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Poetic Reclamation and Goethe's *Venetian Epigrams*



Ralph Hexter

Studying Goethe's "Venezianische Epigramme" (henceforth VE) offers a valuable lesson in the problems of reading an uncanonical work, particularly frustrating in this case because Goethe himself is the canonical author of an entire national literature. It would be manifestly unfair, I admit, to expect every reader of Goethe to be familiar with all of his writings, which run to well over a hundred volumes in the monumental *Sophien* or *Weimarer Ausgabe* (henceforth SA), including, in addition to Goethe's belletristic output, scientific writings, letters and voluminous journals. Records of his conversations with Eckermann and others extend the field yet further. A working selection has evolved over the years. *Faust*, *Werther*, and, say, "Mahomets Gesang" and "Prometheus" among the poems, will always be frequently read, while such works as *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* and *Westöstlicher Divan*, though considered unquestioned masterpieces in the Goethe canon, are probably fated by their very high level of sophistication to be ever the preserve of a relatively small number of readers. Works of the magnitude and stature of these last two, for example, or the *Wilhelm Meister* novels or any of the plays of Goethe's mature years may remain relatively unread by a larger public; they are not likely, however, to be dragged off their own course into the orbit of a powerful neighboring masterpiece. This is the real threat the canonical exerts over the uncanonical. A book that is simply unread can be picked up and read. But to be "simply unread" it must exist in a vacuum, detached from any corpus of read material. The

virtual impossibility of such simplicity is obvious at once; even if the existence of a body of material has been unknown until its discovery—which makes the Dead Sea Scrolls a better example of this for our century than, say, the reemergence of the more strictly literary works of Menander—its very first modern readers cannot help but place it in the array of canonical works with which they are familiar. Until that new placement is fixed or in the rare case that the new discovery is strong enough to force a major rearrangement of the structure into which it is being fitted, the work may have a chance to be read on its own terms. The VE never had such a chance. Even before the final selection of epigrams was made and then of course as they passed the censor and first titillated the readers of Schiller's *Musen-Almanach für das Jahr 1796* (pp. 206-60), their import was deflected and their sense deformed by the response to their outspoken treatment of sexual and other matters. Today our responses are not unduly affected by this (or is the readership of poetry simply restricted to the more sophisticated?) but rather by problems of even greater difficulty and complexity. Now the VE appear not anonymously as a new work in the latest issue of a literary journal but as a slice of Goethe's poetic creation and (even more lamentably), according to some critics, a slice of his life. They are part—and an inferior part at that—of his “classical” phase, following the epoch-making Italian journey and the completion of *Tasso, Iphigenia*, and (one is told) the immensely greater *Römische Elegien* (henceforth RE). In part because the actual journey to Venice was an unsatisfying return to Italy after the rewarding experiences in Rome and the more southern portions of the peninsula, in part because the title of the VE refers to another but “lesser” classical form than does that of the RE, the two have always been paired to the disadvantage of the VE. The RE have been from the beginning the more accessible to traditional literary interpreters and consequently have become the particular stick by which to measure (and more often with which to beat) the VE. Eloquent testimony to the contempt which this work continues to meet is the fact that in the most recent major edition of Goethe's works (the fourteen-volume edition by Erich Trunz known as the *Hamburger Ausgabe*),¹ only forty-three of the 104 epigrams (counting 34a and 34b as separate poems) are printed. The others are literally excluded from the canon. If one conceives of the VE as an entity (as

¹ I (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1949^f), 174-84, notes 562-67.

did Goethe; see his remark to Schiller below), this is tantamount to not printing the VE at all.² At best: for in fact what is preserved and itself made canonical is the judgment that the VE are second-rate, the RE gone slumming.

A critic intent on winning for the VE some measure of respect cannot ignore the collection's prolonged genesis. Work on many of the individual epigrams goes back to the spring of 1790 when Goethe was actually in Venice. A number of manuscripts testify to his dissatisfaction with many of these and the labor involved in correcting and revising the group. Work continued after Goethe had returned to Weimar, and he published a group of twenty-four (twenty-two of which survived in the VE as one now reads it) under the rubric "Sinngedichte" (*Deutsche Monatsschrift*, 1791). Goethe obviously did not regard this as the final form. He continued to write epigrams for the collection and experimented with various arrangements (including one with two "books") before he sent Schiller 103 in August, 1795. (34b, in praise of Duke Karl August, though written as early as 1789 and originally intended for the RE, was included later.) The most significant aspect of Goethe's preparation of the VE in their final form was selection. At one point during this process he wrote of the epigrams to Schiller, "Getrennt bedeuten sie nichts, wir würden aber wohl aus einigen Hunderten, die mitunter nicht produzibel sind, doch eine Anzahl auswählen können, die sich aufeinander beziehen und ein Ganzes bilden."³ Many of the rejected epigrams are lost for ever, while some appear in the early manuscripts but are incomplete or illegible. There is, however, a fixed group of 51 which survived among the papers Goethe preserved but wished unpublished; though many were published during the intervening years they only appeared in full with variants in 1914 (SA I.53, 8-18, 454-61). Of these excluded VE (henceforth EVE; there are likewise ERE) Lind writes that they were "not released for publication by Goethe because of their provocative and disturbing nature, especially their criticism of society and of the Church."⁴ Despite Lind's tone of pronouncement,

² Cp. his directions to Schiller when objections were made to parts of two elegies intended to be part of the RE. Schiller wanted to print them with gaps, but Goethe objected (May 12, 1795) that "ihr zerstückeltes Ansehen wird auffallend sein." So to Schiller's disappointment (see his letter of May 15, 1795), original numbers 2 and 16 were excluded. Cf. SA I.1, 412.

