# Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832): Italian Journey, 1786-7, published 1816-7

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## Introductory Note

*Everybody knows that the thrones of European literature are occupied by the triumvirate referred to in* Finnegans Wake *as Daunty, Gouty and Shopkeeper, but to most English-speaking readers the second is merely a name. German is a more difficult language to learn to read than Italian, and whereas Shakespeare, apparently, translates very well into German, Goethe is peculiarly resistant to translation into English; Hölderlin and Rilke, for example, come through much better. From a translation of* Faust, *any reader can see that Goethe must have been extraordinarily intelligent, but he will probably get the impression that he was too intelligent, too lacking in passion, because no translation can give a proper idea of Goethe's amazing command of every style of poetry, from the coarse to the witty to the lyrical to the sublime.*

*The reader, on the other hand, who does know some German and is beginning to take an interest in Goethe comes up against a cultural barrier, the humorless idolization of Goethe by German professors and critics who treat every word he ever uttered as Holy Writ. Even if it were in our cultural tradition to revere our great writers in this way, it would be much more difficult for us to idolize Shakespeare the man because we know nothing about him, whereas Goethe was essentially an autobiographical writer, whose life is the most documented of anyone who ever lived; compared with Goethe, even Dr Johnson is a shadowy figure.*

from Auden, W.H. and Elizabeth Mayer. "Introduction." *Goethe: Italian Journey.* London: Penguin, 1970.

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**Malcesine, near Verona** (pp. 44-7)

As I had planned, early in the morning I walked to the old castle, which, since it is without gates, locks, or sentries, is accessible to anyone. I sat down in the courtyard facing the old tower, which is built upon and into the rock. I had found an ideal spot for drawing, at the top of three or four steps that led to a locked door. In the frame of this door stood a little carved stone seat of the kind one can still come across in old buildings of our country.

I had not been sitting there long before several persons entered the courtyard, looked me over and walked up and down. Quite a crowd gathered. Then they came to a stop and I found myself surrounded. I realized that my drawing had created a sensation, but I did not let this disturb me and went on calmly with my work. At last a somewhat unprepossessing-looking man pushed himself forward, came up close to me and asked what I was doing there. I replied that I was drawing the old tower so as to have a memento of Malcesine. This was not allowed, he said, and I must stop at once. Since he spoke in Venetian dialect which I hardly understand, I retorted that I didn't know what he was saying. At this, with typical Italian nonchalance he tore the page up, though he left it on the pad. When this happened I noticed that some of the bystanders showed signs of indignation, especially one old woman who said this wasn't right. They should call the *podestá*, who was the proper judge of such matters. I stood on the step with my back against the

door and took in the faces of the crowd, which still kept growing. The eager stares, the good-natured expression on most of them and all the other characteristics of a crowd of strange people afforded me much amusement. I fancied I saw before me the chorus of 'Birds', whom, as the 'True Friend', I had so often made fun of on the stage of the Ettersburg theatre.

By the time the *podestá* arrived on the scene with his actuary, I was in the highest spirits and greeted him without reserve. When he asked me why I had made a drawing of their fortress, I said modestly that I had not realized that these ruins were a fortress. I pointed to the ruinous state of the tower and the walls, the lack in gates, in short, to the general defenseless condition of the whole place, and assured him it had never crossed my mind that I was drawing anything but a ruin. He answered: if it were only a ruin, why was it worth noticing? Wishing to gain time and his good will, I went into a detailed exposition; they probably knew, I said, that a great many travelers came to Italy only to see ruins, that Rome, the capital of the world, had been devastated by the Barbarians and was now full of ruins which people had drawn hundreds of times, that not everything from antiquity had been as well preserved as the amphitheater in Verona, which I hoped to see soon.


Malcesine castle

The *podestá* stood facing me, but on a lower step. He was a tall, though hardly a lanky, man of about thirty. The dull features of his stupid face were in perfect accord with the slow and obtuse way in which he put his questions. The actuary, though smaller and smarter, also did not seem to know how to handle such a novel and unusual case. I kept on talking about this and that. The people seemed to enjoy listening, and when I directed my words at some kindly-looking women, I thought I could read assent and approval in their faces.

