



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Classicism: Excerpts from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann (1824-28)

The poet, author, and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was the leading representative of German literary classicism and traditionally shares with Friedrich Schiller the title of German national poet. The following excerpts are taken from *Conversations with Eckermann*, in which Goethe describes, near the end of his life, his approach to literature, distinguishing it from that of the Romantics. His young associate Johann Peter Eckermann, himself a writer, recorded these exchanges and published them after Goethe's death.

Thursday, February 26, 1824

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We then opened the portfolios, and proceeded to the examination of the drawings and engravings. Goethe, in such matters, takes great pains on my account, and I see that it is his intention to give me a higher degree of penetration in the observation of works of art. He shows me only what is perfect in its kind, and endeavors to make me apprehend the intention and merit of the artist, that I may learn to pursue the thoughts of the best, and feel like the best. "This," said he, "is the way to cultivate what we call taste. Taste is only to be education by contemplation, not of the tolerably good, but of the truly excellent. I, therefore, show you only the best works; and when you are grounded in these, you will have a standard for the rest, which you will know how to value, without overrating them. And I show you the best in each class, that you may perceive that no class is to be despised, but that each gives delight when a man of genius attains its highest point. For instance, this piece, by a French artist, is *galant*, to a degree which you see nowhere else, and is therefore a model in its way."

[. . .]

Wednesday, April 14, 1824

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"There are likewise among the German women, genial beings who write a really excellent style, and, indeed, in that respect surpass many of our celebrated male writers."

"The English almost always write well; being born orators and practical men, with a tendency to the real.

"The French, in their style, remain true to their general character. They are of a social nature, and therefore never forget the public whom they address; they strive to be clear, that they may convince their reader – agreeable, that they may please him.

"Altogether, the style of a writer is a faithful representative of his mind; therefore, if any man wish to write a clear style, let him first be clear in his thoughts; and if any would write in a noble style, let him first possess a noble soul."

[. . .]

Tuesday, March 22, 1825

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I remarked, "Older persons, who lived in those times, cannot praise highly enough the elevated position which the Weimar theatre then held."

"I will not deny that it was something," returned Goethe. "The main point, however, was this, that the Grand Duke left my hands quite free, and I could do just as I liked. I did not look to magnificent scenery and a brilliant wardrobe, but I looked to good pieces. From tragedy to farce, every species was welcome; but a piece was obliged to have something in it to find favour. It was necessary that it should be great and clever, cheerful and graceful, and, at all events, healthy and containing some pith. All that was morbid, weak, lachrymose, and sentimental, as well as all that was frightful, horrible, and offensive to decorum, was utterly excluded; I should have feared, by such expedients, to spoil both actors and audience.

Wednesday, January 17, 1827

[. . .]

From the old German time, the conversation turned upon the Gothic. We spoke of a bookcase which had a Gothic character, and from this were led to discuss the late fashion of arranging entire apartments in the old German and Gothic style, and thus living under the influences of a bygone time.

"In a house," said Goethe, "where there are so many rooms that some are entered only three or four times a year, such a fancy may pass; and I think it a pretty notion of Madame Pankoucke at

Paris that she has a Chinese apartment. But I cannot praise the man who fits out the rooms in which he lives with these strange, old-fashioned objects. It is a sort of masquerade, which can, in the long run, do no good in any respect, but must, on the contrary, have an unfavorable influence on the man who adopts it. Such a fashion is in contradiction to the age in which we live, and will only conform the empty and hollow way of thinking and feeling in which it originates. It is well enough, on a merry winter's evening, to go to a masquerade as a Turk; but what should we think of a man who wore such a mask all the year round? We should think either that he was crazy, or in a fair way to become so before long."

[. . .]

Wednesday, January 31, 1827

[. . .]

"I am more and more convinced," he continued, "that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere, and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men. One makes it a little better than another, and swims on the surface a little longer than another – that is all. Herr von Matthisson must not think he is the man, nor must I think that I am the man; but each must say to himself that the gift of poetry is by no means so very rare, and that nobody need think very much of himself because he has written a good poem.

"But really, we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle which surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen; but if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically, appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes."

[. . .]

Monday, October 20, 1828

[. . .]

"Your excellency," said I, "made an excellent remark a little while ago, when you said that the Greeks turned to nature with their own greatness, and I think that we cannot be too deeply penetrated with this maxim."

"Yes, my good friend," said Goethe, "all depends upon this; one must *be* something in order to *do* something. Dante seems to us great; but he had the culture of centuries behind him. The house of Rothschild is rich; but it has taken more than one generation to accumulate such treasures. All these things lie deeper than is thought.

"Our worthy artists who imitate the old German school know nothing of all this; they proceed to the imitation of nature with their own personal weakness and artistic incapacity, and fancy they are doing something. They stand below nature. But whoever will produce anything great must so improve his culture that, like the Greeks, he will be able to elevate the mere trivial actualities of nature to the level of his own mind, and really carry out that which, in natural phenomena, either from internal weakness or external obstacles, remains a mere intention."

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Source: *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*. Translated by John Oxenford. London: George Bell & Sons, 1874, pp. 67, 79, 120-21, 194, 212-13, 341-42.