

YEARBOOK 2007



**Mosaic Books**

New Delhi

**Review**

*Die Entstehung von Goethes Werken in Dokumenten. Begründet von Momme Mommsen. Fortgeführt und hrsg. von Katharina Mommsen unter den Auspizien der Mommsen Foundation for the Advancement of Goethe Research. Vols. 1–3. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter 2006. – Vols. 1 and 2: Hrsg. von Momme Mommsen unter Mitwirkung von Katharina Mommsen. Reprographischer Nachdruck des vom Institut für Deutsche Sprache und Literatur der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin im Akademie Verlag 1958 herausgegebenen Erstdrucks.*

REKHA KAMATH RAJAN

In 2006 the third volume of what has come to be known as the EGW appeared along with reprographic reproductions of the first two volumes which had first appeared in 1958. The reason for this almost 50-year gap is to be found in the exigencies of German history, more specifically, in the division of Germany after the war and its attendant disruptions of academic and personal histories.

In the late 1940s Momme Mommsen began this long-term project of documenting the genesis of all of Goethe's works not only on the basis of "primary evidence" in Goethe's diaries, letters and other texts, but also on the basis of "secondary evidence" in the form of letters written to Goethe and, at times, to third persons. These last-named documents are scattered in different books often difficult to come by and their reproduction in these volumes is, not least, one of the major achievements of the EGW.

However, let us proceed systematically. The main task of the EGW, as envisaged by its founder editor, Momme Mommsen, is to uncover the historical conditions and the intellectual underpinnings of Goethe's works (1, p. XIII). Mommsen stresses the importance of documentary material concerning the genesis of a work for any interpretive exercise. This could be viewed as giving undue importance to a positivistic philology, but the idea seems to me rather to emanate from the worth of the documentary materials themselves. To illustrate this point it is necessary to mention another very important factor that is constitutive of these volumes and which has been highlighted in existing reviews. The EGW focusses attention on the entire canvas of Goethe's writings, not merely on his literary works. This means specifically that we not only encounter the poet and dramatist, but also the scientist, the critic, the biographer and the translator. The founders of the project proceeded on the assumption that all these aspects are inextricably linked with one another. In other words, the poet and the scientist form a creative unit which has to be studied in its totality. In fact, the documents gathered for the different texts till now have clearly established that there is much less primary or secondary evidence for the literary works than for the scientific writings. This is explained by Goethe's hesitation in discussing his literary works with friends and others. "I carried everything silently around with me and normally no one learnt anything about a work till it was completed", Mommsen quotes Goethe and goes on to state that creative writing was a "magical act" for Goethe and that he was afraid to break the spell by talking about his writing. (1, p.XXV). On the other hand, his scientific writings seem to have been built upon dialogue and commentary. He appears to have always felt the need, says Mommsen, to discuss his ideas with experts and to receive ideas and information from them.

It is particularly in this area of scientific work that one encounters Goethe as one among his contemporaries and not only, as Katharina Mommsen points out in her introduction to the third volume, as the "distinguished national poet". Katharina

Mommsen attributes this constructed image of the “lone genius on Mount Olymp” to the bourgeois image of the individual in the nineteenth century. With regard to the scientist Goethe the EGW effectively deconstructs this myth through the supplementary documentary evidence which proves that Goethe was constantly engaged in a productive dialogue with leading intellectuals and scientists of his times whose ideas and inputs contributed to the genesis of his scientific works. Therefore, Katharina Mommsen states that the main aim of the EGW is to show Goethe in a dialogue with his contemporaries in order, as her husband had pointed out in 1958, to understand the ground on which these works grew. By placing Goethe’s work within a context of intellectual exchange the EGW also achieves another of its goals, namely to help in developing a vital relationship to Goethe’s works today, especially to the scientific ones, since many of them have either been forgotten or are laid aside because they are not necessarily comprehensible to the layperson. By showing the genesis of these works through the process of mutual exchange with other scientists the editors hope to kindle an interest in the works themselves. Therefore, the normal process of reading a text and then going to the supplementary material to understand its genesis can also be reversed.

The 60 pages on “Entoptic Colours” are a wonderful example of this. Reading almost like a novel about a scientific discovery we see Goethe in conversation and correspondence with a number of people who adopt his ideas to carry out their own experiments on the refraction of light and give him ideas in turn. The attempt to understand light refraction through different colours gets an interesting and far-reaching twist when Goethe visits his portraitist on August 22, 1817 and notes in his diary: “Remark about the varying nature of light at different times of the day.” (3, 454) This is proof for Goethe that his theory of direct and oblique refraction is indeed true, and he demonstrates it to the artist in his studio. The same conditions, Goethe adds, apply to the viewing of art. His remarks about this in a letter to C. L. F. Schultz in Berlin inspires the latter

to confirm the theory with the painter and architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841). Schultz writes to Goethe:

“Your remark about the effect of direct and oblique refraction on an artist’s studio was confirmed by Schinkel whose studio faces west and who could never understand why the light was so unpleasant at noon. He was, therefore, forced to work in the early morning hours (...). Maybe this also explains why his paintings have an odd colouring; they don’t stand up to bright light since they haven’t been painted under these conditions or, one can see that they have been partly produced under conditions of oblique refraction.” (3, 456)

From these remarks Schultz also draws possible consequences for the lighting and timings of art galleries.

