

INTRODUCTION

‘There are certain words that, like a lightning bolt, bring forth a garden of flowers within my deepest recesses, like memories fingering the strings of my soul’s Aeolian harp – words like: longing, spring, love, home, Goethe.’

– Joseph von Eichendorff

Goethe has always been more myth than man. Author of *Faust* (Parts One and Two), classical dramas and musical comedies, epistolary novels and novels of coming of age, lyric poetry and cyclical poetry, scientific works that included reflections on the metamorphosis of plants and the theory of colour, Goethe wrote for so long (almost seven decades) and so much (over fourteen thousand letters) that even during his lifetime he was already considered a literary deity. Yet Goethe’s monumentality only reached its true zenith with the 143-volume ‘Weimar’ edition of his collected works that was published at the turn of the twentieth century by a committed, if not slightly quixotic, group of German philologists.

Here we encounter a very different Goethe, a more diminutive Goethe. Instead of the 12,111 lines of *Faust* that took over fifty years to write, you are about to read a very short piece of prose fiction about a man who loses his front tooth, in other words, about a man who falls to pieces. There is elegance to this simplicity.

If nothing else, the publication of *The Man of Fifty* into English should have a corrective effect. It will perhaps displace *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as the work you reach for if you want to sample Goethe’s fiction. *Werther* is the work of a young man – passionate, biting, dripping in bathos – while *The Man of Fifty*, as the title suggests, is the work of an

old man – calm, contemplative, and controlled by irony. In *Werther*, letters function like diary entries, testaments to the soul's pullulations. In *The Man of Fifty* we have letters, but we are never allowed to read them. They are important information packets that travel about while remaining inaccessible. The soul has been locked up, perhaps for ever. Instead of a story about the tidal waves of sentiment that conclude in a young man's suicide, here we have a story about the trickiness of sharing, the complexity of claiming a story as truly your own. The slim volume of *The Man of Fifty* is the perfect counterweight to the ponderous bulk of the collected works perched imperiously on any library's or scholar's bookshelves.

Goethe began writing *The Man of Fifty* in 1807, just prior to turning fifty. It was a period in his life when he remarked, 'I have become historical to myself.' Good friends were beginning to pass away, including his confidant Friedrich von Schiller, who died in 1805, as were entire political systems that had once defined the eighteenth century: the French Revolution not only consumed the Court of Versailles, but also, in 1806, the Holy Roman Empire, that awkward political amalgam whose sheer multiplicity, ungainliness, and respect for local tradition had always both impressed and frustrated Goethe.

The Man of Fifty was not published for another decade, however, until 1818, in Johann Cotta's annual anthology, *The Pocket Book for Women*, and then in much shorter form than we know it today. It was republished in 1821 as part of Goethe's last novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, which was actually more of a novella collection than a novel. It finally appeared in a much expanded version – the version published here – as part of the rewritten

Wilhelm Meister, no longer called a novel and published as part of his last authorised collected works at the age of eighty in 1829.

In other words, work on this short piece about old age spanned the entirety of Goethe's old age. It is a narrative marked by a lack of time, told by a narrator who is always in a hurry (he loves to say, 'suffice it to say...'). *The Man of Fifty* captures that experience of death in life, the temporally and emotionally complex experience of old age for which we have surprisingly few narratives. Two hundred years ago, Goethe was asking questions about what it meant for a society to be defined by being old, a demographic truth that has become overwhelmingly real in Western nations with their teetering systems of social security. Goethe acutely sensed how the coupling of vanity and technology would have a profound impact on our social structures, our families and our affairs. The story of the major's 'rejuvenation servant' and the magical 'cosmetics case' – the temptations of perfection and perpetuity – will undoubtedly serve as a key cautionary tale as we enter the Age of Enhancement.

There is another important concern of this novella, one that is not as readily apparent from the title. In many of the works that Goethe himself translated, the hero was very often a fool. That Goethe equated translating with being foolish is a powerful warning to anyone daring to translate him. But Goethe also said that every translator was a 'prophet within his own people'. There was a certain wisdom to the fool's – and the translator's – rhetoric, to his outsider status and the nonsense that he sometimes spoke. If Goethe wrote the first version of *The Man of Fifty* at a time when things were passing away in his life, he was writing the revised version

at a time when he was intensely interested in the idea of *Weltliteratur* ('world literature'). It was a time when he was reading the Paris import, *Le Globe*, every day and thinking about the *commerce intellectuel* that the dramatic expansion of print was making possible. *The Man of Fifty* is thus also crucially concerned with both the heroism and the perils of translation, with what happens when you imagine writing as fundamentally an act of exchange.

The novella opens, not surprisingly then, with a crisis of owning property. How will the family consolidate their inheritance if the two cousins – the major's son and his sister's daughter – do not marry? That there was already something illicit in this hoped-for union is not lost on Goethe, nor on the characters themselves, and it is replaced by another possible transgression – the niece, Hilarie, will marry her uncle, the major, and the land will be theirs. Possession, in *The Man of Fifty*, is always configured as something slightly perverse.

Just as there is a crisis of 'property', so too of one's 'properties'. Goethe plays with the connections between *das Äußere*, one's exterior, and *die Äußerung*, one's speech, to build a felicitous bridge between the concerns of the first half of the novella and those of the second. The major's obsession with his *dress* will later become an obsession with his modes of *address*. We repeatedly encounter him struggling to paraphrase, translate or compliment himself out of various uncomfortable social circumstances. The crisis of being oneself in the novella is refigured as a crisis of speaking for oneself. 'Sharing,' warns the major's cosmetic master, 'is more difficult than you think.'

Sharing is thus the problem and the promise of *The Man of Fifty*. Sharing means both to impart something and

to divide it in parts. It means that we are never alone and nothing is ever wholly our own. As a novella of shares and sharing, *The Man of Fifty* speaks to the conditions of our increasingly media-dense social geographies today, just as it was meant to address the rising tide of books upon books that shaped Goethe's own world.

The concerns with the back-and-forth, the to-and-fro of this new landscape converge in a single key word that previous translations of *The Man of Fifty* have often treated unsystematically: 'grace' (*Anmut* or *Gnade*). Whether it is granted by the King, God, or Woman, grace is like a free gift, an act of giving that does not require a gift in return. When the widow remarks, 'Please, let's not speak of graciousness,' she is doing more than punning on the German mode of formal address, 'gracious lady'. She is telling both the major and us that we live in a world after grace, where a reply, a return, is always necessary. There are no free gifts, no first things, no original works of art. There are only replies. Thus the novella closes, inconclusively, with the words, 'Everything concludes with a grateful reply to Makarie.'

Instead of the titanic Goethe, then, here we have one interested in pieces and how they may, or may not, fit together. We have one interested in the lost and found, the incompleteness and itineraries, at the heart of translation. We have one, in short, who can nourish our emerging dreams of a world literature. In what may be the most beautiful scene of this exquisite novella, we encounter the characters ice-skating after a flood has frozen over. The frozen flood allows for new patterns and new contacts to emerge, but what truly matters is that this landscape is temporary and tenuous. No one knows when the thaw will come and when these new connections will be terribly interrupted. Writing, Goethe

wants us to understand, is just such a chance constellation, not a pantheon of timeless and immobile monuments, but a fortunate reply to a conversation that we will only ever hear in parts.

– Andrew Piper, 2004

Note on the Text:

The edition used was J.W. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre. Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989).