120

December 5, 1948

Egmont's Character

A

K. V.

Ernst J. Meyer

Egmont's Character

That Egmont was the last drama of Goethe's youth gives to it a place of special significance among the writings of Goethe, if in so rich a pattern as was the artistic creation of Goethe one may speak of "special places" in any sense. But that the fourth part of Dichtung und Wahrheit, describing, as it does, the end of Goethe's youth, should end with a quotation from Egmont is no coincidence. Of Egmont is true what Goethe said about all of his works, that he had written "was ihn auf den Naegeln brannte"; and if Egmont stands in a place of its own among Goethe's writings, it is because this period of Goethe's life, the threshold of maturity, where the bright and lively fire of youth begins to mingle with the apprehensive insights of the older man, before being quenched by them, is a uniquely beautiful one. In his old age Goethe himself was contented to look upon Egmont and to recognize in him the driving moments of his own youth, and he did not criticise or chide them. On the contrary, Egmont became for Goethe a symbol of the irrational, incomprehensible forces that made the vigor and the candor of his youth, that drove him, to some extent through his whole life. When he looked back in Dichtung und Wahrheit, the words of Egmont had been made meaningful by the course of Goethe's life:

> "Kind! Kind! nicht weiter! Wie von unsichtbaren Geistern gepeitscht, gehen die Sonnenpferde der Zeit mit unsers Schicksals leichtem Wagen durch; und uns bleibt nichts als, muthig gefasst, die Zuegel festzuhalten, und bald rechts bald links, vom Steine hier, vom Sturze da, die Raeder wegzulenken. Wohin es geht, wer weiss es? Erinnert er sich doch kaum, woher er kam."

Egmont stands as a monument on the boundary between Goethe's youth and his manhood.

Nothing is more fitting than that one should attempt to understand Egmont, as the drame is illuminated by Goethe's own life and genius. Ultimately the rewards of that method will be richer, than if we burden Egmont with our own hopes and desires, our own fears and disillusionments. —

Egmont according to history was an older man with a family of several children, but a sedate middle-aged man could not be the pattern for Goethe's Egmont. Goethe's hero was to be young, childless, inwardly as well as outwardly unconstrained, the spark of life was to spring from his eyes, and unrestricted vitality was wholly to motivate him. Goethe wanted his hero free of restrictions or burdens, physical or spiritual. After all, it was not Goethe's purpose, to be necessarily true to history. For him it was only an end to a means, the raw material from which he created Egmont according to his own specifications. History was only the background of a stormy age that was struggling for freedom, on which Egmont could appear not only in human but in knightly excellence as well.

Nothing is more characteristic for Goethe in this period of his life* than that Egmont should appear active, a man of deeds; in motion, a knight on horseback, as the populace thinks of him, rather than static, pensive, or contemplating, - as so many of Schiller's heroes were. Egmont, although he himself does not appear in the first act in person, is described already as the victor at Gravelingen, whose horse was shot from under him. Similarly Klaerchen dreams of him as a knight, as the great hero riding through the streets, who was her sweetheart. The crowd believes that to Egmont one owes the peace; on Egmont one hopes in time of need.

* when he went from Frankfurt to Weimar.

But Egmont is extraordinary not only as a knight. For Goethe Egmont's human love for his fellow men is also of importance. The common people love Egmont. All the world favors him. One would carry him, so to speak, in the palms of one's hands, because it is evident that he wishes well, "weil ihm die Froehlichkeit, das freie Leben, die gute Meinung aus den Augen sieht; weil er nichts besitzt, das er dem Duerftigen nicht mitteilte, auch dem der's nicht bedarf." For Egmont the good will of his people is the surest and the noblest security. With Alba's son Ferdinand he will trade horses, so good-natured and unsuspecting is Egmont. And even in the hour of death Egmont he trusts Ferdinand, although ~~he~~ Ferdinand has betrayed him; and Egmont entrusts to him his beloved.

With Klaerchen Egmont's humanness and his humanity reveals itself most tenderly and most beautifully. Not the Duke Egmont, the great Egmont would he be, not the stiff, cold, unpleasant Egmont. His love is simple and direct, embellished only by its intensity and its purity. The true Egmont, he says, is the one that Klaerchen loves and knows and presses to her heart.