After Goethe’s essay on entoptic colours was published, S. Boisserée wrote to him from Stuttgart that he had not only enjoyed reading the text but that he had also drawn the necessary consequences for his gallery by delaying its opening time since the morning light was not favourable for viewing the paintings.

We see here how a scientific discovery has practical consequences for the sphere of art. Artists, art-lovers and art-critics would have to give due consideration to Goethe’s scientific discovery which thus establishes a link between the artistic and the scientific spheres.

It is interesting to read that in 1820 Goethe also sent a copy of his published essay to Hegel with the hope that it would meet with his approval. Hegel’s reply is reproduced here and it documents not only his interest in the subject and his careful reading of Goethe’s essay, but it also analyses the structure of the essay in a manner which even Goethe finds illuminating. Hegel writes:

“You place the simple and abstract, which you fittingly call the original phenomenon, at the top. You then show the concrete phenomena as a result of a further series of effects and conditions and order the whole process in such a manner that the sequence progresses from the simple conditions to the more complex ones, and you arrange the whole in a way that

the complex is made comprehensible through its deconstruction.” (3, 480–81).

All the supplemental material for the genesis and progress of the essay on entoptic colours underscores the claim made by Momme Mommsen in 1958 that these documents have “the character of a genuine supplement since they contain significant statements on the works and material that is important for understanding them.” (1, XXVII)

The circumstances surrounding the edition of the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller is another interesting example. Goethe’s published letters and diaries would have already made it clear to interested readers that he considered Schiller’s letters to him to be the greatest treasure that he possessed. In order to publish the entire correspondence as a testimonial to their fruitful co-operation, however, Goethe needed his letters to Schiller which Schiller’s widow was unwilling to hand over without written assurances that she and her family would also derive financial benefit from the published correspondence. The EGW traces the many-pronged negotiations that were required between Goethe, Schiller’s widow, her eldest son and her sister, Caroline v. Wolzogen, and the publisher, Cotta. The final agreement that was drawn up concerned not only payment for the immediate publication, but also all future editions including possible paper-back editions. The money to be paid by the publisher for the manuscript would be divided equally between Goethe’s and Schiller’s family.

Goethe’s editorial work on the correspondence, as we learn, consisted not only in ordering it chronologically, whereby the dates for the small undated notes they often sent each other had to be ascertained, but also in deleting unfavourable remarks about living persons. This is why Goethe came to an agreement with Schiller’s family that once the manuscript was ready, the original letters would be sealed and deposited with the government to be opened only in 1850. The negotiations regarding this deposit are also documented here including a letter from Caroline v. Wolzogen to her nephew, Ernst v. Schiller

in which she writes: "The people concerned will then no longer be alive and the interest in the two most remarkable men of our times will ensure both our families a large profit that will be shared equally." (1, 477).

Between 1823 and 1831 Goethe worked on the edition of the correspondence and on negotiations with Schiller's family and the publisher. The documents of these negotiations that have been taken from various sources give us an interesting background to the history of the published correspondence that is not immediately evident in the hitherto published diaries and letters. They allow us to understand the practical difficulties Goethe faced in editing this "testimonial of an epoch".

The documentary material gathered for the individual works till now gives us an insight into the cultural and scientific discourses of the time and this goes beyond the mere placing of Goethe's works in a "historical framework", or rather, the historical framework gains definite contours and leads Katharina Mommsen to hope that the volumes would put an end to "speculative interpretations", "hypothetical surmises" and "ideological and personal prejudices" (3, IX). It remains to be seen, however, whether this is at all possible, especially with regard to the literary works.

Katharina Mommsen also hopes that the EGW will create the necessary basis for a comprehensive "intellectual biography", for which a start is planned in the index volume which will provide a chronologically-ordered list of all documented works by Goethe divided according to the periods of his life. The need for a chronological instead of the alphabetical order used in the EGW is also felt by the editors. Since the database for using a chronological system of ordering was not available in the 1950s when work on the volumes began, it was decided to continue with the alphabetical ordering. However, certain special volumes are planned in which groups of works around important themes will be brought together. These will include a special volume on Goethe as a translator and mediator from foreign languages as well as one on his theory of colours. This is to be welcomed as is the decision to also bring out a

volume on Goethe's poetry – a field that was not originally envisaged given Hugo Gräf's painstaking work of 1914 in this area. However, since a large amount of material relating to the genesis of different poems has come to light subsequently, it is a welcome decision.

This monumental project will definitely contribute to research on Goethe and his times and the arrival of the subsequent volumes will be eagerly awaited.