³ *Briefe* 10, 204 (October 26, 1794).

⁴ Levi Robert Lind, *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's RE and VE: A Bilingual Text* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1974), p. 28. The EVE them-

he is only speculating when he attempts to describe Goethe's motives. It is of course true that among the *Inkommunikabilien* there were works that Goethe considered too frank, the ribald "Das Tagebuch," for example. However, a comparison of the VE and the EVE suggests that the material in the latter would differ only in the degree to which it disturbed puritanical minds; as for criticism of society and church, there is enough damning matter in the VE as it stands. The material in the EVE is just more of the same, occasionally more explicit, also occasionally of lesser quality. Taking into account Goethe's comment about "ein Ganzes" (see above), it seems more reasonable to infer that artistic considerations were of paramount importance in Goethe's selection process. Most of the EVE deal with themes that appear in the VE as published in 1796. Had they been included as well a number of topics would have been driven home in a repetitive and tasteless manner. Perhaps more importantly, in the VE one reads today Goethe himself stands in the center. When compared to the epigrams of Martial, Goethe's most direct ancestor in this particular genre,⁵ the German collection breathes a personal, individual air, self-conscious in the best sense of the word. This the reader of the EVE misses. It may be

selves present editorial problems. A number of editors have decided to print more than the 51 EVE in SA I.53 (which have some authority as a single body), adding poems now found in the published paralipomena, poems Goethe was at pains to cancel, in some cases with a knife. Some are earlier drafts of epigrams now in VE or EVE. Lind prints 53 EVE. Horst Rüdiger, editor of a volume entitled *RE. VE. Tagebuch der italienischen Reise* (n.p. [Rowohlt]: 1961) prints 55, numbered 104-158, with only square brackets around the numbers to indicate the liminal status of these poems. He follows the order in the SA but inserts after (SA) EVE 4 his [108] (SA.I.5^{II}.375), after EVE 21 his [126] (*ibid.*, 376), after EVE 35 his [142] (SA I.53.349). Otto Deneke (ed., *VE* [Berlin: 1919]) wished to offer the 1790 version of the epigrams but his edition presents the reader with a confusing farrago, and one which Goethe himself never sanctioned. He inserts 56 EVE in the series, abandoning the traditional numbering for a new consecutive series 1-158 (D). (The apparent discrepancy arises from the fact that his series has a "111a" and that EVE 19 appears as the final couplet of VE 34a.) His additions are 17 (D) (SA I.1.467 and 5^{II}.348) and 97 (D) (SA I.1.441 and 5^{II}.347). Finally, after printing VE 51 (75 D) he produces a 4-line poem (76 D) patched together from variant versions of VE 51, the first distich appearing in three manuscripts, the second only in one (SA I.1.457). Such treatment is nearly as destructive of the collection Goethe created as only printing half the poems.

⁵ Ernst Maaß ("Die 'VE,'" *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft* [henceforth *JGG*] 12 [1926], 68-92) is no doubt correct in pointing to a spiritual link between the Horace of the *Satires* and the Goethe of the VE, a link suggested by the fact that lines from *Satires* 4 and 5 head the collection in a number of the early manuscripts. However he goes much too far, concluding that the VE are a satire or, literally, a mixed dish (see especially pp. 90-92).

impossible to tell whether there is any inherent difference between the self-awareness expressed by the epigrams of the VE and those of EVE or whether this personal spirit emerges from the organization of the VE—in my view it is due to both. In any event, the VE have that spirit, that centered personality because they are organized as they are; were the EVE included the resulting collection might in some measure still have a personal spirit, but it would of necessity be a different one.

There remains still the problem of what use to make of the EVE. The work, by which I mean single work, which it is the present aim to study and if possible interpret, in part if not in full, is the VE. In one sense, the EVE ought to be examined last, for they are what Goethe most explicitly did not want to be part of the VE. Yet they can be used to elucidate the VE, at least in places. For example, VE 69, which follows the introduction of Venice's "Lazerten" (or prostitutes), who lure men into their "Spelunke" (VE 68), reads

Was Spelunke nun sei, verlangt ihr zu wissen? Da wird ja
 Fast zum Lexikon dies epigrammatische Buch.
 Dunkele Häuser sind's in engen Gäßchen; zum Kaffee
 Führt dich die Schöne, und sie zeigt sich geschäftig,
 nicht du.⁶

The reader thus discovers what these "caves" are, but he may still not understand the specific meaning of the last line and a half. Lind's comment on this epigram is

See also withheld Epigram 36 for the drinking of coffee, another of Goethe's dislikes.⁷ The Venetian girl means something quite different

⁶ For ease of reading and consistency of spelling modernization, quotations from the VE and EVE will be from Lind's text; see note 4.

