitly illustrates his vehement fighting-spirit.

In the first year Goethe wrote for the new journal two other articles, Über Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke and Über Laokoon, and in the following year, Der Sammler und die Seinigen. What is characteristic of all these articles, as is clearly seen in Einleitung, is that the tone of his writing is highly polemic (polemisch), being of the nature of party platform (programmatisch). If we accept the general truth that all theories are developed through argumentation, it is natural that Goethe’s contention should have become clearer and more convincing in these articles.

Of these articles which are all very important, Der Sammler und die Seinigen is especially of no small concern to our point at issue. It represents the growth and development of Goethe’s idea on beauty (Schönheit).

The central point of this interesting article lies in its fifth and sixth letters. The dialogue between der Sammler (the collector), who closely resembles Goethe, and his guest chiefly concerns itself with “beauty as the ultimate aim of art.” In answer to the latter’s question of what beauty is, der Sammler says that he can point out beautiful artistic products one by one, but it is impossible to determine beauty in the abstract. To this his guest opposes, saying:
"Schönheit kommt von Schein, sie ist ein Schein und kann als das höchste Ziel der Kunst nicht gelten: das vollkommene Charakteristische nur verdient schön genannt zu werden, ohne Charakter gibt es keine Schönheit.... Sie finden die Schönheit nie ohne Charakter, denn sonst würde sie leer und unbedeutend sein. Alles Schöne der Alten ist bloss charakterisch, und bloss aus dieser Eigentümlichkeit entsteht die Schönheit." (J. A. 33, 167f.)

The guest then points out Lessing's and Winckelmann's fault of overlooking the character of classical beauty, and continues further:

"So hat uns Lessing den Grundsatz aufgebunden, dass die Alten nur das Schöne gebildet; so hat uns Winckelmann mit der stillen Grösse, der Einfalt und Ruhe eingeschläpert, anstatt dass die Kunst der Alten unter allen möglichen Formen erscheint." (J. A. 33, 168.)

We have seen how Goethe attached great importance to classical art. To him Greek art was especially important as the model of artistic creation. But needless to say Goethe did not merely encourage a skillful imitation of classical art. Lessing had adored Greek art too. He devoted himself to the search for beauty as the ultimate end of art without attaching himself to any particular system of philosophical doctrine. Winckelmann found "edle Einfalt und stille Grösse" (noble simplicity and calm greatness) as the supreme essential of ancient art. And it can be said that their classical and rationalistic apprehension of Greek beauty offered fruitful suggestions to their followers in the deeper appreciation of French classicism.

But Goethe introduced the idea of characteristic (Charakteristisch) beauty as opposed to simple beauty. This he did through the guest's tongue in the above-mentioned article. Here we can see a new social condition which fortells the self-contradictions of capitalism which can never be removed by believing only in simple harmonious beauty. Love for characteristic beauty had become an indispensable phrase in the creed of every genuine romantic, but Goethe saw classical beauty in the dialectical synthesis of Winckelmannian beauty and characteristic beauty. It was a stage necessary for him to pass through in transcending Romanticism. (We have seen just the same process in his dealings with the problem of Genre.)

Meanwhile the Propyläen gradually lost its strength to oppose the growing ardour of Romanticism and the journal came to an end in 1800. Soon after that, Schiller, the only sympathetic friend and collaborator in the anti-romanticism war, closed his life of forty-six years in 1805. These occurrences made Goethe feel an acute solitude. We are able to suppose from the following letter addressed to Schiller that his gloomy feelings of solitude had been surging up for several years:

"...die Mauer, die ich schon um mein Existenz gezogen habe, soll nun noch ein Paar Schuhe hoch aufgeführt werden." (July 27, 1799.)

But these deep feelings of solitude neither weakened his confidence in human beings nor paralyzed his humanistic activities. On the contrary, through Schiller's death he realized all the more strongly his genuine mission in society; his faith in humanism became even more unshakable than before. Winckelmann, his last artistic treatise in the classical period, was written in 1905 under such circumstances. This article, according to the critics, is one of the most beautiful character sketches ever written, full of sincere love and understanding for the person depicted.
Another important point about this character sketch is that here Goethe's classicism is synthetically explained. At the same time he issued an open challenge to romanticism in this article. In opposition to freedom from any fixed form and to the reactionalism in romanticism, he maintained the classical style; and against the obscurantism, (Obskurantismus) and mysticism, he claimed wholesome paganism and the ancient spirit. Throughout the whole article he sang the praise of humanism.

It is not hard to imagine that his paganism might have laid itself open to the bitter criticism of romanticists.

Besides the ideological war against romanticism declared in the Propyläen, Goethe instituted, in Weimar in the fall of 1797, an art exhibition with the cooperation of amateur groups, so that he might carry his theory into practice. What was the result of this trial? It only shared the same fate as that of Propyläen. Every year the exhibition was opened, prizes were offered for the best entry, and a report was published as a sort of art criticism. But it lost popularity year after year, and the seventh one held in 1895 became the last. Goethe's unpublished writing penned at this occasion states in a sharp tone how unfruitful was his endeavour against the growing romanticism around him:

"Gemüt wird über Geist gesetzt, Naturell über Kunst, und so ist der Fähige wie der Unfähige gewonnen. Gemüt hat jedermann, Naturell mehrere; der Geist ist selten, die Kunst ist schwer." (Goethes Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe. Bd. 12, S. 129.)

Even in this short extract we can see his heroic determination to tolerate no other views but his own classical realism. There is also something that savours of the indignation of a vanquished general. The same sentiment echoes in the following maxim: "Die höheren Forderungen sind an sich schon schätzbarer, auch unerfüllt, als niedrige ganz erfüllte." (J. A. 35, 321.) This indeed reminds us of the mettle of the blind, old Faust.

However, the social conditions did not turn out in Goethe's favour. The political reform which upset all of Europe from the end of the 18th to the beginning of the 19th century reached its peak in Germany at the outbreak of the War of Liberation in 1815. But as Goethe gradually realized who had gained freedom by this war, he became aware of the limitations of his own artistic theory. He had long been looking upon the folk (Volk) as the potential leaders of the coming new era. But contrary to his expectations, the result of the Vienna Conference drove such an optimistic view far beyond the range of possibility. Thus Goethe's classical period came to an end; and from this time on, he gave up his ideological war and devoted himself to the practice of his isolated, and yet great, artistic theory. This lets us into the true sense of his philosophy of resignation (Entsagung). But his Entschluss was never that of a pessimistic philosopher. Who could find a shadow of pessimism in the old Goethe of eighty-one who spoke to Eckermann about the death of his life-long friend Sommering, the anatomist? Who could find it in his self-confident and presumptuous air—which Thomas Mann named "Präsumtuosität" in Phantasie über Goethe? There are also the great peaks of West-Östlicher Divan, Wanderjahre, Faust II etc. standing conspicuously among his many valuable experiences and hard fights against the trend of his time. From the tops of these peaks we can descry a rosy future which is to be built up through the cooperation of human beings enduring the present difficulties. How our hearts leap for joy when a song in praise of Goethe's classical humanism reaches our ears from that distant dreamland!