PROJECT MUSE®

Erste Lieb' und Freundschaft: Goethes Leipziger Jahre
(review)

Elizabeth Powers

Goethe Yearbook, Volume 17, 2010, pp. 368-369 (Review)

Published by North American Goethe Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gyr.0.0070>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372010>

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.

University of Georgia

Max Reinbart

Manfred Zittel, *Erste Lieb' und Freundschaft: Goethes Leipziger Jahre*. Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2007. 247 pp.

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 Schönpkopf “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,” DjG 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 Schönpkopf, 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

letters in French, at least not as a vehicle of self-expression. Certainly the letters have biographical value, but to what extent is Goethe also staging his own emotions? Linguistic echoes between the letters of fall 1767 and *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* have led many scholars (myself included) to regard them as literary practice. As he wrote to Behrisch: "[N]ous ne sommes jamais si fertiles en expressions, que quand notre coeur nous en fournit" (DjG 1:114).

Zittel does not deny that the letters to Behrisch are reminiscent "in ihrem Gestus" of *Werther* and even of Goethe's letters to Auguste von Stolberg, but he is of the opinion that they (in particular the November 10 letter) are "ganz von literarischen Vorbildern gelöst" (112). Zittel is influenced by Kurt Eissler's psychoanalytic study of Goethe, and thus his claim to reveal a previously unknown Goethe rests on showing "wie er als Leipziger Student *fühlte und lebte*" (italics in original, 11). The "Liebesgeschichte" related in the letters was really "erlebt[] und durchlitt in der Wirklichkeit . . . und . . . gerade nicht als Dichtung, sondern im persönlichsten Ausdrucksmedium, dem Brief, zu Papier [ge]bracht" (156-57). Well, maybe, but as Heinrich Meyer wrote (in a volume of essays aptly subtitled *Das Leben im Werk*), even passions that we create ourselves can produce real pain.

Zittel's thesis is that the friendship with Behrisch and the love affair with "Annette" were "Der Nährboden für die Entwicklung der Empfindungswelt Goethes" (226-27), but the Goethe who emerges here is rather banal, not very different from other relatively privileged bourgeois males of sixteen to eighteen ca. 1765, one moreover who is very immature and very needy. If there is truth in this picture, Goethe's destruction of the letters of the friend of his Frankfurt and Leipzig youth, Adam Horn, may indicate their unadulterated adolescent character. It may have been because of their literarily-mediated aspect that Goethe spared the letters to Behrisch, which he acquired in 1818.

In this connection, Zittel draws attention quite rightly to the disparity between the emotional content of these letters (which Goethe did not have in his possession when he wrote his autobiography) and the sparse account of his relationship with Käthchen Schönkopf in book seven of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Like others, I have always been puzzled by the otherwise so mysterious Gretchen of book five, and Zittel is of the opinion that Goethe is here really portraying the later relationship with Käthchen, who had only recently (1810) died in Leipzig. Moreover, had he told the story of his Leipzig romance in greater detail, then "wäre damit der Sesenheimer Geschichte der Boden entzogen worden" (225).

Thus, despite my lack of sympathy with the approach of *Erste Lieb' und Freundschaft*, it is a welcome addition to our understanding of this early period. Gustav Roethe argued rightly, I believe, that, despite considerable epistolary destruction, we have just enough material to form a picture of Goethe's artistic development. Still, I am now led to think that, due to Behrisch's positions, one at the important court at Dessau, there might remain some archival material to be mined. (I find it mystifying that there is not a single contemporary portrait of Behrisch.) In connection with this review, I reread Stuart Atkins's essay, which, in dwelling on the plethora of literary references in Goethe's early letters, suggests further areas of inquiry, at least for the literary Goethe.