



UNIVERSITY
of
GLASGOW

Stephenson, R. (2002) Review of Nicholas Boyle, Goethe: the poet and the age, vol. 2: Revolution and renunciation (1790-1803). *Modern Language Review* 97:pp. 484-487.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3306/>

Goethe: The Poet and the Age. Vol. II: Revolution and Renunciation (1790–1803). By NICHOLAS BOYLE. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2000. xiv + 949 pp. £30.

Readers who enjoyed the first volume of Nicholas Boyle's biography (*The Poetry of Desire (1749–1790)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) will not be disappointed by the second. Here, too, one finds a wealth of fascinating detail represented with a raconteur's mastery of vivid evocation and dramatic, telling phraseology. The thesis announced in the sub-title is set firmly in the real world, both private and public, in which Goethe found himself on his return from his second (1790) Italian journey: faced with the challenge of the French Revolution to the world-order in which he had grown to maturity, Goethe learned, painfully and slowly, to re-commit himself to his German bourgeois public, spurred on by his openness to the 'German Revolution' (pp. 66, 73) initiated by the post-Kantian Idealism that came to replace the Leibnizianism which had hitherto dominated German intellectual life. Boyle argues that the thwarting of Goethe's hopes for a third trip to Italy in 1796–97 symbolized the failure not only of the cultural (and personal) ambitions with which he had returned from Italy in 1788 but also of the ideals that animated his collaboration with Schiller on *Die Horen*. Goethe's *Entsagung* of courtly aestheticism in favour of a compromise with the kind of middle-class realism popular with his contemporary German audience, embodied in his growing acceptance of his *de facto* marriage to Christiane, eventually took him 'beyond Schiller' (p. 569).

In making his case (neatly summarized on pp. 323–24) Boyle provides a marvellously succinct account of the events, in France and Germany alike, that followed 1789. Against this backdrop, his masterly exposition of the main points of Kant's, Fichte's, Schelling's, and the young Hegel's thought is enormously helpful in placing Goethe in the intellectual atmosphere of his 'middle age' (p. vii). Boyle's readings of Goethe's own writing are as lively and provocative in this second volume as in the first; naturally, not everyone will be able to agree with his interpretations, but few will not be grateful for the trenchant clarity with which he sets them forth. His interpretations of, for example, *Hermann und Dorothea* (pp. 518–32) and *Die natürliche Tochter* (on which, as ever, he writes brilliantly, on pp. 772–94) hold out the promise of fruitful scholarly disagreement. Equally productive in their expositional clarity are his reflections on the (aesthetic) meaning for Goethe of colour (p. 102); on 'the insistently recurrent theme' of Goethe's marriage, in *Life and Works*, in the spirit of Anthony Burgess' definition of marriage as 'a little civilization' (pp. 150, 457); and on Goethe's ultimately 'resilient creativity' (p. 200).

Those who have read the first volume will find in the second the same weaknesses that I criticized in my review of the former (*British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (1995), 241–42), namely a lack of engagement with current scholarship and an undue emphasis on historicist contextualization. The discussion of Goethe's science would, for instance, have benefited from coming to terms with works published after 1978 (the date of George Wells' *Goethe and the Development of Science*, the most recent item cited on the topic in the bibliography), some of it by reputable scientists highlighting Goethe's methodological sophistication. Frederick Burwick's *Damnation of Newton: Colour Theory and Romantic Perception* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), like Karl G. Fink's *Goethe's History of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), would, surely, have gone a long way to modifying Boyle's opinion that Goethe's 'realistic-objective' phase in the 1790s was a repression of theoretical reflexion; to suppose Goethe's 'realistischer Tic' to be anything more than a temporary subordination of one pole of the complementarity of Idea and Experience is, in the light of more recent scholarship than that on which Boyle typically relies,

