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200 YEARS AGO: WITH GOETHE THROUGH SWITZERLAND

JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE'S SECOND SWISS JOURNEY, 1st OCTOBER TO 8th DECEMBER, 1779

Goethe visited Switzerland on three occasions. In 1775 he came at the invitation of the young noblemen Christian and Friedrich Leopold Stolberg and the Count of Haugwitz. In 1779 he undertook a longer visit in the company of Duke Charles Augustus of Saxe-Weimar, while his third journey in 1797 should have taken him on to Italy but was cut short in Switzerland by the outbreak of Napoleon's Italian war.

Each time his experience of Switzerland was different, or was at least differently described; each time it provided the cue for new observations. It is also a significant fact that each Swiss journey was dominated by a different personality who helped to colour the picture of the country: Rousseau in the first instance, Lavater in the second and his artist friend Heinrich Meyer of Stäfa in the third.

The image of Switzerland that Goethe made for himself was — to quote Fritz Strich — "an indivisible unity". In this sense Swiss literature as a whole must be regarded as a microcosm of world literature. Strich continues: "That is what makes Goethe's relationship to Switzerland so individual, so different from his relationship to any other people or literature, provided that we consider not only German Switzerland but the whole of the country".

The account of Goethe's second Swiss journey, that of 1779, no doubt reflects the poet's relationship to Switzerland in its purest, most unadulterated form. Made in the company of Duke Charles Augustus of Saxe-Weimar, it was limited for

J. W. Goethe (1749—1832)

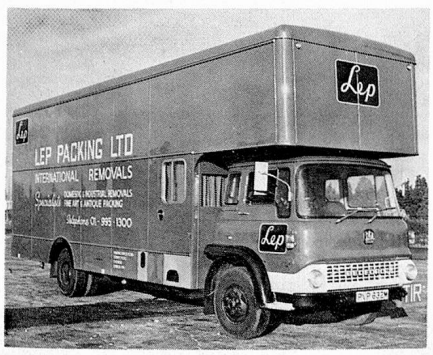
the most part to Western Switzerland, and it probably did not follow the course Goethe would have wished for it had he not had to fit in with the Duke's purposes. In any case we find him writing on 11th October: "Had I been alone, I should have gone higher and lower, but with the Duke I must do whatever is reasonable".

The second journey began in Basle. The travellers proceeded on horseback along the Birs and through the Jura to Berne, where they made an excursion into the Bernese Oberland. They then turned to the Jura in the Canton of Vaud, where they climbed the Dôle. From here there is a view of the distant icy summits whose sublimity and apparent inaccessibility seem to suggest the infinite within the finite.

The route continued through Geneva to Savoy and Chamonix, and thence over the Col de Balme into the Valais, to Martigny, although on this day — it was already 6th November — the weather was not kind to the tourists. They found themselves in a mist-hung mountain world where they encountered smugglers and where the drifting clouds vouchsafed them no glimpse of the majesty of Mont-Blanc.

It is noticeable that in his description of this trip Goethe makes no attempt to divide the landscape into its various categories, his account of it being characterised rather by fluid transitions. It reveals the fascination exercised upon him by the mists, that blur all outlines till the climber reaches the summit, his final goal from which he can survey all around him; for up to this culminating point Goethe refuses to allow individual impressions or an idea of the whole to "penetrate into his soul", as he puts it. It is the soul, not the intellect, that determines the picture and the way of seeing it. Goethe's view of the world makes no preliminary claims. His path through the landscape is a voyage of discovery, and he is grateful for every impression that takes on clear contours.

There is no longer any of that unbridled dynamism, those powerful surges of feeling whose outbursts lent their own rhythm to his journey when in 1775, a true representative of the Storm and Stress period, he almost flung himself at the mountains, as though he wished to conquer them at one assault. Goethe's eye is now able to



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record the objects he sees, and as a result his account gives a true picture of the landscape as he experienced it. Circumspection now takes the place of dyanmism. The landscape is passed through, is scanned item by item. Nature has become for Goethe a symbol of humanity, and this comes out compellingly in his "Gesang der Geister über den Wassern", which was inspired by the Staubbach waterfall. "Moderation" is a key word here, in the sense of the realisation that man cannot be happy till his striving finds and sets its own limits.

This attitude is also mirrored in his description of his journey, which was continued from Martigny, accompanied by patient mules, up the Rhone Valley to Sion, thence to Sierre, Loèche and Brigue and on dangerous, avalanche-threatened paths to the Rhone Glacier, till the company finally scaled the saddle of the Furka and then faced the Gotthard, which was reached on 13th November as winter broke.

Goethe was now able — and this in contrast to his first visit — to give himself over wholly to the experience of the journey, was capable of enjoying it and did not hesitate even to describe the comfort he derived, in the cold of the Gotthard, from sitting on the stove. "It grows colder, one is loath to leave the stove. Indeed, it is a great pleasure to sit on top of it, which is quite possible in these regions, where the stoves are built of stone slabs."

Goethe's second Swiss journey is quite generally marked by this contemplative ease. It moved in stages, for he climbed step by step and at each new level stopped to take stock, ascending gently from the lowlands on to the high plateau and then into the mountains, till the Gotthard was finally reached as the culminating point: the mental goal and the end of the journey were identical. And although Goethe left the whole eastern part of Switzerland out on this visit, the notes he made in 1779 constitute the most complete and penetrating picture he was ever to draw of our country, for in the unique survey from the Gotthard, instilled with all the imaginative force of the observer, the totality of the country is contained in concentrated form: "You will see from a small geographic description how remarkable the point is at which we now find ourselves. The Gotthard is not the highest mountain in Switzerland, and Mont-Blanc in Savoy much exceeds it in height; yet it holds the rank of a royal mountain before all others because the greatest mountain chains converge and lean upon it". Thus Goethe can sound out the whole of Switzerland from the Gotthard and assemble all the facts in a single instant, to which by so doing he lends permanence.

This second Swiss journey was no doubt one of the happiest passages of Goethe's life, and on his return home the poet decided to erect in the park at Weimar, as a sign of gratitude for the experience, a stone monument which should unite the three gods that had been so well disposed to him and the duke on their way through Switzerland: Fortune, Genius as the torch-bearer, and Terminus, the counsellor of moderation in all situations.

by Peter Zeindler

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