

## BERICHTE UND BESPRECHUNGEN

ELLIS DYE, *Love and Death in Goethe: "One and Double"* (= *Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture*, ed. JAMES HARDIN), Rochester, NY (Camden House) 2004, 333 pp.

In the preface to the first volume of his Goethe biography, Nicholas Boyle observes that post-1945 Goethe scholarship in the Federal Republic tended to edit, annotate and collate Goethe's works without necessarily interpreting them.<sup>1)</sup> Although this tendency may reflect the desire of some post-war German scholars to free Goethe's works from the tendentious ideological readings to which they were subjected leading up to and during the period of National Socialism, there may be another reason for this phenomenon: the sheer volume, complexity, and diversity of Goethe's literary, aesthetic and scientific output. When one adds to this the enormous amount of secondary literature on Goethe – including, for example, texts like Robert Steiger's painstakingly detailed eight volume chronicle entitled ›Goethes Leben von Tag zu Tag‹ – it is no surprise that many scholars have shied away from attempting to interpret the particularities of the Goethe phenomenon through a universal thematic topos.

When viewed against this background, Ellis Dye's ›*Love and Death in Goethe: "One and Double"*‹ must be seen as an extremely ambitious and impressive achievement. Dye undertakes an examination of the Liebestod topos in Goethe's works, using a chronological approach that begins with Sturm und Drang texts like ›Clavigo‹, the early poems, and ›Die Leiden des jungen Werther‹, continues through analyses of later poems and major novels like ›Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre‹ and ›Die Wahlverwandtschaften‹, and ends with ›Faust‹. The Liebestod, writes Dye, "is a formula and a fiction – an ideal that, like all ideals, is only approximated, never fully realized" (7). Although, strictly defined, a Liebestod occurs when two lovers die at the same time in each other's arms, Dye is more interested in the general relationship between love and death in Goethe's works, along with the philosophical issues that flow from this relationship.

The philosophical questions raised by the Liebestod can be traced back to Plato's ›Symposium‹ and ›Phaedrus‹, and might be expressed in the following way: in its most extreme form, eros represents the desire of the subject or lover to unify himself completely with the love-object. By definition, then, love as eros presupposes a distance between subject and object, and corresponds with the desire to overcome this distance. Yet at the same time, one's individual identity, and by extension one's capacity to love, is conditioned by the differentiation between subject and object that love seeks to overcome. Is it possible to fuse oneself with another and yet retain one's own identity? Or, to invoke the title of Dye's book, can two lovers be both one and double? Does unconditional eros, the longing for total fusion with the love-object, lead inexorably to a

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<sup>1)</sup> NICHOLAS BOYLE, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. 1, Oxford 1991, p. ix.

loss of individual identity, to madness, and ultimately to death? Is it possible to fall in love with one's own subjective idea of the beloved rather than with the beloved as they exist in reality? And how does one distinguish between one's subjective ideas about reality and what Kant calls reality "an sich"?

It is, according to Dye, no coincidence that such questions reverberate throughout Goethe's oeuvre, since they are central to a period in European literary history in which the subject-object dichotomy was the key issue in German philosophy: the Romantic period (10). But was Goethe, the exponent of Weimarer Klassik who stated "Klassisch ist das Gesunde, romantisch das Kranke", really a Romantic poet? While traditional Germanistik has maintained a more or less strict differentiation between Sturm und Drang, Weimarer Klassik and Romantik, Dye belongs to a line of scholars – including M. H. Abrams, René Wellek, Hans Robert Jauß and Klaus L. Berghahn, to name just a few – who see the aesthetic and ideological differences between these movements as no more than a "Familienzwist".<sup>2)</sup> Dye argues convincingly that what unites Goethe with contemporaries like Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis is his preoccupation with the dialectical relationship between subject and object, and particularly between the self and nature; a preoccupation that begins in works of the Sturm und Drang period and continues, in various forms, throughout the remainder of Goethe's literary career.

