

Chapter 2

From Goethe's *Italian Journey* to Transalpine Online Navigation – Narrative Changes and Transnational Stereotypes

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I. Preface

Among Goethe scholars, there is consensus that the poet's journey to Italy marks a turning point for his self-discovery, the development of his studies of nature, and the unfolding of his poetic work. It seems to me, however, that less attention is given to this journey also yielding a "social researcher" – someone who has yet to be discovered and explored.¹ Goethe's statements are unambiguous, as we shall see. Besides "nature" and "poetry", there is the analysis of the "customs of peoples". The trip to Italy presented an opportunity for an elementary sociological experience. This is true for any kind of travel, but did Goethe also ponder this? Why do the more or less professed "Goetheans" among the founders of sociology refrain from referencing this literary burden of sociology in Germany?

No poet of German classicism has left such deep traces in classic sociological work as Goethe. Georg Simmel² wrote a book about Goethe that barely gained attention in Goethe research circles³ which he dedicated to Marianne Weber, the sociologist's wife. In one of his most presuppositional pictures, he draws upon *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*)⁴ specifically when dealing with the interactions of ideas and interests. This leaves us to wonder whether these references are based on subcutaneous bourgeois recollections, as is largely the case in German intellectual history concerning Olympians,⁵ or whether their reasoning differs: the secret con-

1 Ideas on this can, of course, be found in Werner (1988).

2 Simmel (1913).

3 Mandelkov (1997) expressly points out the need to catch up; insights on the link between Goethe's image and Simmel's sketch of modernity can be found in Gephart (1998) 25 et seq.

4 Cf. for example Weber (1920) 82.

5 On Goethe's reception in Germany cf. Mandelkow (1980 and 1989).

tent of sociological, intuitive thought, which hides societal analysis behind the literary form of the *Italian Journey* (*Italienische Reise*)⁶ and has a similar meaning for the shape of sociology in Germany – just like the French novel undoubtedly did for the emergence of sociology in France.

I would like to proceed in two steps: First, I will sociologically examine the *Italian Journey* as a reconstruction of a sociological space of observation and experience. In a second step, I will examine whether Goethe also used this objective space of experience “sociologically”, i.e., to what extent did he not only discover himself but also “society” in Italy.

II. “Travelling” as a Medium of Communication and Discovery

“The pleasure of a journey is, if you want it pure, an abstract pleasure [...]”⁷

... Goethe writes in his diary intended for Charlotte von Stein, which, in the literary version, is free from Protestant dross, and contains only rudiments of a travel ethic, labelling travelling primarily as *work*. The diary’s original text reads: “Jeder denckt doch eigentlich für sein Geld auf der Reise zu *genießen*. Er erwartet alle die Gegenstände von denen er so viel hat reden hören, nicht zu finden, wie der Himmel und die Umstände wollen, sondern so rein wie sie in seiner Imagination stehen und fast nichts findet er so, fast nichts kann er so genießen.”⁸ Achieving this pure “experience” of the idea of the journey requires work – hard and relentless “travel work”⁹ – from which Goethe can only free himself from when he goes beyond the Brenner Pass, leaving Lake Garda and Rome behind as he continues on to Sicily and Naples to experience an emerging and uninhibited “travel happiness”.

A sociological analysis, which can only be hinted at here, clarifies how a formal analysis of the constitution of the travelling “me” is applied at the intersection of social circles – meaning between the *society of origin*,

6 Von Goethe (1816/1817).

7 Von Goethe (1786/1991) 75 (“Der Genuß einer Reise ist wenn man ihn rein haben will, ein abstrakter Genuß [...]”; English translation by the author).

8 Ibid.

9 How close Goethe’s connection to the Puritan work ethic is, becomes visible not least in Weber, who emphasizes the mutual condition of ‘deed’ and ‘renunciation’ as an insight of the late Goethe especially in his study on Protestantism; Weber (1920) 203; the passage referring to Goethe is missing in the first version of 1904/1905.

the travelling society, and the “travelled society”. In this model – which is a given for travel research conducted from a cultural studies perspective – attention is not initially cast on the *foreign*, but rather on the *self* of the abandoned society, which the traveller is bound to via a network of relationships of ongoing entanglements. And even before any actual contact with the “foreign”, there are the ephemeral *casual socializations*¹⁰ of travel, as well as the more or less perennial local social formations which the traveller, as a stranger for his own part, partially grows into. Goethe's journey can now be applied to “social circles” where the social rebirth of the travelling “me” first occurs. But how does the traveller remain connected to those whom he left? How do we communicate with each other when the lockdown robs us of the sociality of physical co-presence?

