

To die in Rome: Goethe and his son August

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To the memory of Carlo Antoni

On December 5, 1829 Goethe noted in his *Tagebuch*: “Zu Mittag Hofrath Vogel. Die Krankheit meines Sohnes hatte sich gehoben”.¹ The court counselor Vogel was the doctor Carl Vogel who had treated Goethe’s son and had visited him almost daily at home.² It was he who had diagnosed the progression of Goethe’s son’s illness. Yet in none of the many annotations in the *Tagebuch* that concern either Goethe or his son does one find the minimum indication of the nature of that illness from which his son suffered. Vogel regularly continued to pay house visits to the *Frauenplan*, but only once, on December 19th, can one read an annotation about him that could also possibly concern Goethe’s son: “Mittag Hofrath Vogel. Über sein herauszugebendes Werk. Auch vorliegende Krankheitsfälle”.³ However, neither does this annotation help dispel the mystery surrounding the nature of Goethe’s son’s illness.

The only child of five to live from Goethe’s union with Christiane Vulpius, August was born December 25, 1789. Therefore, in 1829 he was around the fine age of forty, while just four months previously his father had happily celebrated his eightieth birthday. Growing up in the shadow of his father, who had taken care of his education and placed him within the administration of the Duchy of Weimar, in 1817 August had married Ottilie von Pogwisch, with whom he would have three children. It is possible that his mysterious illness was related to alcoholism, if it is true what Amalie von Schlabrendorff, second wife of Fritz von Stein and close friend of the poet’s since childhood, wrote in a letter to her husband dated December 11, 1829: “Es ist recht betrübt für seine Frau, dieses Betrinken. Es scheint mir, als wenn die

¹ *Goethes Werke*, published in *Auftrage der Grossherzogin Sophie von Sachsen* [hereafter referred to as WA] (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1887-1919), III Abteilung: *Goethes Tagebücher, 12: 1829-1830*, 1901, p. 162.

² Gero von Wilpert, *Goethe-Lexicon* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1998), p. 1122.

³ WA, III/12, cit., p. 169.



Laster der Mutter oft noch mehr auf die Söhne forterbten als die der Väter".⁴ In fact, the reference was precisely to alcoholism, from which the mother, Christian Vulpius, had notoriously suffered, dying in 1816.

After this ill-omened December of 1829, no one spoke any longer of either illness or alcoholism. Instead, two and a half months later, on March 16, 1830 to be exact, Goethe noted in his usual *Tagebuch*⁵ that he had been discussing a trip for his son. On the same date, his faithful collaborator Johann Peter Eckermann wrote in his own parallel *Tagebuch*⁶ that he kept of his conversations with Goethe that August had presented himself in order to announce the big news that together they would, upon his father's orders, take a trip to Italy. Immediately thereafter Goethe called upon Eckermann and confirmed the undertaking of the trip with his son. On March 20th Eckermann wrote to his wife Johanna Bertram that Goethe had committed himself to bearing all the travel expenses and had arranged all the details, contacting all the artists and literati he knew in all of the important cities of Italy as well as the German diplomatic representatives who lived there.⁷ Indeed, on April 21st Goethe wrote to Manzoni to announce his son's visit,⁸ who left the day thereafter from Weimar.

The first stop was Frankfurt, from where August sent the first pages of his own *Tagebuch* which his father had asked him to write for him.⁹ Goethe responded on April 30th, and it is from this letter that one learns that the ultimate destination of the trip was to be Rome.¹⁰ From Frankfurt by way of Switzerland the two companions reached Milan where they visited Manzoni. They stayed a number of days

⁴ *Goethe in vertraulichen Briefen seiner Zeitgenossen*, edited by Wilhelm Bode, III: 1817-1832 (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 1999), p. 291.

⁵ WA, III/12, cit., p. 213.

⁶ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, edited by Fritz Bergemann (Baden-Baden: Insel, 1981), p. 376.

⁷ *Goethe in vertraulichen Briefen seiner Zeitgenossen*, III: 1817-1832, cit., p. 299.

⁸ WA, IV. Abteilung: *Goethes Briefe*, 47: *April-October 1830*, 1909, p. 33.

⁹ August von Goethe, *Auf einer Reise nach Süden. Tagebuch 1830*, edited by Andras Beyer and Gabriele Radecke (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1999), pp. 9-12.

