Die Entstehung von Goethes Werken in Dokumenten. Band IV.
Entstehen—Farbenlehre (review)

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This book enables students of Goethe and those interested in music history to see a little-studied aspect of the adaptation of one country’s light operatic production to the needs and tastes of a small German court, one in which no less a figure than Goethe played a leading role, lending his expertise not simply to translation but to cooperation with a man of lesser ability who nonetheless possessed great industry and assiduousness. This attractive volume will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers and can be highly recommended.

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Of the thousand-plus Goethe works (excluding the lyrical poetry, business and official papers, and aphoristic writings) projected as articles for the complete, alphabetically arranged, EGW, volume 4 contains about fifty (nos. 276–326) between the key words Entstehen and Farbenlehre. Many of Goethe’s smaller, or incomplete, works and independent drafts are categorized under the rubrics Entstehen, Entwurf, Epoche, and Erklärung—two or three pages of discoverable documents here, two or three there. Momme Mommsen’s originally stated aspiration deserves repeating in light of this exhaustive plan: “der ganze Goethe” shall be accounted for in the EGW. Even for many a specialist the idea of “the entire Goethe” will acquire impressive new meaning between these covers. Are any documents missing here? No doubt, though in their effort to make a comprehensive survey the editors have drawn from some two hundred printed and manuscript sources (in a sense, to own the EGW, in which all documents relevant to the genesis of Goethe’s works have been extracted, is to own that entire resource library). Included among the larger writings—more accurately, works having a lengthier genesis and consequently commanding greater numbers of documentary pages—are Des Epimenides Erwachen (90 pp.), Ueber epische und dramatische Dichtung von Goethe und Schiller (22 pp.), and Erwin und Elmire (19 pp.). By far the lion’s share of volume 4, however, belongs to the final article, Zur Farbenlehre (726 pp., which accounts for the exceptional length of this volume, nearly double that of each of the previous three). Goethe’s Farbenlehre is a huge work, after all, spanning a lifetime of his attention from the first observations on color as a child in 1755 to a letter written only a week before his death to Polizeirat Joseph Grüner, in which he discusses a recent university dissertation by one H. Lövy that deals in its twelfth chapter with Goethe’s concept of polarity in color theory.

The richness of the EGW manifests itself not only diachronically but also, and most palpably, in the kaleidoscopic minutiae in letters from or to Goethe or between other correspondents—many of them obscure enough not to be mentioned in the Goethe Handbuch—concerning the respective work. To wander through the often day-by-day entries is to share the pleasure of Schubert’s miller. Documentation qua tool proves to be a good read in itself, having beginning, middle, and end; enriched with local color, historical detail, and personal conflicts; above all, chronicling the processes of production and reception in a totalizing view that embraces author, collaborators, publishers, and critics. The EGW demonstrates that documentation, in epistolary form, may assume features of a
unique literary genre. Certain series of entries are so tightly sequenced, so well
told, so critically revealing, that they would seem to lack only a controlling narra-
tor, an Erich Trunz, say, to become functional episodes, or chapters, within an
overarching story or theme.

Some of these series are only brief, if fascinating, sidebars. For example, a per-
son commonly associated with Goethe in an entirely different context may unex-
pectedly enter the field of the given work and leave behind little gems of com-
m entary. In the article on Farbenlehre, two letters from Bettina Brentano in the
fall of 1809 (1 September; 19 October), sent to Goethe from Munich and Landshut,
show off her acclaimed powers of description in relating an encounter with the
rather obsessive, to hear her tell it, royal Bavarian Hofmaler and, Goethe-inspired,
color theorist M. Klotz, “von Farben verfolgt, gepeinigt, gezwickt, gemartert.”

More importantly, tracking the documentation carefully may persuade us to
emend certain commonplaces that have been passed down in literary history. For
example, it is widely believed that Napoleon’s shocking escape from Elba on 26
February 1815, one month before the opening of Epimenides in Berlin, was an
embarrassment to the intended triumphant return of Friedrich Wilhelm III and
prevented the success of Goethe’s Gelegenheitsgedicht (as he called this festive
piece). While this later turned out to be partially true (resulting in the restaging
in Weimar), there is little in the documentation to support this position during
the stagings in Berlin, or in general. What we do discover is that in the final month
the production was apparently modified to diminish its original occasionality
and to refocus its purpose on the future as a “Probe des Exempels” and a “pro-
phetische Vision” (letter from Zelter to Goethe, 31 March/1 April). All evidence
suggests that Epimenides continued to be hailed as a success in Berlin.