Egmont's love, however, surpasses Klaerchen or the common populace; Egmont's love surpasses even humanity, for Egmont's highest and most fervent love is dedicated to life itself. Not that Egmont would consider it that way. What would be further from Egmont's nature than to theorize? His love of life expresses itself in the naive trust that he places in it. Between Egmont and life exists complete harmony which wants no philosophical justification. He cannot be suspicious; suspicion would destroy the harmony, and distrust

would corrupt the benevolent bond that ties Egmont to life. He will not, he cannot hear the voices of warning that reach him. To live for one's safety, means to be dead already. With his wonted directness Egmont says: "Es dreht sich immer um den einen Punkt: ich soll leben, wie ich nicht leben mag. Dass ich froehlich bin, die Sachen leicht nehme, das ist mein Glueck und ich vertausch es nicht gegen die Sicherheit eines Totengewoelbes." What is life, if it bethinks not itself, but always only the future ? To worry about tomorrow, implies wasting the joys of today, and since tomorrow the worries of today repeat themselves for the day after, one loses all his life. When the threatening danger which he cannot see is pointed out to Egmont, he answers light-heartedly words that have ominous significance: "Wenn ich ein Nachtwandler waere und auf dem gefaehrlichen Gipfel eines Hauses spazierte, ist es denn freundschaftlich mich beim Namen zu rufen, und mich zu warnen, zu wecken, und zu toeten?" Such voices of warning reach him. An old friend Graf Olvira writes to him, and Oranien comes to tell his fears and suspicions. But no voice can wake Egmont from the dream which is his life.

Oranien is a polar complementary opposite to Egmont. Where Egmont acts impulsively, Oranien thoughtfully calculates his chances. Egmont trusts everyone and suspects no evil. Oranien is careful, suspicious, and well bethought of preparing for danger. He warns his friend, and begs him to flee. When he sees his urgings to be vain, Oranien leaves him. The passionate drive of Egmont is foreign to him. The people may respect him, but they do not love him. Statesmanlike, Oranien is always conscious of the state of affairs; he says himself how diligently he studies the intentions of all parties; he acts from a balanced consideration of his own interests and those of the people. Oranien is altogether sober; dispassionately he considers:

"Ziemt es sich uns fuer Tausende hinzugeben, so ziemt es sich auch uns fuer Tausende zu schonen. . . Es ist klug dem unvermeidlichen uebel entgegen zu gehen." Egmont on the contrary, cannot consider his own safety. His thoughts turn only to the destructive conflict that will follow upon his flight, and so long as there is a chance for peace, he will stake his life on the attempt to maintain it.

But Goethe did not want to make Egmont a hero, nor by any means a titanic hero, no Prometheus who contends with gods. Egmont is far too human to be titanic, and his death is not that of a martyr but of a human being. His last words are not prophetic or apocalyptic, they are beautiful merely in their sincerity and directness: "Und euer Liebstes zu erretten, fallt freudig, wie ich euch ein Beispiel gebe."

Neither is Egmont an average man. With all his love to Klaerchen, with all his cordiality toward the common people, Egmont is nevertheless differentiated from them. His faith in life is naive, but it is all the stronger. Egmont believes that his life is yet ascending; that is why he can be aware of no danger. "Ich stehe hoch, und kann und muss noch hoeher steigen; ich fuehle mir Hoffnung, Muth und Kraft. Noch hab' ich meines Wachstums Gipfel nicht erreicht; und steh' ich droben einst, so will ich fest, nicht aengstlich stehn. Soll ich fallen, so mag ein Donnerschlag, ja ein selbstverfehlter Schritt mich abwaerts in die Tiefe stuerzen; da lieg' ich mit viel Tausenden." At times Egmont seems to be dimly aware that his ascending path is precipitous, that a wrong step might hurl him to destruction. But a spirit within him drives him blindly to what he thinks will be the summit of his life; what actually is his destruction.

This fateful element in Egmonts life, Goethe called the daemonic. It seemed to Goethe, when in his old age he surveyed his life, to be

a part of a general phenomenon. At the time when Egmont was written Goethe was only intuitively aware of its existence, and only later did he become aware of its many implications. He believed to find in nature, in the non-living as well as the living modes, something which manifested itself only in contradictions, and which could hence be comprehended by no concept, much less expressed by a single word. It was neither divine, for it did not partake of reason; it was not human, for it possessed no mind. It was outside of the realm of morals and stood beyond good and evil. It was a natural force, which seemed irrational, and though it did not always work destruction, it tended to interfere with human plans. It defied human conceptions, in sofar as it resembled chance and did not respect causality. And still it resembled providence, since its effects revealed a certain inner connection. Everything which seemed for man to be unlimited, for it was finite. It seemed to deal arbitrarily with the fixed and necessary factors of human existence such as time and space. In the impossible it was at home, and the possible it scorned. In a sense it seemed to be a law of nature, and yet it violated all the laws of nature which we knew. It was at one and the same time a factor which connected and dispersed, which unified and scattered. Goethe called it the daemonic.

