

**Matthew Bell.** *Goethe: A Life in Ideas*. Princeton University Press 2025. 776 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover 9780691153957); \$39.95 USD (eBook 9780691275161).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) oeuvre is so comprehensive that one intuitively wonders what the few fundamental ideas of his thinking are. In the disciplines of the natural sciences alone, his work includes contributions in botany, zoology, anatomy, geology, mineralogy, color theory and much more. But what are the origins of conceptual comprehension in poetry and the origins of our comprehension in modern science? Matthew Bell presents an intellectual biography of the poet, intertwining historical-political context, literary criticism and the history of ideas in Europe. In this new book, the portrayed evolution of the poet's thought draws on sources translated into English language for the first time.

The search for the key to conceptual comprehension leads us to the great poet's *realism*, the origin in personal feelings and perceptions, particularly in poetry, as it was delineated, e.g., in the *Cambridge History of German Literature* (ed. H. Watanabe-O'Kelly, section "Weimar Classicism"). *Realism* [which stands in tension and contrast to Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) idealism] teaches of a human-environment relationship that is fundamental to the sentient individual. It also bears witness to an overall scientific attitude that is based on a healthy self-image of man. Goethe deliberately advocates an image of man that is in harmony with nature, i.e., it is supposed to have a medical healing effect. Here is agreement with Friedrich Schiller. Out of a possible selection of conceptualizations of the human being, it seems to be the one that is most suitable for the performance of human life itself. In this respect, his anthropology is a decisive part of his work, which not only goes beyond achievements in individual branches of knowledge, but also sets an accent in the optimization of self-discovery and, through self-discovery, also provides justification of the conceptual definition of all fields of knowledge. Decisive for a correct understanding is the view of anthropology, as it was already represented in one of Bell's early books (*Goethe's Naturalistic Anthropology*) in 1994, as K. J. Fink's review at the time noted. Pantheism, which is only ontological, must be transgressed and its intended purpose for poetry can be seen: "By 'naturalistic' the author [i.e. Matthew Bell] means 'holistic' (12) and by anthropology, the author means literature, the view of humankind as presented in aesthetic writing."

Professor Bell thus emphasizes that the great poet's reflected image of man is to be found in a basic aesthetic attitude, in the poetic reinterpretation of the human-environment relationship based on human perception, in time after the *Rationalist Enlightenment Movement*, e.g., J. G. Herder, I. Kant or M. Mendelssohn, which advocated understandable ethical and also natural ideals. To draw our continued attention justifiedly to the enormous achievement of the German poet as a problem-solving genius of his time was the pioneering achievement of Professor Bell. Particularly noteworthy in this new book are the discussions of Goethe's Theory of Light (i.e., his *Farbenlehre*, directed against Sir Isaac Newton's *Optics*) guided by psychological and artistic factors of perception and the chapters that deal with Goethe's contributions in the environment of 19<sup>th</sup> century evolutionary biological theorists.



Goethe succeeded in moving away from enthusiasm for sensuality and from subjectivism without becoming the victim of idealism. Following the pantheism of the famous philosopher Baruch Spinoza (with his intuitive grasp of the individual from the whole, from God as thinking substance), there is thus an integration of man into nature, which becomes a doctrine of man, reinterpreted in the literary theory of poetry. This basic attitude also explains the natural perception-guided approach to objects in the natural sciences, which is also based on human experience in the encounter with natural phenomena. Weimar Classicism can rest on this solid foundation and can thus recognize in poetry the cohesion of the soul's activities, as already projected by Schiller. As Bell notes in *The German Tradition of Psychology in Literature and Thought, 1700-1840*, Schiller argues that “with the isolation and separate working of our mental powers that the extended sphere of knowledge and separation of the professions make necessary, only poetry is able to bring into harmony once more the separated, powers of the soul – head and heart, intelligence and wit, reason and imagination – and once again to restore the wholeness of a human being in us” (Bell 2005, 117).

In the fine new book addressed here, the author describes how the poet strove to solve the problems of literary criticism of his time through his poetic attitude. The focus is categorically on the Weimar period. The Classical period, as well as the *Enlightenment*, certainly dealt with the nature of man, instead of the nature of God, as before. But Goethe's turning away from the religion of his youth must be properly understood. Bell's *Goethe*, it must be noted, does not devalue faith in his preoccupation with nature, but reinterprets its relevance as an expression of our inner connection with nature, as a first review of Bell's newest publication announces (*Kirkus-Reviews*): “faith is ... an expression of compassion. What matters is that our compassion engages with the world ... The natural human capacity to feel concern or compassion, rooted deep in our nature, dwarfs any reasoning about good or evil or otherwise of religious doctrine.”

Ever since the great state theorists, like Hobbes or Rousseau, humanity guided by intellect functions according to the laws of nature in its self-understanding, humanity is subject to these laws and insofar human feeling remains only *subjective*. This new problem, which is now before Goethe, is solved by the fact that now, in the time after the age of the *Enlightenment* and its ideals, an *objective* order characterizes our relationship and our access to nature. Thus, the poet equal to Schiller starts from nature as a whole, which can only be found in poetry. “Poetry objectifies that intuitively grasped law without generating the empty fantasies otherwise produced by such minds.” In: *The Cambridge History of German Literature* (Ed. H. Watanabe-O'Kelly). Cambridge University Press, 1997, 212.

In an earlier book written by Bell, it becomes clear that similarly to Schiller, the great poet was probably looking for a common starting point for his theory of the very diverse areas of soul activity, as Tauber writes in a review of *Goethe's Naturalistic Anthropology*, “Bell fits Goethe, then, into this schema by reading his oeuvre as an attempt to reconcile the natural and the ethical, mend the mind-body duality, and mediate between spiritualism and materialism.” (Tauber 1994. 35, 3, 477-482, 480).

David Wellbery has pointed out, that Bell's Goethe project “... aims to highlight the conceptual

lines in Goethe's scientific projects, his political views, his allegiances and aversions ..." It is therefore a matter of comprehensive conceptual pioneering work in which poetry plays a central role. Indeed, Goethe's achievement was enormous: his aesthetically reinterpreted anthropology also guides the reappraisal of the literary ideas of his time. He also founded political visions on nature and not on rational principles, we are informed by Bell.

It must be remarked, however, that this new book on the great German poet does little to address the gender-specific distinction for the overall picture of poetic productivity. But the absence of the less enlightened aspects of the great German mind does not diminish the philosophical actuality of this new book. Its subject matter has relevance, today, for example for the newly discovered and much debated new *Environmental Aesthetics* of Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, which emphasizes that the formation of concepts, in ethics, politics as well as in the sciences, relies on our judgments founded on an indispensable aesthetic distance, a distance humans ought to have to their contemplated object of investigation.

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