¹⁰ WA, IV/47, cit., pp. 49-50.



during which August visited the fish and vegetable markets and a few craftsmen's workshops. He was also interested in agriculture and noted that within the Padanian plain there was a great amount of livestock renting and breeding, not unintelligent observations, and ones that revealed a certain grounding in that area. August had a certain interest for economic life and none at all for theatrical performances like Eckermann. As a rule he got up and went back to the hotel to sleep after the first act. He continued to send his *Tagebuch* entries to his father as he wrote them, reassuring him continuously about the state of his health.¹¹ However, he did not tell him the truth, because from Milan on May 13th he wrote his wife Ottilie: "Ich ging wirklich so krank aus Weimar daß ich nicht glaubte Frankfurth lebendig zu erreichen, durch die Anstrengung in den letzten 8 Tagen hatten sich alle meine Übel so geseigert, dass ich in einem verzweiflungsvollen Zustand den Postwagen bestieg".¹² He had managed to arrive in Frankfurt, but was so sick that he had had to remain in bed for four days before being well enough to get up again. On the same date Eckermann wrote to Goethe that his son was much better, "so daß er jetzt fast ein vollkommen gesunder Mensch ist". As proof of this he added: "Er trinkt des Morgens Caffe mit mir und den Tag über nicht mehr Wein wie ich selber".¹³ August therefore was relatively better, but Eckermann revealed himself too optimistic because, from the diary August sent to his father, one understands that while in Milan he continued to drink heavily. It is enough to point out an entry written on May 12th when in Eckermann's company at an *osteria*: "wir uns ein Cottlet und einen musirenden Wein wolschmeken ließen der mir so gut wie Champagne schmeckte".¹⁴ At the beginning of June they left Milan for Venice. But from Milan August had already written numerous times to the newlyweds and good friends from Weimar, Johann Friedrich and Wilhelmine Christiane Gille, that he did not have much interest in reaching Rome and desired instead

¹¹ August von Goethe, *Auf einer Reise nach Süden. Tagebuch 1830*, cit., pp. 12-60.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.



to move on toward Naples because he believed that the sea would have a positive effect on his health.¹⁵ In every letter his father however insisted that he not lose too much time traveling about Italy but focus instead on reaching Rome. In a letter on June 29th he repeatedly harped upon this destination, adding “daß es mir sehr angenehm seyn wird in deinen Tagebüchern deinen Einzug in die Porta del Popolo zu vernehmen. Du mußt dir in jedem Fall, da du so großen Vortheil von deiner Reise körperlich und geistig schon empfunden hast, jetzt, mit immer freyerem Gemüth und Sinn, überlegen was dir fernerhin nützlich seyn kann”.¹⁶ His son however did not understand for what reason Rome would be the cure-all for all his ills.

They stayed a short time in Venice, returning soon to Milan and from there reached Genoa immediately where a good friend of August's father, the son of the English consul, Charles James Sterling, was waiting. They were welcomed to his home with great kindness and August wrote to his father of having been invited by him to breakfast at 9 o'clock the morning of July 20th. He was surprised to learn that the English drank tea and coffee while eating salami and steak. The day was very hot and August noted: “[...] ich begnügte mich mit einem weichen Ey und einem Beeftek und einer Flasche Burgunder, sehr gut fürs Klima”.¹⁷ In reality his diary was in fact full of wine: August downed it from morning to night and there was not a city or village in Italy where he did not find one of an excellent quality. In Genoa Eckermann realized that there was no hope of August's quitting drinking and thus decided to return to Weimar, giving August's father various excuses. On July 25th the two travel companions separated definitively: August took a carriage for Leghorn and Eckermann headed instead for Turin. But only once he was in Geneva on September 12th did he write Goethe a long letter¹⁸ in which he referred to his decision to return to Weimar in order to get back to work and give a final hand on the *Gespräche* which he intended to

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214, 215-217, 218-219.

¹⁶ WA, IV/47, cit., p. 114.

¹⁷ August von Goethe, *Auf einer Reise nach Süden. Tagebuch 1830*, cit., p. 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 254-257.