Although Egmont is not heroic, his personal bravery is the fertile ground which nourishes the daemonic in him. It is his bravery which makes him oblivious of all danger, which tends to make all men admire him, and hence attracts them to him. Egmont's bravery, his personal courage is what finally destroys him. This personal valor knows how to cope with danger on the battlefield; it is inseparably linked with the free and joyous lightheartedness of Egmont. Egmont's bravery is the expression of the good luck (gute Glueck) which he feels is attending him.

Against the enemy in battle, Egmont knows how to defend himself. But in the face of the snares of statecraft he is helpless, and his bravery avails him nothing.

The daemonic, says Goethe, is here involved from two sides, is engaged in a conflict in which that which is lovable (das Liebenswuerdige) perishes, and that which is hated triumphs. Not only in the bright and joyous character of Egmont, but in the tension of the overall situation, and in the dark and cruel character of Alba, where it is the destructive, fatal force, does the daemonic act. The daemonic is neither static, nor does it throw its weight on any one side of the balance of fortune. Rather it is dynamic; it expresses itself in action, and works through complementary opposites. In the constantly reversing motion between two counterbalanced extremes, Goethe sees one of the basic truths of life. The tragedy in Egmont is that in the conflict, the lovable is lost and that which is hated triumphs. The fourth act of Egmont was the hardest for Goethe to write, by his own admission. For it is there that the human tenderness, the warmth, the goodness, and the childlike bliss in Egmont's life (particularly in his love for Klaerchen) is lost in the conflict. Egmont falls, and that which is hated, the calculating cruelty, the beastly brutality of Alba triumphs. And Egmont's happiness in life is now replaced by cares and worries, by mental anguish, and ultimately by death.

Goethe, unlike the Christian tradition which finds in death the end of worldly pain and the beginning of a happier life, feels that death (though a necessary opposite to life) is the end of Egmont's earthly existence. Goethe is not concerned with life after death, or with a resurrection. That is why Egmont looks not forward to death, but backward at the joys of his life; and in the unspeakable fondness for life that lies in Egmont's backward glances, is Goethe's solution to the problem of death.

In Egmont life is untroubled by thoughts of death, because life is its own reward, its own explanation, its own justification. The only purpose of life is itself, its own enjoyment, its own intensification. Life is judged by its own values, by its simple joys, its hearty pleasures. Life seeks itself; it is content within its own frame of reference, it works according to its own laws. Life is utterly self-sufficient. In Egmont, life is the solution to its own problems; it needs no heaven and no eternity to make it meaningful. That Goethe is able to define such an outlook upon life without in any way striking the discordant notes of what Americans call "Epicureanism", and French men call "libertinage", is a document not only to his own genius and his human greatness, but to the high level of German bourgeois culture in Goethe's time.

It is the daemonic in Egmont which attracts all people to him, which frees him from inner constraints, which gives him the immeasurable (ungemessene) love for life, the boundless confidence in himself, and the favor of the populace. It is the daemonic element in one of its most joyous aspects which drives him out into the country, into the fields, "wo aus der Erde dampfend jede naechste Wohltat der Natur, und durch die Himmel wehend alle Segen der Gestirne uns umwittern." The daemonic element as bravery drives Egmont into the midst of the battle. Above all, the daemonic element gives Egmont the unshakeable faith, that nothing can happen to him, that his life is still ascending, and that he has not yet reached its peak.

But the daemonic element is contradictory, and is at work from both sides, from the cruel darkness of Alba's heart, as well as from the joyful vitality of Egmont. Therefore he falls, where he thought it impossible. He cannot control his fate, he cannot guide his path, he cannot see where he is going. Hence he falls in the midst of life.

The beauty of the play is made by the fact, that of the coming catastrophe there is no indication whatsoever in Egmont's behavior, nor in his life. That Egmont should fall is inconceivable, to the reader or spectator, as well as to Egmont himself. The descriptions of his love of life become more vivid in the reader's mind as the play progresses. Alba himself gives the crowning characterization when he describes how Egmont is the only one who has not changed his way of life at the coming of the Spanish army. Like the Princess of Parma, Alba suspects a hidden motive in the very gaiety of Egmont. "Den ganzen Tag von einem Pferd auf's andere, laedt Gaeste und ist immer lustig und unterhaltend bei Tafel, wuerfelt und schiesst, und eilt nachts zum Liebchen." - Cruelty and treachery can neither understand nor accept the brightness of life.

