The Madwoman on a Pilgrimage

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Translated by
Jonathan Katz and Andrew Piper

ET REMOTISSIMA PROPE

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birth with a shadowy past, the baron invites her to live at his family home where she becomes the focus of both his and his son's attentions. This story not only plays on the theme of attachment – central to the *Wanderjahre* – but also warps the relationships of father and son, beggar and benefactor, creating a near-farcical melodrama about who has overstepped the mark: the weird woman from the country road or the strait-laced landed gent? Even in 'Who is the Traitor?' – the most upbeat and playful of the three stories – Goethe's tone is ironic, almost disparaging. Ultimately, the happiness of the central couple is dependent on a series of deceptions and capricious partner-swapping, making us wonder how well-intentioned the cast of characters really is.

While these tales are riddled with improper passions, it would be wrong to say they are gaudy. Goethe refrains from daubing the paper with lascivious impropriety. Instead, he teases us with swipes at his characters and the reader; he implies 'secret unions' and 'fresh blooms [...] in pale cheeks' but never joins the dots. In the final tale 'Not too Far!' events turn on a man 'so passionately agitated by an apparently trivial incident'. Goethe knows better than most that a subtle turn of phrase can be more inculpatory than any snapshot of a couple in flagrante.

In 1963, the critic Richard Friedenthal called the *Wanderjahre* a 'repository for the wisdom of Goethe's old age'. If these stories are indeed the nuggets of a career dotted with its fair share of illicit passions, then we might conclude that we, too, are only a 'trivial incident' away from the maelstrom of our own illicit desires.

– Lewis Crofts, 2010

INTRODUCTION

'Traitor!' Few words emerge more strikingly in Goethe's late work than that of '*Verrat*' or 'betrayal'. The three stories collected here are all drawn from a creative period in Goethe's life that began when he turned fifty and ended with his death at the age of eighty-two. They have been brought together because of their shared interest in this provocative nexus of erotic and communicative betrayal that became a hallmark of Goethe's later career. Whether it is the young pilgrimess who sings a tale of a miller's daughter betraying her lover to her family; the young man who betrays his true feelings about a mismatched fiancée; or the comical coach ride of 'Not too Far!' in which everyone betrays everyone else, infidelity was at the very heart of Goethe's thinking about literature towards the end of his life. As he would famously write in one of the poems accompanying his Oriental reverie, *The West-East Divan* (1816–17), 'Writing poetry is itself a betrayal.'

Infidelity in literature is of course an old topic, perhaps one of the oldest of topics. As long as men and women have been sleeping with each other, and then someone else, there have been tales to tell. But it was amidst the world of the early modern European court – and the genre of the courtly romance that it spawned – that infidelity assumed its most pivotal cultural role. Cross-dressing aristocrats hopping in and out of each other's beds and then lamenting their betrayals off in the woods or in a private changing room, this was the stuff of European literature for centuries, from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (*c.*1350) to María de Zayas' *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637) to Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782). The panoply of narrative infidelity – its seemingly inexhaustible supply of combinatory permutations

– provided early modern readers not only with an encyclopedic repertoire of cautionary tales but also that all-important ingredient of boundless readerly titillation. Like the unflaggingly horny lovers in their fictions, readers weren't supposed to stop either.

This is the world from which the heroine of our first story, 'The Madwoman on a Pilgrimage', emerges. She seems to walk literally right out of one of these courts and into Herr von Revanne's grove (suggestively called a *Lustwäldchen* in the German, a sexy little wooded space). He drops his book in surprise. At first we might surmise that, like Paolo and Francesca, no more will be read that day. But we would be wrong. She sighs and then he does too. *And then she goes home to work for him.* The dropped book is not a rather witless dirty joke, but a sign that something different is going on here. Something very different. We gradually learn that she looks like she belongs at court, but she is missing her retinue. There is something incomplete about her. She is surrounded by a vacancy, by something both we and the characters in the story cannot know. She is said to be on a pilgrimage, but we never learn her destination or her starting point. There is no Mecca or Jerusalem here, and not really much of God either. The circularity at the heart of the pilgrimage turns into a wandering, twisted line of secularity, a line that the reader cannot ultimately follow.

Perhaps no other story captured the two great fundamental transformations that were taking place in European societies at the end of the eighteenth century as succinctly and as comically as 'The Madwoman on a Pilgrimage'. In just a few short pages we symbolically experience the decline of both the aristocracy and Christianity *at the same time*. It is little wonder that it became a sensation in Goethe's circle in Weimar when it

first appeared there – in its initial French version in the fateful year of 1789 – via Heinrich August Ottokar Reichard's *Cahier de Lecture*, a journal responsible for communicating all things French to German intellectuals across the Rhine. The arrival of the 'Madwoman' coincided, coincidentally or not, with the French Revolution that set all of Europe on its head. The story we have here is a translation by Goethe undertaken several decades later in preparation for his novel-cum-novella collection, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* (1808–29). There was something about this story, and about the act of translation, that marked an important new point of departure for Goethe's late work. The madwoman or *Törin* was like a portal or *Tor* to the next phase of his career.