publish. He successfully hid the real reason he had been driven to leave Goethe's son to head toward his destiny alone. He could not help but remember that he himself had authorized just such a decision, as in effect Goethe had done in a letter written to his son on the 29th of June.¹⁹ In reality Eckermann's decision was rather serious because, in deciding to depart, he was leaving poor August to complete the long voyage to Rome on his own. August quickly became aware of the difficulty in which Eckermann had placed him, so much so that in a letter on July 23rd he wrote to his friend Wilhelmine Gille: "Eckermann geht morgen ab und ich stehe allein in der fremden Welt, wie wird es mir vorkommen? Doch ich muß durch es koste was es wolle, doch ich hoffe nicht das Leben".²⁰ When in La Spezia the carriage in which he was travelling tipped over and cost him the fracture of a clavicle and forced him to remain for a long time in the city, on August 9th he once again wrote to his friend Wilhelmine Gille about his accident and did not miss the chance to lament: "Es war viel zu ertragen, ganz allein in einem fremden Lande des Gebrauchs des Arms beraubt eingewürgt um den ganzen Körper in 30 Ellen Bandage, da galts Gedult".²¹ For a person in his condition and spirit it was not easy to face the journey alone, but evidently Eckermann was afraid of finding himself from one moment to the next in a situation of great embarrassment, perhaps fearing that August would die along the road; thus therefore he had preferred to sever all ties. Still, in the same letter of September 12th he related the fact that on August 15th a letter from Sterling had reached him in Geneva informing him of August's accident in La Spezia but, fortunately, on August 28th another letter from Sterling told him that August's arm had completely healed and that he was on his way to Leghorn.

From La Spezia on August 10th²² August wrote in his diary for his father that, as soon as his arm healed, he thought he would reach Leghorn, embark for Civitavecchia and from there continue onward

¹⁹ WA, IV/47, cit., p. 115.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

²¹ August von Goethe, *Auf einer Reise nach Süden. Tagebuch 1830*, cit., p. 222.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 119-121.



to Rome by carriage. If he would be unable to take the boat he thought to fall back on the carriage: he had already studied the itinerary on the map and intended to pass through Volterra and then Siena reaching the Cassia in order to arrive in Rome at the end of September. At last he seemed to have become convinced of accepting Rome as that journey's real destination, just as his father had so greatly insisted. On August 19th, arm fully healed, he left La Spezia by carriage for Leghorn, where he arrived two days later; but, instead of embarking for Civitavecchia, he took an excursion to Florence and from there wrote his father on August 24th²³ that it was better not to reach Rome by carriage because he had learned that during that season the city was plagued by malaria. Rather, it would be better to embark from Leghorn for Naples and from there go back up to Rome in order to arrive by the end of September. After the brief Florentine excursion, on September 5th he returned to Leghorn and embarked for Naples on the 9th; the boat stopped in Civitavecchia the next day. August saw many passengers disembarking and therefore did as well, but immediately found the city rather ugly and thus re-embarked and continued onward toward Naples where he disembarked September 12th. On the 13th²⁴ he wrote to his father that his old friend Wilhelm Zahn had come to visit him and had suggested that he rent an apartment and extend his Neapolitan sojourn so that the two of them could visit the beautiful surroundings together. Zahn accompanied August to Paestum, Sorrento, Amalfi, and Pompei. In the end, August stayed in Naples for more than a month and only on October 15th hired a carriage for Rome where he entered through the Porta San Giovanni, breaking with the family tradition that dictated entering the city from the Porta del Popolo, just as his grandfather, Johann Kaspar Goethe, had done.

In Rome August found himself in the Hotel d'Allemagne and on October 16th²⁵ wrote to his father: "Mein höchster Wunsch ist erfüllt!" In all truthfulness however the desire he had fulfilled seems

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-164.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.



to have been that of his father, and certainly not his own. The same October 16th²⁶ he announced his arrival in Rome to his friend Wilhelmine Gille, remarking that he had had to rush, spending only twenty-six hours in the carriage to complete a stretch that normally took three and a half days. After much hesitation, in the end he had decided not to miss the appointment his father had made for him there in Rome. He had arrived, he wrote with satisfaction, with the feeling of having managed to fulfill a difficult commitment to his father. However, he also added, not without a hint of sadness: “Es ist die erste, aber wahrscheinlich auch die letzte Reise die ich mache”.²⁷ Just after arriving in Rome, he contacted the painter Friedrich Preller, a friend of his father’s, who in the guise of Cicero took him around the city and did not miss introducing him to Georg Kestner, the son of that same Charlotte Buff who had offered his father abundant material for his *Werther*. Kestner was the ambassador of the Kingdom of Hannover to Rome, and helped August throughout his brief sojourn in the city. August declared to his father that in Rome he finally felt free and was delighted to have managed to overcome all of the many difficulties to which such a long journey had subjected him. The last entry in the *Tagebuch* is dated October 21st.²⁸ It was to remain interrupted because August became gravely sick and, only a few days later, on October 27th, died. In a long letter written on October 28th Georg Kestner told August’s father about the illness that had brought him to death, but did not mention in the least the question of alcoholism.²⁹ In a letter dated November 2nd³⁰ to the Chancellor Friedrich von Müller, Minister of Justice of the Duchy of Weimar and good friend of Goethe’s,³¹ however, he let all pretense drop and told the whole truth. The autopsy had revealed the real cause of August’s death to have been due to alcoholism. Among the other most noted symptoms of this

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-266.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-270.