Perhaps the earliest and most striking representations of this subject-object dialectic in Goethe's works can be found in poems like ›Mahomets Gesang‹, ›Prometheus‹ and ›Ganymed‹. All three poems articulate what Goethe refers to in ›Dichtung und Wahrheit‹ as the polarity between subjective self-assertion or "sich verselbstigen" on the one hand, and self-submergence or "sich entselbstigen" on the other,<sup>3)</sup> while also dealing with a concept central to Romanticism: that of genius. ›Prometheus‹ is the clearest example of the genius problem as manifested in the Sturm und Drang period. As Goethe specifies in his essay ›Von deutscher Baukunst‹ (1772), the key features of genius are unity, originality, autonomy, sincerity, and naturalness. But in order to be absolutely original, the genius cannot recognise a source that precedes him, otherwise he becomes derivative. At its most radically subjective extreme, then, the genius wishes to displace God/Nature and occupy the position of the origin – to install itself as both the subject and object of mimesis: "Hier sitz ich, forme Menschen | Nach meinem Bilde".<sup>4)</sup> The opposite pole of this dialectic is displayed in both ›Mahomets Gesang‹ and ›Ganymed‹. In the former poem, the subject, embodied in a stream that rushes down a mountain side, eventually merges itself with its father, the ocean, while in the latter poem, the subject and God/Nature embrace one another with such complete reciprocity – expressed in Goethe's remarkable phrase "Umfangend umfassen" – that subject and object become virtually indistinguishable (56f.). In both poems a loss of individual identity is experienced by the subject, but it is unclear whether this loss is to be viewed positively or negatively; on the one hand it may represent the moment of absolute blissful unity experienced by lovers, in which the double becomes one, while on the other hand it may also be an example of pathological love: the inability to distinguish self from other.

The pathological side of this dualism is, of course, given its most famous and comprehensive representation in ›Die Leiden des jungen Werther‹, a work that is subjected to an extensive analysis by Dye. After offering a useful overview of the novel's detailed and turbulent reception

<sup>2)</sup> HANS ROBERT JAUSS, *Deutsche Klassik – eine Pseudo-Epoche?*, in: *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein*, ed. REINHART HERZOG and REINHART KOSELLECK, München 1987, p. 583.

<sup>3)</sup> GOETHE, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, Frankfurter Ausgabe, vol. 1.14, ed. KLAUS-DETLEF MÜLLER, Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 385. Discussed by Dye, S. 17.

<sup>4)</sup> GOETHE, *Prometheus*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, Frankfurter Ausgabe, vol. 1.1, *Gedichte 1756–1799*, ed. KARL EIBL, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p. 204.

history, Dye stakes out his own position with respect to Goethe's most successful and controversial work. He sketches three common interpretations of Werther's unfortunate fate: the first argues that Werther is a pathological individual whose lack of stability is the sole cause of his downfall; the second proposes that his fate emerges from an inflexible society characterised by a strict social hierarchy; while the final position argues that a clash between Werther's personality and the limitations of class stratification are to blame for the novel's tragic end (81f.). Taking what at first seems to be a post-modern stance, Dye argues that all three of these alternatives are inadequate, since they endeavour to "distinguish the 'objective' state of affairs from Werther's perception of them" (84). Support for this argument can be found in the fact that ›Werther‹ is an epistolary novel in which every letter is written by the eponymous protagonist, thereby allowing no objective voice to intrude upon his eminently subjective world-view. This is no doubt correct, since even the voice of the Herausgeber is non-omniscient and offers an arguably subjective interpretation of Werther's behaviour and ultimate fate.

On the other hand, Dye goes on to contradict his own argument when he alleges that "Lotte's situation and her actions are aspects of the objective state of affairs with which Werther wrestles and which, finally, seem to require that he leave the world" (87). Since these actions are reported to us through the perspectives of Werther and the Herausgeber, it is difficult to see how they can be given the objective status that Dye affords them. How much of Werther's reportage is fact and how much embellished fantasy? How much is perception and how much projection? In working against earlier interpretations of ›Werther‹ as a proto-Freudian case history, Dye swerves too far in the opposite direction by finding an objectivity in Werther's account of events that cannot be substantiated by textual evidence.

In fact, it is precisely Werther's lack of objectivity that reveals another aspect of the Liebestod analysed by Dye: the tendency of the lover to project his own subjective fantasies and desires onto the love-object. In ›Werther‹, Lotte functions as a screen onto which the protagonist projects a number of eminently aesthetic preoccupations, the most prominent of which is his desire to see her as representing the Pantheistic concept of Nature propagated during the Sturm und Drang period. Dye helpfully points out that as a representative of Nature, Lotte is for Werther "both *arché* and *telos*", both the origin from which he purportedly emerged and the source to which he desires to return (88). Yet within this very desire there also exists a powerful ambivalence, since Werther also fears that in unifying himself with Lotte he will experience a loss of identity, since "any fusion implies the destruction of separate selves and is therefore threatening as well as appealing" (90).

