

GOETHE AND THE YO-YO

By RICHARD J. BROWNE and M. C. DAVIS

Concerning the composition of the *Venezianische Epigramme*, Goethe once made the remark: "Es sind dieses Früchte, die in einer großen Stadt gedeihen, überall findet man Stoff, und es braucht nicht viel Zeit, sie zu machen."¹ Certainly these epigrams prove that Goethe did transform varied and diverse personal experiences of the most common nature into verse, while he surveyed Venice with his artist's eye, a Venice which had just as much "everydayness" and plain humanity in its marrow as cultural grandeur and historic tradition. In any event, the "big city" as a concept tends to draw otherwise insignificant daily poignancies of the human comedy into grosser relief for the artistic mind, and with the epigrams written at Venice Goethe comes his closest to the type of temperament later exhibited by Rilke, which thrives on urban inspiration of the most common variety. Apropos this feeling for the down-to-earth, a quotation dating from Goethe's first taste of Italy's city life in 1786 might be recalled: "Mir wenigstens ist es so als wenn ich alle Dinge dieser Welt nie so richtig geschätzt hätte als hier. Welche Freude wird mirs seyn dich davon zu unterhalten."²

Many of the poems contained in the collection, *Venezianische Epigramme*, portray lighthearted sightseeing and extraordinary interest in the daily cataclysm of events which cannot be separated from life; other Venetian epigrams belie the *Stimmungsdevise* promulgated as a preface to the volume of poems: "Wie man Zeit und Geld vertan, / zeigt das Büchlein lustig an."³ Because Goethe's second sojourn in Venice was not a happy one, and since he was there only on state business (to meet the Herzogin Amalia and accompany her back to Weimar), he was anxious to get the entire affair over with so that he might return to his beloved Christiana. And this impatience is voiced in many an epigram. No wonder that he writes to Knebel:

Hier schicke ich dir, lieber Bruder, ein Blätchen Gedichte alle eines Inhalts, Herder wird ein manigfaltigeres mitgeteilt haben. Besser ist es immer mit den Resultaten unseres Daseyns die Freunde ein wenig ergötzen, als sie mit Confessionen wie uns zu Muthe ist wo nicht traurig doch nachdenklich zu machen. . . . Mich verlangt sehr wieder nach Hause.⁴

His nostalgia, his impatience, his moments of pleasure, his likes and dislikes—everything which was his or in him or around him was ultimately reflected in terms of the *Venezianische Epigramme*. The

¹ *Goethes Werke* (Weimar Ausgabe), Abt. IV, IX, 201, Letter of April 30, 1790, to Charlotte Sophie Juliane von Kalb.

² Letter to Frau von Stein, November 11, 1786. Cf. *Schriften der Goethe Gesellschaft*, II, 216.

³ *Goethes Werke* (Jubiläums-Ausgabe), I, 204.

⁴ *Goethes Werke* (Weimar Ausgabe), Abt. IV, IX, 200 f.

spasms of composition and the choppy irregular way of life characterizing his second stay at Venice are illustrated by a few more fustian lines scribbled off to Knebel in April of 1790:

Heute erhalt [*sic*] ich einen Brief von Frau v. Kalb, daß erste Wort das ich von Hauß sehe. Grüße sie und dancke ihr. Über acht Tage erhält sie auch ein Blat Epigrammen. Sie wachsen hier wie die Pholaden. Leb wohl. Behalte mich lieb. Die Herzogin kommt den 7. Mai hier an.⁵

In the bevy of epigrams which traveled to friends in Germany was one apparently intended "to amuse his friends with the results of his living,"⁶ to paraphrase from his letter. This trifling stanza reads:

Welch ein lustiges Spiel! Es windet am Faden die Scheibe,
Die von der Hand entflo, eilig sich wieder herauf!
Seht, so schein' ich mein Herz bald dieser Schönen, bald jener
Zuzuwerfen; doch gleich kehrt es im Fluge zurück.

The last two lines of this poem admit a dual interpretation, perhaps even a triple interpretation. Heinrich Düntzer, who has already taken most of the fun out of the interpretation of classical German authors, leaves quite a bit behind him when he comments on Epigram 90: "Das hübsche Epigramm dürfte hier, wo der Liebende sich nach höchstem Genusse sehnt, etwas auffallend stehn, will man nicht annehmen, nur aus Verzweiflung zu seinem Zwecke zu gelangen, sehe er sich nach andern um."⁷ In our opinion Goethe alludes here (the final two verses) either to the fact that he finds himself surrounded by lovable maidens, but enamored in each case only for the moment, and remembering his unhappy waiting in Venice and the senselessness of it all, his decision is usually to retire into himself for the rudimentary reason that he cannot give in to complete self-forgetfulness; or to the fact that his heart already belongs by choice and by duty to the beloved who is waiting at home for him, and he experiences only momentary, unthinking desires for novel amours, but immediately his desires are affixed again to his one and true love.

No matter what the signification of the last two lines, the big problem is still found in the first distychon of the stanza. What is the *lustiges Spiel*? Düntzer is even less satisfactory in his disquisition on this question: "Es schwebt ein wohl in Venedig gesehenes Knabenspiel vor, wo man ein Rad bald weiter im Seile laufen läßt, bald wieder einzieht." We frankly think the game described is the famous yo-yo, a toy familiar to every American. Like many things we are prone to consider up-to-date and unprecedented in the historical sense, the yo-yo is in reality very ancient. Indeed, a complete yo-yo is pictured on a Greek vase of the pre-Christian era, and terra-cotta yo-yo discs of the same period have been unearthed.⁸ Not only is the yo-yo ex-

⁵Goethes Werke, IX, 201. For further reference to *pholades* cf. IX, 363.

