

THE ERA OF GOETHE CLASSICS

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Abstract: The article presents an analysis of Goethe's literary works of post "Sturm und Drang" period. The paper is concerned with such brilliant samples of his prose and poetry as "The German Refugees", "Faust", "Iphigenia in Tauris", "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship". Much attention is given to how Goethe's point of view changed with the time.

Keywords: Goethe, "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", "Faust", Weimar classicism, humanity.

Since the middle of the 1770s, having survived the rebellious years of "Sturm und Drang" Johann Wolfgang Goethe gradually passed to more moderate positions and softened the tone of his narrative art. He was no longer in the opposition to the world but was looking for the ways of positive contact with it.

Later the writer said that he "by his nature was inclined to reconciliation" and moreover everything irreconcilable in this world seemed to him absurd. As time went this tendency in his worldview increased.

That is why when you read the book "Poetry and Truth" written in Goethe's declining years but narrating about the author's youth there comes the feeling that there was no "Sturm und Drang". Everything is so "corrected" and seems to be written by a man of solid character.

The corresponding evolution of Goethe's civic point of view is significant. By the 1790s he had absolutely deviated from former radicalism in his social views.

Now the political criticism was expressed mostly in a soft, benevolent form, more likely in the form of a wish than in the form of blame.

Having learnt the lessons of the tragedies "Götz von Berlichingen" and "Egmont" Goethe confirmed his opinion that social reforms were necessary and inevitable. But soon he realized the wrong and violent way of their implementation.

And now watching the events of the French Revolution, the most terrible cataclysm of that time, he was convinced in negative attitude towards such a takeover. In his opinion the progressive development by reforms and educational efforts would be much better.

The two moments especially alienated him from civil radicalism. Firstly, as he was convinced, in the course of revolution disgraceful people came to power. (He told about it in the comedy "Der Bürgergeneral".) Secondly, in Goethe's opinion takeovers were made under the guise of political appeals that never got in line with final results.

The writer proves this in a set of his novellas "The German Refugees" using his compatriot's life as an example. He was from a family of German nobles who were forced from their home on the left bank of the Rhine by the French Revolution. The main character knew very well arbitrary and oppressive rule.

In "Faust" this idea developed into the judgement about revolutions that swept away the former regime in order to establish a new one. And when Mephisto uttered it, the statement gained a contemptuous and humiliating tone.

Goethe of the post-Sturm period dramatically changed his attitude towards the system of academic canons that he had recently rejected. Now he didn't find them restraining and strictly and willingly followed them.

On this basis the so-called Weimar classicism was formed by the end of 1780s. It got such a name because two outstanding masters of the pen – Goethe and Shiller - met by chance in

Weimar at that time. The inner meaning of the Weimar classicism was connected with the breakaway from the rebellious “Sturm und Drang” movement, with the idea of perfecting the society by means of moral improvement and education and with a wish to bring the spirit of serenity, harmony and balance into the society that was flurried by revolution.

Goethe of that time strove to rise above everyday routine, dullness and to get to something sublime, immense and imperishable. It endowed his manner of writing with features of contemplative estrangement and distance.

Stylistics of Weimar classicism had also changed. The narration became rationalistic, the form got crystallinity. The style of writing became rhythmical. Moreover, Homeric hexameter was used in such works written at Goethe’s time as the tragedy “The Natural Daughter” and the poem “Hermann and Dorothea”.

In the same way different works have similar marks of standard aesthetics: few characters, the unities of place and time. The above-mentioned features can be found in the plays “Iphigenia in Tauris” and “Torquato Tasso”.

In the first tragedy we see adherence to all “standards” of classicistic theatre: so-called three unities, mythological plot, five-act structure. Goethe interpreted the subject that was known from the same-named Euripides’ tragedy in accordance with inherent mood of his time.

The play appealed to quietness of mind, to nobility of actions, to pacific settlements – reasonably and humanly, without any violence and blood.

The Weimar classicism became for Goethe a kernel and a kind of crystal of his interpretation of the positive program of Enlightenment Age – the epoch which his work belonged to. Among the main points of this program there were the categories of humanity, harmony and optimism.

As for humanity that includes other two categories it’s enough to say that Goethe’s characters bearing the idea of goodness and high moral principles have the upper hand.

As for harmony two things are important. Firstly, the writer obviously likes Horatio’s principle of “the golden mean” which can be adapted to conditions of the epoch. Secondly, the writer regards the nature as balm for the soul, the source of peace and serenity. It’s perfectly demonstrated in the poem “Wanderer’s Night song”. Characters of many Goethe’s works closely communicate with nature (it’s most noticeable in the novel “Elective Affinities”) and it feels them with incomparable joy.

For Goethe optimism it is not just energy boost or cheerfulness but persistent aspiration to support those who are in trouble, who are weak and oppressed.

The most characteristic features of Goethe’s hero are based on the above-mentioned categories. The hero is quite a down to earth man but he is endowed with many virtues. He is usually a middle class man of strong emotions, inquisitive and sensitive, well educated and broadminded.

Goethe often wrote that he was lucky to meet a lot people of such kind – intelligent, honest, kind, gifted, and remarkable in one way or another. They also can be found on pages of his belles-lettres. The writer took them as they were, but friendly and with patience. He didn’t demand them to meet any ideal, he wanted to see them not perfect but kind, not distinguished but interesting and pleasant.

To represent his ideas by means words Goethe created a special narrative genre which came down in history as “Bildungsroman” (“educational novel”). The novel “Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship” (1796) is considered to be the most characteristic sample of such narrative. The main character Wilhelm as he was described by the writer does his best to learn the world and himself. The novel tells us about the beginning of his life, about consciousness of his “ego”, his needs and aspirations, about choice of life path, about personality development with his pursuit, delusions and thirst for light, goodness, harmony – all these usually make contents of “educational novel”. The final function of such a novel is to portray a character of a real man of worth.

The educational genre obliges to edifications and this didactic purpose is felt in “Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years”. The educational function of the novel is emphasized by the fact that Wilhelm going on learning life helps his little son to enter upon life.

The book “Poetry and Truth” also belongs to the genre of “educational novel”. It’s one of the biggest and most remarkable books in a series of reminiscences which are united under the title “From My Life”. All together they narrate about more than three decades of Goethe’s life and the world surrounding him.

“Poetry and Truth” stands apart in this autobiographical prose not just because of its size. Indeed, we see a real novel with the only difference that it was written on the material of his own life. The title of the book means the following: Truth belongs to real facts of life, and Poetry is their interpretation.

Goethe told about the formation of human identity in its interaction with the world and under the world’s influence. On the basis of experiences of his childhood and youth he restored extremely large and eventful panorama of Germany in the second half of the 18th century.

Analyzing the process of growing-up the author highly thought about the effectiveness of purposeful and persistent self-education.

Goethe tried to find his character, a man of worth, in the close circle of burghers. The writer was born in a wealthy family of respected citizens and his native town Frankfurt-am-Main had the most fundamental burgher traditions. The paternal grandfather of the poet was a tailor, grand grandfather was a smith. Goethe regarded burghers and peasantry as the basis of the nation and served middle class faithfully and loyally with his work.