III. Letters, Circulars, and Broadcast Chains

As regards the official Weimar – whose benevolence Goethe must continue to strive for – the numerous and painstakingly consistent monthly letters to Duke Karl August quantitatively stand out. In contrast, the letter to the Duchess, which was not reflected upon at all in the *Italian Journey*, provides a refreshing irony which even caricatures the Arcadian motto of the *Italian Journey*: “The traveller can seldom go out of himself, what he has to report of fates is of little importance and mostly he writes with

10 Theoretically illuminating is the sketch by Luhmann (1972). – In Simmel's work, the importance of non-institutionalized social connections is particularly clearly emphasized. Thus it says in his “Exkurs über das Problem: wie ist Gesellschaft möglich” (“*Excursus on the problem: How is society possible?*”): “Es bestehen außer jenen weithin sichtbaren, ihren Umfang und ihre äußere Wichtigkeit allenthalben aufdrängenden Erscheinungen eine unermessliche Zahl von kleineren, in den einzelnen Fällen geringfügig erscheinenden Beziehungsformen und Wechselwirkungsarten zwischen den Menschen, die aber von diesen Fällen in gar nicht abzuschätzender Masse dargeboten werden, und, indem sie sich zwischen die umfassenden, sozusagen offiziellen sozialen Formungen schieben, doch erst die Gesellschaft, wie wir sie kennen, zustandebringen”, Simmel (1908/1968a) 14 et seq. (“Apart from those widely visible phenomena which impose their extent and external importance everywhere, there exist an immeasurable number of smaller forms of relationships and modes of interaction between people, which in the individual cases appear to be insignificant, but which are presented by these cases in an incalculable mass and, by interposing themselves between the comprehensive, so to speak official social forms, only bring about society as we know it”; translation by the author).

smug delight: that he now also enters those long-desired regions, sees those hearty regions with his eyes and enjoys them after his own kind.”¹¹

Let us consider the confidants and friends of the Weimar Circle – a Weimar which had just 6,000 citizens and was to become the center of world literature. It’s not just Charlotte von Stein who stands out in this circle, but also – and with a completely different significance – the servant and confidant, assistant and administrator Seidel, as well as Gottfried Herder, for whom the Göschen edition is being compiled. In addition to Knebel, Voigt, and Kayser, letters addressed to the anonymous *Weimar Circle of Friends* also deserve special sociological attention – circulars, circulars ad *incertam personam*, insofar as the circle of friends is not yet defined, or at least determinable. It is Goethe’s *communicative genius* that provides for an unbelievable multiplication of fruitful bonds which eventually leads to the fact that the circle of friends seems to determine the progress of the journey seemingly consensually. Indeed, Goethe even asks Charlotte to excuse him from the places he does not write!¹²

The letter is thus a medium in which both the distance intended – not least by the traveller – and the communicative proximity can be modulated.

To me, correspondence¹³ appears thus not only particularly appealing to literary scholars. Rather, it can also be interpreted as an indicator of the journey’s communicative *socio-gram*. Travelling thereby places extraordinarily complex communicative demands which go in two directions: both in relation to one’s own world, which is left behind, and to the new, “foreign” world. Perhaps we’re only “touched”¹⁴ by “foreign objects and people” – as Goethe authoritatively postulates for his son – if the traveller meets both requirements: as a traveller, one becomes a mediator between worlds and cultures to the extent that one remains connected to the abandoned world and allows oneself to be touched by the new, as another world.