as implausible as ascribing a complete ‘failure of self-understanding’ (p. 87) to a Goethe who (in a diary entry of 26 March 1780) set himself the daily task of observing ‘the circle that turns within me’. So keen is Boyle to present Goethe as ‘a man of his time’ that he seems to forget that Goethe had claimed to ‘live in 10,000 years’, had recommended an historical perspective of 3,000 years as the minimum for proper cultural awareness (HA, II. 49), shared with Schiller the view that human greatness transcends time and space (pp. 228–29), and thus did not see his own destiny as necessarily implicated in what Boyle reifies as ‘the German future’ (p. 91). ‘The wisdom of the ages’ (pp. 107, 636) was, from early on (witness *Urfaust*), of living relevance to Goethe. Boyle’s tendency to rigid, indeed hermetic, periodization tends not just to overlook the relevance of this long perspective, but also to obscure the continuities in Goethe’s own life and intellectual development: the *Entsagung*, for instance, that Goethe expressed in *Wilhelm Meister* is already present in the achingly sad last lines of ‘Willkommen und Abschied’; and the fact that he only reluctantly renounced in his own life what he could not possibly avoid giving up without losing something else yet more valuable (pp. 437, 563) is entirely consonant with what, since the Stoics, distinguishes ‘renunciation’ from mere ‘resignation’. The novelty Boyle ascribes to Goethe’s conceptualization in 1792 of ‘polarity’ likewise ignores the presence of the concept, if not the term, in such early *Sturm und Drang* imagery as ‘wanderer and hut’ or ‘light and dark’, as David Wellbery has shown. Indeed, the pervasive use, repeatedly punctuating the text, of the rhetoric of ‘a new epoch’ in Goethe’s life and thought (designating limited initiatives taken by Goethe on a regular basis) seems to owe more to Boyle’s historicist compartmentalization of two-year to three-year time periods, with its attendant blindness to continuity, than to the facts of the case. It is simply an exaggeration to say that by 1793 ‘all the plans and certainties of Goethe’s earlier life had foundered’ (p. 168) or that ‘he had begun to reconstruct the whole building from the foundations’ (p. 175), just as no evidence is offered for the claim that the ‘symbolische Pflanze’, to which Goethe refers in ‘Glückliches Ereignis’, is entirely unrelated to the ‘Urpflanze’ (pp. 837–38). Similarly, Goethe’s ‘new’ commitment to the contemporary reading public, which is emphasized over and over again (pp. 216, 252, 271, 305, 450, 607, 635), turns out, on Boyle’s own account, to be neither new (but, rather, a would-be return to the relationship enjoyed in the 1770s) nor one of commitment (given Goethe’s sceptical irony in respect of his public: pp. 292, 313); nor, again, did Goethe limit his readership to Germany but wrote for ‘humanity’ (p. 546). Like a fly caught in amber, Goethe and, particularly, his works (above all, *Faust*, ‘the tragedy of Goethe’s own time’, p. 688), seem trapped in the past. Similarly, commonplaces of the Western tradition are frequently assigned to contemporary sources, thus obscuring the traditions in which the thinkers to whom they are ascribed are participating: ‘putting one’s moral duty above any other consideration’ is not peculiarly Kantian (p. 319), but unites Kant with the Stoics and Aquinas, and citing Schelling’s absolute Identity in the context of Faust’s longing to transcend earthly conditions obscures the relevance of the long tradition of Platonic eros.

The historicist tendency to assume that past events and situations cannot be understood in universal terms, while it may help illuminate the non-repeatable uniqueness of concrete objects, cannot possibly help clarify theory. For theory consists in the coherent co-ordination of concepts and its logical implications; it is, by definition, universalistic in its claims (a point Boyle explicitly concedes only in respect of Kant, on p. 51). Mere exposition of the constituent concepts employed is not sufficient; attention must also be given to their logical interaction. Although Boyle is eminently sensible in not making too much of the legendary ‘first’ meeting