⁶Epigram No. 90. Cf. Goethes Werke (Jubiläums-Ausgabe), I, 224.

⁷Erläuterungen zu den deutschen Klassikern (Leipzig, 1876), Band 68, Teil 9, p. 190.

⁸Cf. Konrad Levezow, *Gallerie der Vasen* (Berlin, 1834), Plate 871; Otto Benndorf, *Griechische und Sicilianische Vasenbilder* (Berlin, 1869-1883),

tremely venerable; it has also been extremely popular in brief moments of culture. And astoundingly enough, the period of its most devastating popularity in England, France, Germany, and Italy falls roughly into the period of the Venetian Epigrams!

Goethe's ambiguous little poem is not the only literary documentation of the great yo-yo fad of the 1790's. In January, 1792, Beaumarchais submitted to the *Chronique de Paris* a rewriting of Scene 13 in Act III of the *Mariage de Figaro* ridiculing the cult of the *émigrette*,⁹ the French synonym for yo-yo:

BRID'ONSON, à Figaro: On—on dit que tu fais ici des tiennes.

FIGARO: Monsieur est bien bon! Ce n'est là qu'une misère.

BR: On n'est pas plu—us idiot que ça.

FIG: (riant) Idiot, moi? Je fais tres-bien monter et descendre. . . (Il roule)

BR: (étonné) A—à quoi c'est-il bon, l'émigrette?

BARTOLO: (brusquement) C'est un noble jeu, qui dispense de la fatigue de penser.

BR: Ba—ah! Moi, fatigue-là ne—e me fatigue pas du tout.

F: (riant) Jeu favori d'un peuple libre, qu'il mêle à tout avec succès!

BART: (brusquement) Emigrette et constitution, le beau mélange qu'ils font là!¹⁰



Jeu de l'Émigrette.

The Parisians went in for the fad in a big way; there were songs and caricatures of the yo-yo in abundance. The figures pictured here¹¹

p. 61 f.; *Berichte der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig*, phil.-hist. Klasse (1852), Plates v-vi.

⁹ "Dieses Spielzeug soll seinen Namen davon haben, daß es zur Zeit der stärksten Emigrantenzugung aufgekommen ist." Walther von Wartburg, *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bonn, 1922), III, 220. "En 1791 la manie de l'émigration fit inventer un jeu qui eut quelque temps la vogue, et qu'on nomma Coblentz ou l'émigrette." *Le grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1870), VIII, 437. *Jou-jou* also seems to have signified the toy, and thus its etymology becomes clear. Cf. *Der große Brockhaus*, 15th edition, XX, 517.

¹⁰ Conveniently reprinted in *Le grand dictionnaire*, VII, 437.

from a contemporary print are about to enlist in the army, but they are all playing with yo-yos. The "quiz" or "bandelore" (as the yo-yo was termed on the British Isles) took England by storm, and Moore reports that the Duke of Wellington was not above amusing himself publicly with the instrument during a committee meeting of the Irish House of Commons.¹² A sequel to Baron Münchhausen, which was published in all English editions, contains a courtroom scene in which the clerks

were blind and the women jurors made dumb by having their mouths sewed up. The matrons, however, instead of their tongues had other instruments to convey their ideas; each of them had three quizzes, one quiz pendant from the string that sewed up her mouth, and another quiz in either hand. When she wished to express her negative, she darted and recoiled the quizzes in her right and left hand; and when she desired to express her affirmative, she, nodding, made the quiz pendant from her mouth flow down and recoil again.¹³

The game penetrated into Germany as well, and later, in 1792, a pamphlet¹⁴ on the subject commented: "In Weimar und Gotha wurde es bald das Spiel des Tages, und in ersterer Stadt zeigte der daselbst lebende große Mann, daß ein Genie auch im *Joujou* ein Genie groß und unerreichbar ist." Goethe must have known of the yo-yo, and this quotation seems to imply that he even had such toys in his hands. The epigram in question was composed in April, 1790. The exclamation "Welch ein lustiges Spiel!" might be meant to indicate Goethe's first experience with the object in Venice. But even as early as 1790, before the full strength of the fad hit Europe generally, Goethe must have been aware of its existence and popularity. The conjugation of Goethe's general propensity for keeping well-informed and the widespreadness of the cult of the yo-yo, plus the various literary comments the phenomenon elicited, lead to the inevitable conclusion that Goethe must have known the yo-yo.

And if the *Spiel* of Epigram 90 is the yo-yo, is it at all unlike or unworthy of Goethe to transform this object of ridiculous social obsession (due to its misuse in his days) into an original symbol of his own churning and coquettish emotions, and then further into a vaguer image of the sublime constancy of true love despite the sprightly fancies of the lover?

Yale University and Radcliffe College

¹¹ From Leo Claretie's *Les Jouets, histoires, fabrication* (Paris, n.d.), p. 282.

¹² *Memoirs of Thomas Moore*, ed. Lord John Russell (London, 1853), p. 12.

¹³ *The Surprising Travels and Adventures of Baron Münchhausen* (London, 1792), II, 149 f.

¹⁴ *Über das "Joujou de Normandie."* This pamphlet was not available to us, hence we quote from an article in the *Pauliner Zeitung* (Leipzig, 1933), XLV, 134.