It is especially with respect to male ambivalence towards female love-objects that Dye's analysis of Goethe's works is at its most original, compelling and convincing. While recognising the fact the love-death topos also appears in literature written by women, Dye observes that the excessive masculine focus on separateness and individuation goes hand in hand with a longing for "Ent-individuation" and a fear that women may consume and devour them (37f.). Covering similar ground to Klaus Theweleit in ›Männerphantasien‹,<sup>5)</sup> Dye argues that it is this psychological ambivalence that gives rise to the notion of the *vagina dentata*, which combines "the concept of engulfment by the enveloping womb with the idea of oral devouring," and in which "the vagina becomes a mouth, and the mouth a tunnel to the source" (68). Variations on this topos can of course be found throughout the history of Western literature, from the myth of the Sirens in Homer's ›Odyssey‹ to the Lorelei myth, and Goethe's depictions of both die Mütter and Helena in ›Faust, zweiter Teil. A notable aspect of this cultural phenomenon is the common association between women, fluidity and water, as Dye points out in his sensitive reading of the "feuchtes Weib" who appears in Goethe's poem ›Der Fischer.‹ Is this Weib part of an objective reality to

<sup>5)</sup> KLAUS THEWELEIT, *Männerphantasien*, Frankfurt/M. 1977.

which the poem's protagonist responds? Or is she the fisherman's projection, a fantasy of woman as both alluring and destructive? Is, moreover, the spectral Erlkönig in Goethe's famous poem a figment of the child's imagination, or a manifestation of the devouring powers of nature? In exploring these questions without needing to foreclose them, Dye's interpretations display what Keats famously called "Negative Capability", in which "man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>6</sup> Always taking into account, but also moving beyond, commonly accepted interpretations of some of Goethe's most famous poems – and here one thinks in particular of the love-death poem par excellence, ›Selige Sehnsucht‹ – Dye achieves a level of freshness and originality rarely found in contemporary Goethe scholarship.

There are some minor problems, however, with the epistemological aspect of Dye's argument, which may in part be put down to the difficulty of dealing comprehensively, in one volume, with the entirety of Goethe's thought on the subject-object dichotomy. Dye is correct when he points out that the relationship between subject and object lies at the very heart of Goethe's intellectual exchanges with Schiller, but he then neglects fully to examine the influence upon Goethe of the philosopher who did more than any other to shape the nature of these exchanges: Immanuel Kant.

Goethe's most direct attempts to reckon with Kant are for the most part contained within his writings on scientific method, particularly essays like ›Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt‹ (1793) and ›Erfahrung und Wissenschaft‹ (1798), not to mention ›Zur Farbenlehre‹ (1810). While it is true to suggest that Goethe did experiment, in his fictional works, with many different configurations of the subject-object dichotomy – as Dye observes in his discussion of ›Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre‹ (169-170) – it is incorrect to maintain that the post-Kantian Goethe desired "absolute Identität" between subject and object (231). Here Dye confuses Goethe's desires with those of Werther and Faust, since Goethe certainly did not believe that "the knowledge most worth having obliterates the separations on which relational knowledge depends," and "annihilates the agents of knowledge, the knowers" (247). It is precisely the desire for this kind of knowledge that blinds Faust in the second part of Goethe's great drama, and the reason why Goethe is able to portray Faust's psychological state so persuasively is because he (that is, Goethe) had already recognised that it is based upon folly.

When, in the late 1790's, Goethe was confronted with a philosophical system that proposed a complete continuity between human ideas and the purposiveness of nature – namely, the early *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling – he responded with extreme skepticism. In a letter to Schiller dated 6 January 1798, for example, Goethe dismisses the notion that an identity between subject and object is achievable or even desirable; the only way of knowing, according to Goethe, is through separateness, through the subject experiencing a "Bestimmung von außen" and a "Verhältnis nach außen."<sup>7</sup> After his encounters with Kant and Schelling during the 1790's, Goethe's epistemology remained a kind of ironic Kantianism based upon the concept of *Entsagung*; maintaining, on the one hand, that we always approach nature through ideas (and here one thinks of the *Urpflanze*), while at the same time realizing that such ideas can only ever be subjective, schematic and therefore subject to constant revision in light of further experience. Complete epistemological consummation can perhaps, in one's most Faustian moments, be dreamt of, but never achieved.

<sup>6</sup>) JOHN KEATS, To George and Thomas Keats, 21. Dezember 1821, in: The Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. 2, eds. M. H. ABRAMS et al., 5. Aufl., New York 1986, p. 863.

<sup>7</sup>) GOETHE, An Schiller, 6. Januar 1798, in: Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens, Münchner Ausgabe, vol. 8.1, Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Schiller, ed. MANFRED BEETZ, München 1990, S 489.

Notwithstanding these minor epistemological quibbles, Ellis Dye has, in ›Love and Death in Goethe‹, made an extremely important contribution to contemporary Goethe's studies, drawing upon a vast array of Goethe's works, and offering interpretations that are often bold and compelling. This book stands alongside Robert Richards' ›The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe‹ as the best book in English on Goethe that I have read in the last few years.<sup>8)</sup>

Angus Nicholls (London).

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<sup>8)</sup> ROBERT RICHARDS, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*, Chicago 2002.