Such examples of the pleasure and the usefulness of EGW 4 abound. Certainly
the complicated genesis of the Farbenlehre contains many. After the publication
of the complete edition in 1810 we can witness, for instance, its changing recep-
tion from the initially scathing attacks by physicists and mathematicians as
“romantisch,” or “confessional,” as mere “Tollhäusergeschwätz” (Oberdeutsche
allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung, 5 July 1810)—among Goethe’s fiercest defenders
was none other than M. Klotz (e.g., 28 July–18 August 1810)—to the rather sud-
den shift in opinion after Hegel joined the fray some ten years later. It was under
Hegel’s authority that the hold of “Newton und die ganze Physikeraft ihm
nach” began to be undermined as a hidden theology: “Physik, hütte dich vor
Metaphysik!” (Hegel to Goethe, 24 February 1821).

Measured against the nearly fifty years it took to bring volume 3 of the EGW
into existence (the first two volumes appeared in Berlin in 1958 during Momme
Mommsen’s lifetime; they were reprinted and published together with volume 3
in 2006), the speed with which volume 4 has been produced dazzles, though this
is deceptive. The hidden part of this immense iceberg lies in the years between
the fall of the Wall and the publication of volume 3, during which time Katharina
Mommsen painstakingly restarted the enterprise by establishing the Mommsen
Foundation for the Advancement of Goethe Research, recruiting staff and collab-
orators, and restoring work relations with the great Goethe repositories in Berlin
and Weimar. But what accounts above all for the rapid preparation of this volume,
and ensures that the remaining ones in the massive positivistic undertaking
should appear in uniform succession, is the equally massive search and storage
capacity of the computer, whose advent as a research tool paralleled the end of
the Cold War. Mommsen announces in her “Vorwort” to the present volume that
Uwe Hentschel has meanwhile also created the databank, promised in volume 3, from which the project’s *index nominarum* will be generated. It may be viewed in progress at www.egw.unc.edu.

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In 1865 already, Woldemar von Biedermann wrote a two-volume study of the period, from October 1765 to August 1768, that Goethe spent in Leipzig ostensibly studying law. Among others, Wilhelm Bode devoted over one hundred pages to this period in *Goethes Leben: Lebrjahre 1749–1771* (1920). Gustav Roethe (1932), Stuart Atkins (1949), Heinrich Meyer (1951), and Ernst Beutler (1957) have written essays on Goethe’s Leipzig letters, while individual letters have been treated by Albrecht Schöne (1967) and recently by me (*Goethe Yearbook* 8 [1996]). Still, Goethe in Leipzig remains a neglected field of scholarship, although the surviving documents—thirty-eight letters written by Goethe in Leipzig and another twenty to Leipzig after his return to Frankfurt, plus two collections of poems—are a rich resource compared to the evidence of his stay in Strassburg from April 1770 to August 1771, of which there is no end of scholarship. Of the “real” Goethe in Leipzig, however, one might think that all the evidence has been evaluated. It was therefore with some interest that I read of Manfred Zittel’s promise to bring to light “erstaunlich viel inhaltlich Neues über die Studentenjahre Goethes in Leipzig” (9).

In the event, like the rest of us Zittel relies for his interpretation mainly on two sets of letters by Goethe, one written to his sister Cornelia, the other to Ernst Wolfgang Behrisch, the thirty-year-old tutor of Count Lindenau, son of the chief equerry in Dresden, whom Goethe met in 1766 at the Schönkopf “Mittagstisch” and to whom he quickly became attached. The thirteen letters to Cornelia, many in French, date from Goethe’s earliest days in Leipzig. Besides confirming the close relationship between brother and sister, they correspond to a familiar picture of Goethe: his fondness for female company, his pedantic side, his linguistic inventiveness, his considerable memory for literary texts, his independence of mind and selectiveness when it came to criticism. They give a strong impression of the influence of reading on self-conception in the eighteenth century. They are chatty, and Goethe seems to experience all the ups and downs of a young man on his own in a setting for which he is not altogether unprepared, socially, intellectually, or otherwise.

They are also highly performative (“Ich habe eben jetzo Lust mich mit dir zu unterreden . . . Neige dich für diese Ehre die ich dir anthue, tief, noch tiefer, ich sehe gern wenn du artig bist, noch ein wenig! Genug! Gehorsamer Diener,” DfG I:88). This aspect is more striking in the letters to Behrisch, beginning in October 1766, which stage the relationship between Goethe and “Annette,” as he called Käthchen Schönkopf, the titular muse of his poems from this period. I say “stage,” since such is their profound scenic character, while the emotions on display also take place in connection with theatrical events. The earliest letters are also in French and concern the happy days when Goethe felt triumphant over other rivals to Käthchen’s affections. Those from a year later are in German and describe his terrible fits of jealousy, with the most famous of these the one beginning November 10 (but which Goethe misdated). Goethe never went back to writing