Does this also apply to travelling on the internet? With communication streams that go back and forth via Gmail, WhatsApp, I-Chat, and in fo-

11 Von Goethe (1786/1890) 96 (“Der Reisende kann selten aus sich selbst herausgehen, was er von Schicksalen zu melden hat ist wenig bedeutend und meistens schreibt er mit selbstgefälligem Entzücken: daß er nun auch jene langgewünschten Gegenden betrete, jene herzlichen Gegenden mit Augen sehe und nach seiner Art davon und dabey genieße”; English translation by the author).

12 Ibid.

13 Cf. Simmel (1908/1968b) 287 et seq.

14 Von Goethe (1830/1999) 235.

rum between Germany and Italy? And what kind of digital ethics prevails here, or is it unethical?

IV. How We Participate in Foreign Life

Here, the Malcesine scene, as noted by Goethe in his daily report from September 14, has an exemplary significance.¹⁵ The basic experience of sociological travel, of entering an ambiguous observer's situation, not only comprises irony and subcutaneous allusions, but is a key communicative experience.

The "incognito traveller" settles in an old castle and begins to sketch the tower (Fig. 1), and a crowd forms. But then: someone pushes their way to the traveller, asking what he was doing. Goethe confesses to having sketched it "in order to preserve a memory of Malcesine". This is followed by the imperative comment that this is not permitted and that he should refrain from doing so. When Goethe doesn't seem to understand what is said in Venetian dialect, the following happens: "At this, with typical Italian nonchalance he tore the page up though he left it on the pad"¹⁶ (which is how we still have it today). The rest of the story deserves to be analyzed sentence by sentence.



Fig. 1: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Castello Scaligero, Malcesine (torn)*, 14.9.1786

15 Von Goethe (1817/1950).

16 "Er ergriff darauf mit wahrer italienischer Gelassenheit mein Blatt, zerriß es, ließ es aber auf der Pappe liegen" (English translation by the author).

Goethe's memories of the Italian community influenced his search for communicative "agreement" with the man who had taken offence. Following, Goethe asks why the ruins, functionless buildings of a decaying fortress, are not worthy of being painted by a "spy", but by a traveller who – as Goethe writes in this very passage – "anything strange is not strange at all".¹⁷ But one must first of all assume the role of the foreigner, i.e., that peculiar position that denotes both an inside and an outside of society. Not every outsider is a "stranger" as Georg Simmel explained in his famous digression: "Strangeness is [...] a very positive relationship, a special form of interaction [...]. The stranger is an element of the group itself [...]." ¹⁸ But the stranger is quite distanced from the group; "he occasionally comes into contact with each individual element but is not organically bound to any one of them by kinship, local, professional fixities".¹⁹ Thus, the mixture of closeness and distance requires the "stranger" to "immerse" him or herself into the life-world of the "other" to grant him or her, through necessary distance, a special opportunity for objectivity: "Because he is not fixed from the root for the singular constituents or the unilateral tendencies of the group, he faces all these with the special attitude of the 'objective', which does not mean a mere distance and a lack of involvement, but is a special construction of distance and proximity, indifference and commitment."²⁰

Analyzing the Malcesine scene, we could go even further and read into an externally induced experimental situation – a field experiment, so to say – which we know, of course, Goethe later decorated in a colorful fashion.²¹ Especially if we accept Goethe's interpretation of the scientific

17 "etwas Fremdes nicht fremd ist" (English translation by the author).

18 Simmel (1908/1968a) 510 ("das Fremdsein ist [...] eine ganz positive Beziehung, eine besondere Wechselwirkungsform [...]. Der Fremde ist ein Element der Gruppe selbst [...]; English translation by the author).

19 Ibid. ("er kommt gelegentlich mit jedem einzelnen Elemente in Berührung, ist aber mit keinem einzelnen durch die verwandtschaftlichen, lokalen, beruflichen Fixiertheiten organisch verbunden"; English translation by the author).

20 Ibid. ("Weil er nicht von der Wurzel her für die singulären Bestandteile oder die einseitigen Tendenzen der Gruppe festgelegt ist, steht er allen diesen mit der besonderen Attitüde des 'Objektiven' gegenüber, die nicht etwa einen bloßen Abstand und Unbetheiltheit bedeutet, sondern ein besonderes Gebilde aus Ferne und Nähe, Gleichgültigkeit und Engagiertheit ist"; English translation by the author).