³¹ Gero von Wilpert, *Goethe-Lexicon*, cit., pp. 726-727.



illness it was in fact revealed that August's liver was five times the normal size. The doctor who completed the autopsy judged "daß ein nahes Ende, [...] unvermeidlich gewesen seyn würde".³² All of those who had spent time with August were aware of the fact "daß er viel zu viel Wein trank"; he drank at every hour of the day, so much so that the doctor recognized alcoholism as the cause of the devastation of August's completely ruined organism: "Der Arzt erkannte gleichfalls diesen Grund seines zerrütteten inneren Baues, und hat ihn aus Schonung nicht in den Bericht gesetzt".³³

In his response to Kestner in a letter (November 15, 1830), Chancellor von Müller revealed that he had also been quite aware of August's alcoholism and that, in his opinion as well, it had been inherited from the mother,³⁴ Christiane Vulpius. If he knew everything about August's alcoholism, we can only imagine what Goethe knew. What is clear is that Goethe sent August to Rome after the court counselor Vogel told him that his son had already reached the terminal phase of alcoholism which could only end with death. It must be noted that a liver of such enlarged proportions, an unequivocal symptom of mortal hepatic cirrhosis, would have been easily detectable with a simple palpitation of an expert hand, as no doubt Vogel's was. Indeed, it is precisely Vogel who must have told Goethe in December of 1829 that there was no more hope for his son. After this consultation, Goethe decided, as we have seen, to organize his son's voyage to Rome. Evidently, the prospect of his son dying at home, as his wife had, would have been too painful. Speaking of which, one must recall that Chancellor von Müller, in a letter to their common friend Johann Friedrich Rochlitz on November 15th, related the sad news of August's death in Rome due to alcoholism, and added the following eloquent comment: "Segnen aber muß man das Geschick insofern, dass, wenn der Tod *hier*, unten den Augen des Vaters erfolgt wäre, der Eindruck auf ihn noch hundertmal tragischer und verderblicher gewesen sein würde".³⁵

³² August von Goethe, *Auf einer Reise nach Süden. Tagebuch 1830*, cit., p. 268.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

³⁵ *Goethe in vertraulichen Briefen seiner Zeitgenossen. 1817-1832*, cit., p. 312.



Seeing that August was by that point condemned by his obstinate alcoholism to die young, it was better that he die far away, and there was no more suitable place in the world for a *buona morte* than Rome. Goethe himself had been convinced of this during his Roman sojourn forty years prior. In the pyramid of Caius Cestius, with the cemetery reserved for non-Catholics next to it, he had seen the ideal place to be buried. In fact, he had dedicated two pictures to the pyramid of Cestius as the poetic image of death. In addition, a quick mention of the pyramid appears in at least three passages of his *Italienische Reise*.³⁶ Goethe referred to the Roman cemetery next to the Cestius pyramid, in which August, being Protestant, was buried, many times in his letters to friends dedicated to the death of his son. To Carl Friedrich Zelter on February 23, 1831 explicitly referring to his personal experience, he wrote: “Nach wenigen Tagen schlug er den Weg ein, um an der Pyramide des Cestius auszuruhen, an der Stelle, wohin sein Vater, vor seiner Geburt, sich dichterisch zu sehnen geneigt war”.³⁷ To another friend, Justus Christian von Loder, he wrote: “Mein Sohn der freylich schon in bedenklichen Umständen durch Italien ging, schien durchaus sich zu erholen und auf dem Weg zu genesen. Allein zum Ziele seiner Laufbahn war ihm Rom vorgeschrieben, da es denn für mich kein geringer Trost bleibt, daß er dieses hohe Ziel erreicht und die Würde desselben, wenn auch nur kurze Zeit, empfunden und genossen hat”.³⁸ To Kestner, regarding the tomb to be dedicated to his son, on June 11, 1831 he wrote: “Haben Sie die Güte, mir Ihre Gedanken darüber zu eröffnen; da der Vater, wie jene Elegie bezeugt, jenen Weg zu nehmen gewünscht, so ist es doch ganz eigen, daß der Sohn denselben eingeschlagen”.³⁹ The elegy to which he referred was the seventh of his *Römische Elegien*, where he had written:

³⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Italienische Reise*, edited by Christoph Michel and Hans-Georg Dewitz (Frankfurt: Insel, 1991), pp. 144, 485, 556.

