

GOETHE'S LANGUAGE*

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THE subject of Goethe's language has attracted my attention at two different times before this attempt to study it. The first impression was that Goethe had deeply influenced the German language. At the beginning of the second attempt I still held this view, but found little to confirm it. I now, after two vain efforts to solve the question of his influence upon his native tongue, have come to the negative result that Goethe has contributed little in the way of creating new means of expression. Goethe came at the close of a period of considerable change when the language had assumed a relatively permanent form.

In working on my present subject the influence of great men upon language attracted my attention. I had so often read and heard that Luther's influence upon the German language had been so great that we might almost say that he has created the literary language. A careful study of Luther's Bible of 1546 gave me a different impression.

Luther inflects the past tense of *trinken* as follows: *ich trank, du trankst, er trank, wir trunken, ihr trunkt, sie trunken*. We have here the Middle High German forms. He indicates the plural of the past tense in two ways: by a change of vowel and by the ending *en*. He occasionally has the uniform vowel *a* throughout the past tense, i.e., in both singular and plural, as today, but usually the old Middle High German inflection with a difference of vowel in the singular and the plural prevails.

Again, Luther often inflects weak feminines, like *Frau*, in both the singular and the plural: *die Frau, der Frauen, der Frauen, die Frauen*, pl. *die Frauen, der Frauen, den Frauen, die Frauen*. It is often difficult here to distinguish the singular from the plural. Already in Middle High German attempts had been made to distinguish the singular from the plural by dropping inflection in the singular. Luther did not take a decided stand here although there was great need of a clearer distinction.

One of the most distinctive features of New High German is

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the new sequence of tenses. In the old sequence a past tense follows a past tense: "Er sagte, das er bald *käme*." In the new sequence that tense form is used in indirect discourse that would be used in the direct: "Er sagte, dass er bald *komme*." This fine new construction arose in the South West of the German-speaking territory long before Luther's time, but he almost regularly follows the old sequence.

Luther naturally employed simple dignified language in the Bible. The quality of dignity naturally attaches to the older forms of the language. It was only natural that Luther made wide use of the older forms.

A hundred years before Luther's time and a hundred years after his death was a period of great change in the German language. I have not been able to connect these changes with great men. A new means of expression springs up here and there and is brought to the attention of local groups. If the new expression has an appeal, it spreads. Often it takes hundreds of years to establish it in the language. During the period of early New High German many new and improved means of expression were springing up from unknown sources and were being tried out by the German people. Luther has often been mentioned as one of the great creative forces of this period. To me the creative forces lay in the active, aroused minds of the people of this period. Luther often stood facing the past, not the present and the future. The people were facing the present and its pressing needs.

For hundreds of years before Goethe's time the German language was being prepared for Goethe. He came at the end of a period of great and important changes. A people's language is a national product, perhaps the most truly national product. Everybody has worked on it. If all do not invent new means of expression all approve the new forms. Without a general approval the changes cannot become established.

Goethe was born in 1749. He was more fortunate than Luther. The language in which he was to speak would not soon become obsolete. The language had reached a comparatively permanent form. All that Goethe had to do was to mirror himself in it. He was to live for more than eighty years. He was to mirror in the new greatly improved and simplified language the richest human experiences on record. In earlier years in reading Goethe I was planning

as a student of language to describe this wonderful language. Today as an old man experienced in language study I feel that Goethe's life was what was wonderful, not his language. Language is rich only when the life of the man who speaks it is rich.

Heun has given us an interesting book on the language of young Goethe. It is interesting because it gives us glimpses of young Goethe. Language is a varied thing because it mirrors the various forms of life. The golf player, football player, gangster, merchant, preacher, scholar, show us different forms of language because the language simply mirrors the life of those who speak it. I smile sometimes to myself when I hear a scholar criticize the language of a business man. The language of scholars is peculiarly open to attack on account of its lack of simplicity. In reality, however, the different forms of a language represent aptly the people who speak them. In the field of fiction language gives fuller views of the life of the speaker or writer because this field deals more fully with life. In the early works of Goethe we have a splendid view of young Goethe.

We have some very fine works on Goethe's style, especially the style of the mature Goethe: Richard M. Meyer, *Studien zu Goethe's Wortgebrauch*; id., *Goethe's Art zu arbeiten*; Boucke, *Wort und Bedeutung in Goethe's Sprache*; Pniower, *Zu Goethe's Wortgebrauch*; id., *Goethe als Wortschöpfer*; Petersen *Goethe und die Deutsche sprache*. I have read these works with great joy. Everything about Goethe is important to me. For fifty years my interest in Goethe has been growing. No writer has ever held me so long. I am at present speaking of Goethe's language as a linguist. I see nothing peculiar in Goethe's language. To me it is simply fine German. Pniower treats Goethe's compounds and sees in Goethe the creator of new forms of expression. I have the same interest in Goethe's compounds, but see in them merely Goethe's masterly use of words. I observe that the compounds are regularly formed for the most part, formed in harmony with the laws for word formation. The German people have created these laws. Goethe has merely expressed himself skillfully.

Boucke's and Meyer's fine treatises on Goethe's style, mentioned above, have raised the question in my mind whether a study of Goethe's style can convey a bit of Goethe's power to others who would use it to improve their expression. No doubt features of his

style might adorn the language of others, but we can scarcely speak of borrowing his power. We must have power of our own to speak with power. Here we see clearly that Goethe continues to hold the highest place in German literature not because he has enriched the language by better means of expression but because he has given himself to his people. Those who borrow Goethe's favorite means of expression cannot speak with Goethe's power. Fischer has given us a fine large work on Goethe's language, summing up everything that has been said about Goethe's language—*Goethe-Wortschatz*. This fine book alone teaches us how little learned treatises can do to bring us to an appreciation of Goethe. They can help us some, but we can enjoy him fully only by reading him often and long. His power does not lie in tricks of speech or special means of expression. He simply spoke his mind and heart in good German. Even simple language can convey great thought and powerful feeling if the speaker is simple and great. But a little man cannot make himself great by a great show of words. Language reflects the man perfectly. I once connected Goethe's power with creative power of expression. Today I cannot see in his language any traces of creative linguistic work. He simply spoke good German. The highest thoughts and deepest feeling can be expressed in the established mother tongue if the speaker is a great man or woman.