One of the essential ways that tales of betrayal had mattered to their courtly readers was through the dramatisation of a confessional moment. The act of erotic betrayal was often conflated with one of communicative betrayal as a jilted lover would recount the story usually alone in the woods or sequestered in a closet somewhere. But she or he was seldom alone: the story needed to be overheard by another party. The tale of betrayal, in other words, needed to be betrayed to someone else. Such scenes were a way for the narrative to argue for its own authenticity. Amidst all the flirtatious deceptions at court, there was still a space where individuals could disclose what they truly felt, where individuals could finally mean what they said. Such dramas of authenticity at the periphery were used to understand the dissimulation at the centre of the early modern court.

In 'The Madwoman on a Pilgrimage', by contrast, we never get this controlling framework. There is no stability at the margins any more. Betraying something (as opposed to betraying someone) is no longer framed as a guarantor of authenticity

– that this story is true because I do not mean to divulge it – but instead as a sign of a universal communicative malady. Things are constantly being betrayed to listeners, but we (and they) are never quite sure what. The pilgrimess sings a tale of a man who has been betrayed by his lover (she announces his presence early one morning to her family). At the end of the song the narrator tells us that this was the man who amorously betrayed her. After the song is over, the pilgrimess's listeners do not know how to respond. Is this 'romance' about her, especially when she is classified as a 'madwoman'? How can we be sure that a madwoman is telling the truth? And shouldn't we beware of making the elementary mistake of confusing a narrator with an author?

After the song is over we are told that her listeners were surprised that 'she could forget herself in this way'. Which self did she forget, the crazy one or the sane one? And yet such self-forgetting seems to be contagious. The listeners too, we are told, 'forget themselves', or at least what they said to her afterwards. In other words, no one has any idea what they are saying to each other any more. The pilgrimess seems to speak only in unintelligible aphorisms anyway, a modern-day sphinx. It is, in short, a world of pure misunderstanding, a point that reaches a fever pitch by the twist at the end of the story.

So why so much literary betrayal in this work that Goethe chose to translate and make the centre of his last monumental work of fiction? The simplest answer is that this was a translation and no association was more emphatic throughout the early modern period than that of the translator with the traitor. As the Italians had it, *traduttore traditore*, to translate is to betray, or as a popular group of French translators called themselves in the seventeenth century, *les belles infidèles*. Goethe chose this work to translate, one could say, because

it was about the perils of translating and being translated, something that was occurring to him regularly as he became a star on the European literary stage. Like the listeners in the 'Madwoman', it was clear that Goethe's listeners in other languages very often had no idea what he was saying.

But on a deeper level, I think there is a more profound point to be made as to why Goethe was drawn to this element of communicative betrayal at the heart of translation in his late career. The schema that had surrounded tales of betrayal for centuries, 'court/simulation vs. not-court/truth', was giving way to a new universal truth of simulation at the end of the eighteenth century. According to this proto-modernist logic, all language games were simulations and thus all language games required interpretation, the filling in of the surplus of meaning that followed from the void of meaning at their heart, like the pilgrimess's missing retinue.

Such epochal shifts in how we think about language and literature were of course tied to major sociological changes, too. The tale of betrayal was a powerful way for Goethe to reflect on the changing nature of writing at the turn of the nineteenth century and the increasing distance between an author and his public. The courtly romance was predicated on the physical proximity of its interlocutors – that the means and the end were the same: one used one's body to communicate that one would like to use another person's body. Language was fundamentally gestural, and bodies were at the heart of interpreting the meaning of how we communicated with each other. But in a world that was increasingly mediated, in a world overwhelmingly shaped by writing, print, and the book, how was an author to retain control of the meaning of what he said amidst the swirl of so many distant and anonymous readers? How were these readers, disassociated from the

personal connections to writers that had characterised the system of writerly patronage for centuries, to know what an author truly meant? It seemed that an unbridgeable gap had emerged, a gap that was at the heart of an increasingly mediated world.

If this sounds like it has a lot to do with our present, it does. That is one of the major reasons why Goethe still matters today. Few authors were as concerned with this change, with what it meant to inhabit a world suffused with written mediation, as he was. And few authors explored in more extravagant and thoughtful detail what it meant for us to inhabit this world than he did. I leave it up to readers to try and see how such fundamentally modern concerns with the treachery of written words also assume centre stage in the two other tales included here.

– Andrew Piper, 2010

The Madwoman on a Pilgrimage