Klaerchen is justly one of the most beloved of Goethe's women characters. Simple, gay, naive, hearty, and joyous, she is the fitting partner of Egmont in the play. In no respect touched by the daemonic herself, and yet sharing with Egmont all of the warm and simple pleasures of life, imbued like him with an inborn joy of living, Klaerchen emphasizes these traits in Egmont. Her death is for the spectator almost as tragic, certainly as touching as that of Egmont. Her appearance to Egmont in the dream of the last scene is the dramatic device by which Goethe unifies her death with Egmont's. It is to show us that the love which bound them together, a love which was joyful and innoway tragic, which was warm and simple and in no way metaphysical, has meaning even in the face of death.

The most beautiful scene of Egmont is the dungeon scene, where Egmont, the freedom loving, light-hearted Egmont, whose truest love was life itself, lies imprisoned, in semidarkness, awaiting his death. He is cast down, and no heroism is in his words, but the bravery that characterized his life does not abandon him in death. He does not give way to despair. But wholly unlike Beethoven's Florestan he does not accept his lot, and that he has done his duty, is neither comfort nor justification in his death. A renunciation of life as Florestan made it or all of Schiller's heroes would have made, would be altogether out of keeping with Egmont's character. On the contrary, we learn now pictured in all honesty, simplicity and sincerity, "dass der welcher durch sein ganzes Leben wachend getraeumt, Leben und Liebe mehr als geschaetzt, viel mehr, nur durch den Genuss geschaetzt, dass dieser zuletzt noch gleichsam traeumend wache, und uns wird nun gesagt, wie tief die Geliebte in seinem Herzen wohne, und welche vornehme und hohe Stelle sie darin einnaehme." the joyful naivité of Mozart's Tamino is reminiscent of Egmont's happiness in life.

The Egmont who dies here is not a martyr. Himself he says he falls through his happiness (Glueck). One may interpret it literally and symbolically. Alba was jealous of Egmont's luck at marksmanship or at cards. Alba was envious of Egmont's good nature and of his host of friends. And Alba's envy was the cause of Egmont's fall. In a broader sense, one might say, that it was Egmont's happiness, his love of life, his lack of foresight which caused his destruction.

Even sleep flees Egmont as he languishes in prison. The pictures of his life pass through his mind, the wreath of love, the heat of battle; he is aware of the fact that he has been felled in his prime. Death for the first time comes close to him, and he attempts to gage its meaning. But Egmont's thoughts invariably return to life. He longs for sleep to escape from the unaccustomed worry. ". . .warum vermagst du nicht die Ahnung zu verscheuchen, die tausendfach in dir sich auf und niedertreibt ? Seit wann begegnet der Tod dir fuerchterlich, mit dessen wechselnden Bildern, wie mit den uebrigen Gestalten der gewohnten Erde du gelassen lebtest ?" His dungeon oppresses him, and his thoughts fly back to the free and careless days of his past.

Let no one criticise Egmont, for not "reconciling himself with heaven". Truly he did not need to. Life for Egmont was its own purpose and its own goal. Now that death approaches, he seeks no metaphysical explanation. His love of life does not dissolve in the face of death. Goethe's description is honest in simplicity and sincerity.

Even now hopes and cares intermingle; he cannot believe that all his friends have abandoned him. He dares to hope; it is the last expression, and the most human one, of Egmont's love of life that he cannot conceive himself as utterly, finally lost.

Liberation* overtakes Egmont on his way to death, although not physical, it is spiritual, and soothes the pain and the doubt that tortured him. Ferdinand comes in Egmont's final hour, attracted by that daemonic element which now for the last time wins for Egmont a friend. For the last time he comtemplates flight. Once again the daemonic element which cannot believe in death raises itself in him. He stamps with his foot, saying:

> "Keine Rettung ! - - Suesses Leben ! Schoene freundliche Gewohnheit des Daseins und Wirkens! Von dir soll ich scheiden! So gelassen scheiden ! Nicht im Tumulte der Schlacht, unter dem Geraeusch der Waffen, in der Zerstreuung des Getuemmels gibst du mir fluechtiges Lebewohl; du nimmst keinen eiligen Abschied, verkuerzest nicht den Augenblick der Trennung. Ich soll deine Hand fassen, dir noch einmal in die Augen sehn, deine Schoene, deinen Werth recht lebhaft fuehlen, und dann mich entschlossen lossreissen und sagen: Fahre hin."

With the dignity that befits his life, Egmont goes to his death. In his last moments he turns to his newly found friend:

> "War mir mein Leben ein Spiegel in dem du dich gerne betrachtetest, so sei es auch mein Tod. Die Menschen sind nicht nur zusammen, wenn sie beisammen sind; auch der Entfernteste, der Abgeschiedene lebt uns. Ich hoere auf zu leben; aber ich habe gelebt."

Egmont's parting words to Ferdinand are meaningful also for us: "So leb auch du, mein Freund, gern und mit Lust, und scheue den Tod nicht."

* N.B. Not in the sense of Schiller.