VI. Literature in Translation


The purpose of the first of these books is to "show how ever-present Goethe is, that he has something to say to us today, that he is thoroughly 'in' and 'up to date'" (p. i). In order to accomplish this, Katharina Mommsen, one of our best authorities on Goethe, has compiled a fascinating collection of Goethe texts in English translation—whole poems, excerpts from dramas, prose works and correspondences—and augmented these with a good deal of pertinent commentary. The selections from Goethe are so judiciously chosen and so well calculated to capture the genius of the poet that it would be invidious to suggest any omissions. The reader senses immediately that this is the kind of short book which comes only from the disciplined use of great knowledge. It requires considerable skill to reduce all of Goethe to the stringent proportions of this book, to know how to apportion space between fact and fantasy, prose and verse, early Goethe and late Goethe, etc.; but this skill is evident throughout, and combined, moreover, with an unflagging freshness that makes the book a pleasure to read. Particularly refreshing, I think, is Mommsen's brave attempt to correct a deeply entrenched bias on the part of Goethe scholars for the second version of Götz; unabashedly she calls attention, instead, to the more unadulterated *Geschichte Gottfriedens von Berlichingen*. How many others would have the courage to do this? This reviewer knows only one: Rolf-Christian Zimmermann (in *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe*).

If the welcome we can extend Mommsen's book is not unqualified, the reason must be sought in the apparent haste with which the publisher and the principal translators rushed the work through the press. The misspelling of *Goethe* on the first page of the publisher's preface is symptomatic. On the second page we read *Strassbourg* (an inappropriate "s" added to the French name or an unwarranted "o" in the German version?). The name of Lili Schönemann's husband turns up on p. 26 as Türkheim and on p. 27 as Turckheim (instead of the correct Türckheim). On the same pages, to cite a more serious result of the haste with which the book was printed, we are told that Goethe's engagement to Lili was broken in 1775 because "the Schönemanns urged their daughter to make a rich match, by which their banking house—which was on the verge of bankruptcy—could be revitalized." This statement should have been checked against the notes in the *Hamburger Ausgabe* (X. 7th ed., p. 633). The "Schönenmanns" (plural!) could never have urged "their daughter" anything of the sort, firstly because father Schönenmann had died in 1763, twelve years prior to the engagement (Lili was only five when her father died!); and secondly because the bankruptcy did not occur until 1784, nine years after the engagement had been broken.
The less than pious care the book received when it went to press is again conspicuously visible in the bold print at the top of p. 108, where we are informed that Goethe's memorable audience with Napoleon took place on October 8, 1808 (instead of October 2). The English translation of Goethe's account of this audience has all the indications of having been rushed too. When Goethe says "ich hatte Zeit mich im Zimmer umzusehen und der Vergangenheit zu gedenken. Auch hier waren es noch die alten Tapeten. Aber die Porträte an den Wänden waren verschwunden" (Artemis-Ausgabe, XII, p. 638), the Tapeten are not the "carpets," as we are told in the translation on p. 109 (a misreading for Teppiche?), but rather the tapestries on the walls. Another embarrassment on the same page that could have been avoided has to do with Goethe's quoting Napoleon's opinion of French drama: "So kam er auch auf die Schicksalsstücke mit Mißbilligung. Sie hatten einer dunkleren Zeit angehört. Was, sagte er, will man jetzt mit dem Schicksal? die Politik ist das Schicksal." These sentences are given in English as follows: "And so he came to the fate tragedies that he objected to. They should have belonged to a darker time. 'What,' he said, 'do they want with fate now, politics is fate.'" The translation hardly makes sense. Goethe is not using the unreal subjunctive but the subjunctive of indirect discourse, for Napoleon did not say to him that the plays "should have belonged" to a darker time, but that they "belonged" to a darker period of history.

More such careless errors in translation can be found in other places in the book. It is not necessary to enumerate them all, for the readers of this journal will be quite capable of noting the inaccuracies themselves. It would be misleading, too, to dwell on the distortions, since the book also has its complement of excellent translations. I would single out for particular praise the Faust passages by Stuart Atkins and the poems rendered into English by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton.

If, in the aforementioned volume, Mommsen sought to make Goethe accessible to a wider English-speaking public in today's world, then, in the companion volume in German, she becomes a champion of Goethe's relevance to the modern German-speaking reader. Essentially, the same material is reprinted in its original German dress, but since the second book is considerably longer, we are offered a far richer fare of texts. Hence, we have a heightened presence of Goethe.

The volume is also enhanced by an extensive afterword in which Mommsen succeeds in evoking the extraordinary life of Goethe. She makes an eloquent plea to look at the whole of Goethe in order to discover the real Goethe. We must see in him not only the poet of art and sense but the man of society and soul as well. Mommsen's portrait of Goethe's multifaceted personality and repertoire is so movingly presented that it would have served well as a foreword instead of as an afterword.

Other advantages of this volume over the former are the noticeable absence of printing errors and, of course, the nonexistence of stylistic quirks by occasionally nodding translators.

Only one item in this volume seems to me odd, and that is the fourth verse in the final stanza of "Heidenröselein" on p. 27: "Half ihm doch kein Weh und Ach." Since 1959 Goethe-philology knows that the poet wrote ihr and not ihm (cf. W. Hagen in Beiträge zur Goetheforschung, edited by E. Grumach, Berlin 1959, pp. 56-58). Accordingly, Erich Trunz in the eighth edition of volume I of his authoritative Hamburger Ausgabe, and in all subsequent editions (cf. the latest, twelfth edition, 1981, p. 78), has insisted on the rendering ihr. Mommsen, in printing ihm, is perhaps of the opinion that it sounds better than ihr, and she may well be correct in such an assumption. Still, Goethe did not wish the poem to be read this way. A textual anomaly as this, however, can hardly matter in a volume on Goethe that has been so expertly planned and excellently printed as the one Katharina Mommsen offers us here.

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