But when I mentioned the amphitheater in Verona, which is known here by the name 'arena', the actuary, who had been collecting his wits in the meantime, broke in: that might be all very well, he said, in the case of a world-famous Roman monument, but there was nothing noteworthy about these towers except that they marked the frontier between Venetia and the Austrian Empire, for which reason they were not to be spied upon. I parried this by explaining by some length that the buildings of the Middle Ages were just as worthy of attention as those of Greek and Roman times, though they could not be expected to recognize, as I did, the picturesque beauty of buildings which had been familiar to them since childhood…

[Goethe says he's not from the Austrian Empire, he's from Frankfurt-am-Main. A young woman has heard of it, she tells them to send for Master Gregario who lived there for many years.] Master Gregario: "Signor *Podestá*, I am convinced that this man is an honest and educated gentleman who is traveling to enlarge his knowledge. We should treat him as a friend and set him at liberty, so that he may speak well of us to his countrymen and encourage them to visit Malcesine, the beautiful situation of which so well deserves the admiration of foreigners."

**Verona** (pp. 52-3)

The amphitheater is the first great monument of the ancient world I have seen, and how well preserved it is! When I entered it, and even more when I wandered about on its highest rim, I had the peculiar feeling that, grand as it was, I was looking at nothing. It ought not to be seen empty but packed with human beings, as it was recently in honor of Joseph I and Pius VI. The Emperor, who was certainly accustomed to crowds, is said to have been amazed. But only in ancient times, when a people were more of a people than today, can it have made its full effect. Such an amphitheatre, in fact, is properly designed to impress the people with itself, to make them feel at their best.

Verona amphitheater - inside

When something worth seeing is taking place on level ground and everybody crowds forward to look, those in the rear find various ways of raising themselves to see over the heads of those in front: some stand on benches, some roll up barrels, some bring carts on which they lay planks crosswise, some occupy a neighboring hill. In this way in no time they form a crater. Should the spectacle be often repeated on the same spot, makeshift stands are put up for those who can pay, and the rest manage as best they can. To satisfy this universal need is the architect's task. By his art he creates as plain a crater as possible and the public itself supplies its decoration. Crowded together, its members are astonished at themselves. They are accustomed at other times to seeing each other running hither and thither in confusion, bustling about without order or discipline. Now this many-headed, many-minded, fickle, blundering monster suddenly sees itself united as one noble assembly, welded into one mass, a single body animated by a single spirit. The simplicity of the oval is felt by everyone to be the most pleasing shape to the eye, and each head serves as a measure for the scale of the whole. But when the building is empty, there is no standard by which to judge whether it is great or small.

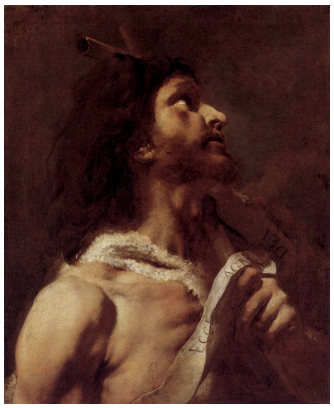

Verona amphitheater - streetside

The Veronese are to be commended for the way in which they preserved this monument. The reddish marble of which it is built is liable to weather, so they keep restoring the steps as they erode, and almost all of them look brand-new. An inscription commemorates a certain Hieronymus Maurigenus and the incredible industry he devoted to this monument. Only a fragment of the outer wall is left standing and I doubt if it was ever even completed. The lower vaults which adjoin a large square called *il Bra* are rented to some artisans, and it is a cheerful sight to see these caverns again full of life.

**Padua** (pp. 72-3)

In the place of assembly belonging to a religious brotherhood dedicated to St. Anthony, there are some ancient paintings, reminiscent of the old German school, among them some by Titian, which show a progress in the art which no painter on the other side of the Alps has so far made. I also saw some more modern paintings. Though no longer able to reach the sublime dignity of their predecessors, these artists have been extremely successful in the lighter genre. The beheading of St. John the Baptist by Piazzetta is, after allowing for the mannerisms of this master, a very good painting…

Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-9



Piazzetta, *St John the Baptist*, 1740s

In the Church of the Eremitani I saw some astonishing paintings by Mantegna, one of the older masters. What a sharp, assured actuality they have! It was from this actuality, which does not merely appeal to the imagination, but is solid, lucid, scrupulously exact and has something austere, even laborious about it, that the later painters drew their strength, as I observed in Titian's pictures. It was thanks to this that their genius and energy were able to rise above the earth and create heavenly forms which are still real. It was thus that art developed after the Dark Ages.

The audience chamber of the Palazzo Comunale…is such a vast closed-in shell that, even when one has just come from seeing it, one can hardly retain its image in one's mind. It is three hundred feet long, one hundred feet wide and, from floor to vaulted ceiling, one hundred feet high. People here are so used to living out of doors that the architects were faced with the problem of vaulting over a market square, so to speak. Such a huge vaulted space gives one a strange feeling. It is a closed-in infinity more analogous to human nature than the starry sky is. The sky draws us out of ourselves, but this gently draws us back into ourselves.

Palazzo Comunale, Padua