21 The original entry is much more brittle: "Die Lust dir das Schloß zu zeichnen, das ein ächtes Pendant zu dem böhmischen ist, hätte es mir übel bekommen können. Die Einwohner fanden es verdächtig, weil hier die Gränze ist und sich alles vorm Kayser fürchtet. Sie thaten einen Anfall auf mich, ich habe aber den Treufreund

experiment as a *mediator between object and subject*, and apply it to the analysis of “society”, the potential richness of the Malcesine experiment, even in poetic imagination, becomes immediately obvious.

The scene also plays, in two ways, with the notion of a hidden identity. It is only the incognito traveller who exposes himself to the danger of being mistaken for a spy, a suspicion whose refutation is both cumbersome and pleasurable for the knowledgeable reader – after all, the identity of the accused, as author of *Werther*, is known to him.

V. The Power of the “Image”

The Malcesine scene is also of paradigmatic value because the “suspicion” was linked to the activity of drawing, a medium in which the view of art, nature, and society unfolds. The appropriation of the “foreign”, and of the yet so “familiar”, occurs in a medium that simultaneously creates a visual communicative link to the abandoned society: drawing. Thus, Goethe writes the following in a letter on February 17, 1787, which, by the way, did not find its way into the literary text: “A packet of drawings or rather scribbles after nature, to give you at least a view of the country in general.” He continues: “request Mrs. v. Stein that she distribute the pictures when you arrive, and that Prince August and Franckenberg also see them. Finally, however, they are to be returned to her [...]”.²²

This function of drawing for Goethe's perception and visual communication should be considered when the lines facilitate any idea of sensual things, because, and I quote: “The more closely and precisely one observes particulars, the sooner one arrives at a perception of the whole”.²³

I would like to conclude the “Malcesine experience” with Goethe's prophetic statement that this report could one day be of touristic value. Just listen to his words in the *Italian Journey*: “The keeper of the inn where

köstlich gespielt, sie haranguirt und sie bezaubert. Das Detail davon mündlich.” Von Goethe (1786/1991) 37.

- 22 Von Goethe (1890) 187 (“Ein Päckchen Zeichnungen oder vielmehr Krabeleyen nach der Natur, um Euch wenigstens einen Blick des Landes im allgemeinen zu geben. [...] ersucht Fr. v. Stein, daß sie die Bildchen wenn Sie kommen circulieren laße, auch Prinz August und Franckenberg sie sehen. Zuletzt aber sollen sie wieder bey ihr zurück kommen [...]”; English translation by the author).
- 23 Von Goethe (1817/1950) 137 (“man erhebt sich ja eher zum Allgemeinen, wenn man die Gegenstände genauer und schärfer beobachtet”; English translation by the author).

I had engaged a room – after the misunderstanding had dissolved into nothingness – now joined us and was delighted at the prospect of foreigners flocking to his inn, once the attractions of Malcesine were properly known.”²⁴

VI. Conclusion

During these times, pandemic borders must be overcome to relive the Malcesine scene on site. But I hope it has become clear how images and their production can acquire situational power. They are placed in the realm of the normative and surrounded by commandments and prohibitions. They also exude their own deontic power which we find difficult to grasp theoretically. What we can expect from the distance experienced by those at home was very precisely reflected between the lines in Goethe as a communicative epistolary ethic. And we also know that one may even offend the sensitive minds by de-individualizing group messages, only using them for certain content, circulars, and broadcasts.

The uncanny realm of the normative also extends to the most subtle forms of communication: the love letter, including the love email, and the prohibition of breaking up over text, even though in some legal cultures, one can now divorce by email.

I am firmly convinced that we can still learn from the highest levels of the epistolary arts, including for their application to questions of a digital ethic.

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24 Ibid. 35 (“Der Wirt, bei ich eingekehrt war – nachdem sich das Missverständnis in Wohlgefallen aufgelöst hatte – gesellte sich nun zu uns und freute sich schon auf die Fremden, welche auch ihm zuströmen würden, wenn die Vorzüge Malcesines erst recht ans Licht kämen”; English translation by the author).

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Fig. 1: https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Goethe_Malcesine.jpg