³⁷ WA, IV. Abtheilung: *Goethes Briefe*, 48: *November 1830-Juni 1831*, cit., 1909, p. 129.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.



Dulde mich Jupiter hier und Hermes führe mich später,
Cestius Denkmal vorbei, leise zum Orcus hinab.⁴⁰

Following his instructions, Kestner had the sculptor Bertel Thorwaldsen engrave August's tombstone with the following Latin inscription: "GOETHE FILIUS PATRI ANTEVERTENS OBIIT ANNOR. XL MDCCCXXX". Goethe's son, preceding his father, died at forty years of age in 1830. At forty years of age for, having been born on December 25, 1789, he had not yet celebrated forty-one. In some obscure way August must have intuited that his father had fixed a sort of appointment with death for him in Rome. This is probably why he had tried to postpone his entrance into the eternal city for as long as possible, choosing instead such a curious, zig-zagging route through Italy.

Even if Goethe had gone a few times and had dedicated two pictures to it, he had never been present at a funeral there and did not know how they in fact were carried out. However, his old friend Karl Philipp Moritz had taken part in a funeral and had left a rather detailed and precise description in certain pages of his *Reisen eines Deutschen in Italien*.⁴¹ In September of 1787 a young friend of his, the painter from Dresden August Kirsch, had died and on the 23rd of that month the few German friends of Kirsch's in Rome organized a funeral. Moritz related how the cadaver was deposited in a coffin and placed in a carriage that had to cross the whole city, as Kirsch had lived near Saint Peter's. After having crossed the Ponte Sisto, at the Bocca della Verità a group of mounted gendarmes waited for them in order to protect them from possible attacks by the rabble of the area; for Protestant funerals had only recently been tolerated by the pontifical authority and had to take place at night, in the glow of torchlight and in secret. The small funeral procession, made up of only a few carriages of the deceased's German friends, stopped near

⁴⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Römische Elegien*, in *Gedichte 1756-1799*, edited by Karl Eibl (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker, 1987), p. 411.

⁴¹ Karl Philipp Moritz, *Werke*, edited by Horst Günther, II: *Reisen. Schriften zur Kunst und Mythologie* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1993), pp. 310-315.



the pyramid, built in Egyptian style in the 1st century BCE to be the final resting place of Caius Cestius Epulo. In the shadow of the pyramid, in the middle of a grass-covered clearing there was something that vaguely resembled a cemetery reserved for Protestants; in fact, that clearing was referred to as “the Roman people’s meadows”. The whole quarter was fenced-in, but the cemetery stood outside the old Aurelian Walls. Close to the pyramid a few tombstones of Englishmen and German Protestants could be found. Moritz was struck by the contrast between the absolute solitude of the cemetery and the din that came from nearby Monte Testaccio, the small hill made up of centuries of potsherds that was teeming with *osterie* where the Romans would go to drink wine and live it up. When the silent funeral procession made it to the pyramid, the friends of the deceased painter planted their lit torches into the ground, took the coffin from the carriage and deposited it in the previously dug grave. They huddled around it, Moritz gave a brief talk, and then with their shovels they threw dirt overtop. Around them a small crowd of Romans had gathered, they too silent and respectful before the seriousness and the order with which the ceremony had proceeded.

It is important to remember that at that time the pontifical authority did not permit Protestants or any non-Catholics to be buried in churches or in consecrated ground. That which was outside of the city walls was not considered such. For German Catholics there was the German Cemetery within the Vatican. And finally, inside the cemetery the display of crosses was severely prohibited, as was the inscription of the word “God” and Biblical passages as well. Already at the beginning of the 18th Century the area near the pyramid of Caius Cestius had been chosen to be the burial place of non-Catholics. In 1775 the Marquis de Sade⁴² noted that the erection of small marble monuments was permitted and counted three. Things improved at the beginning of the 19th Century thanks to Wilhelm von Humboldt, at that time Prussian Ambassador to the Holy See, who lost two small children in 1803 and 1807. He approached the

⁴² Donatien Alphonse François Marquis de Sade, *Voyage d’Italie*, edited by Maurice Lever (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1995), p. 85.



reigning pontiff, Pio VII, and was able to obtain the right to have the cemetery at least walled in and to plant trees.⁴³ These were the conditions when Kestner found when he had the mortal remains of August von Goethe buried.

⁴³ Hans von Hülsen-Josef Rast, *Rom. Führer durch die ewige Stadt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), pp. 290-293.