between Goethe and Schiller and their reported fundamental difference over the 'symbolic plant' as an 'Idea' or 'Experience' (p. 223), and he is surely right to question Schiller's 'misleading characterization of [Goethe's] genius' in the famous 'birthday-letter' of 23 August 1794, the account that he gives of Schiller's cultural theorizing is deficient in several important respects: narrative for Schiller is not aesthetic, as is implied on p. 231, nor is 'freedom' necessarily 'moral', let alone 'perfect', and the aesthetic only mediates between the 'dynamic state' and the 'ethical state' in its superordinate modality, a concept that Boyle never adduces (pp. 231–32) but which is essential for Goethe's theory of symbolism, which is, therefore, entirely compatible with Schiller's theory (see p. 546). Most crucially (not least for his own central argument), Boyle is wrong in his account of Schiller's 'idealism'. Schiller does not share the post-Kantian Idealist's faith in *Geist*, in the sense of a Reason to which Nature is to be subjugated (p. 65). It is true that the sense in which Kant is an Idealist, in holding that an *Idee* (a *Vernunftbegriff*) may regulate reality (p. 42), is also Schiller's, and Schiller also uses the word *ideal*, beyond the ordinary notion (of perfection), to mean 'having existence only as idea'; but, since on his theory, Art articulates 'Geist' (as a synonym for 'Gehalt') in the broad sense of 'the inner life' ('das Innere'), 'Kunst des Ideals' (*Aesthetic Letters*, II, 3; xxvii. 1) is not 'perfect art', nor is it 'intellectual art' (presenting a concept of reason), but art replete with significant import. It is this insistence that the content of art (*Gehalt*) is more than intellectual, even if its material (its *Inhalt*) is wholly or partly intellectual, that distinguishes Schiller's Idealism from that of Hölderlin, Wackenroder, and Friedrich Schlegel (p. 510), and from Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, who all subordinate Art to Philosophy (and Religion). Moreover, Art is 'ideal' for Goethe in precisely the same way: insofar as it embodies an idea in the broadest sense (*Gehalt*), and not in the sense of gesturing towards any intellectual or moralizing norm (as Boyle argues on pp. 311–12). Schiller did not think Art enabled one to grasp 'the Ideal "in appearance"' (p. 728); he thought it enabled one to grasp import (*Gehalt*) in appearance. That is why Goethe could so enthusiastically endorse Schiller's 1791 review of Bürger's poetry (p. 91), and why he could subscribe to Schiller's epistemology in 1799 as to 'my own credo' (p. 597), in the face of Schelling's increasingly uncongenial *Naturphilosophie*. For both of them, the aesthetic could be reduced to neither the (objective) empirical nor the (subjective) rational. It is, therefore, misleading to interpret Goethe (and Schiller) as 'bound together' with the Schlegels, Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin and Fichte 'by a belief in the culturally transformative power of Idealism' (p. 709) and as participating in 'the Idealist aesthetic' (p. 710). It not only drastically oversimplifies the *Kulturkampf* Goethe and Schiller were allied in conducting (p. 718). It also obscures the central role that Schiller's concept of *wahrer (schöner) Schein*, as distinct from the delusion of *logischer Schein* in competition with reality, played in Goethe's science and in his thinking in general. When he speaks in his 1796 essay, 'Morphology', of his conviction 'that everything that is must also manifest and show itself [. . .] as what it is' (p. 459), he is speaking of Nature as an aesthetic phenomenon, one that cannot be reduced either to an 'empirical' object (p. 598) or to an intellectual idea. Nature is rather, and, in this respect, like Art, the embodiment of significance. Goethe went 'beyond Schiller' only in the meticulous application to natural and cultural phenomena of the theory they had hammered out together. To read the available evidence in the way Boyle does (drawing on an impressionistic reading of the poem 'Der neue Pausias' in support of his thesis) seems to be the product of an unduly historicist (and, therefore, inevitably a-theoretical) approach.

Boyle argues convincingly that Goethe in his 1795 essay 'Literarischer Sansculotismus' is not so much disowning Classicism as a regulative aesthetic ideal as rejecting the term as both a description of what had so far been achieved in German letters and as a French-derived counsel of perfection that could only demoralize (pp. 274, 447). It may seem a pity, then, that Nicholas Boyle did not grasp the evaluative nettle and debate the appropriateness of labelling the years of Goethe's middle age 'classical', a term he concedes was deservedly 'bestowed on it by official history' (p. vii). However, as Leszek Kolakowski has remarked, 'conceptualization and experience move in opposite directions'. Could it be that the genre of biography, with its unavoidable reliance on supposition about what must have been done, thought, and felt, and with its implicit trust in the correlation of outward events and the inward workings of the creative mind, cannot address such significant cultural issues?

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

R. H. STEPHENSON

MHRA
Modern Humanities Research Association