⁷ This "another" apparently refers to VE 66, which mentions explicitly four of Goethe's dislikes. Lind concludes the note to that epigram, "Goethe was fastidious about many things, including dogs," and refers the reader to VE 73 (p. 209). This kind of remark is all too frequent throughout Lind's introductions and commentary. The translation itself adequately renders the sense, although carelessness in textual matters leads to a discrepancy in VE 103 where in 1. 1 he prints "Freunden"—as he should—yet translates the "Freuden" of some of the earlier manuscripts. Lind often has to sacrifice Goethe's words to the constraints of English verse; at times the translator appears willful in his variations and unaware of the consequences. For example, as I shall discuss below, it is of some significance that the word "Wiege" occurs both in VE 2 ("Über die Wiege Virgils") and in VE 8, where the gondola is compared to a cradle. Lind's translation mentions "cradle" in the latter poem, but in the earlier he writes "Vergil's birthplace at Andes." Of course German often employs "Wiege" in this figurative sense, but in the light of VE 8 Goethe is clearly reviving what is, in common speech, a dead metaphor. This leaves the translator in a bind, but the reader ought to be made aware of the difficulty and its significance. At least the name of Vergil preserves some link between the two poems in English.

by the expression; it is her invitation to strangers who seek her out for a night of pleasure.

It is perhaps not the most crucial of points, but Lind is so euphemistic that he misleads his reader. Goethe himself makes matters very clear in EVE 36 and 37. EVE 36 is short:

“Kaffee wollen wir trinken, mein Fremder!”—Da meint
sie branlieren;
Hab ich doch, Freunde, mit Recht immer den Kaffee gehaßt.

In the same spirit of lexicography, Goethe translates “Kaffee trinken.” The expression means “masturbate,” *branlieren* obviously related to the French *se branler*. Should any one doubt this, EVE 37 explains things at greater length—and in plain German.^{7a} In the first four lines Goethe describes how two of these creatures lured him into their cave. All were drinking coffee.

“Tun wir etwas!” sagte die Schönste, sie setzte die Tasse
Nieder, ich fühlte sogleich ihre geschäftige Hand (11.5f.).

He grabs her hand as well as that of the other. By this they know him a stranger—the point of the epigram is that native Venetian men do not resist and thus, wasted by frequent ejaculations, slink about the city with pale complexions—and then arrange a rendezvous in more secluded lodgings for the night. These two excluded epigrams serve, then, as handy glosses on the puzzling VE.

Further exploration of this particular case would be worthwhile, as it introduces certain problems about the textual history of the VE, problems the critic must face before he turns to more rewarding endeavors. An obvious and perhaps interesting question is whether one can determine where individual EVE stood in the series before exclusion. The answer is a limited yes. The first limitation is that the earlier manuscripts, the sources for this information, themselves represent earlier stages of the collection and most contain only a portion of the fuller series. Collating the material collected among the variants in both volumes 1 and 53 of SA I one can place 29 of the 51 EVE in sequence with one of the epigrams included in the final version of the VE, that is, a sequence that occurs in at least one manuscript.⁸ In the case of the coffee drink-

^{7a} The use of different languages for different communications is a theme of interest to Goethe; cf. VE 29, 58, and especially EVE 17, 38.

⁸ This was apparently done by Johanna Jarislowsky as part of her project of classifying the epigrams according to her own categories: “Der Aufbau in Goethes ‘VE,’” *JGG* 13 (1927), 87-95. Her chart appears on pp. 94f. She was not explicit about her methodology, however, and if—as I presume—she worked from the

ers, it would be more appropriate to go from VE 69 to EVE 37, for in three manuscripts (H⁵⁴, H⁵⁵, H⁵⁶) this was the order. Note that the “geschäftig” of the last line of VE 69 is picked up in EVE 37 (“geschäftige Hand,” 1.6). In those versions EVE 36 came a bit later, immediately after what is in the final version VE 72, and was then a short and witty reminiscence of an earlier, more fully described scene. Such a reconstruction as I have just effected could be multiplied again and again, and though a full study of the earlier versions might prove interesting, it is not my concern here. As I have said, my object is the VE itself. If one turns back to the final arrangement, one sees that all that remains of the motif is VE 69. It is simply tossed in, and in the very casualness of the reference to coffee drinking and “geschäftig,” in deliberate contrast to the epigram’s ironical, dictionary-definition opening, part of the charm and personality of the VE become apparent. Something is going on, and by expecting the reader to exercise his imagination Goethe invites him to share the experience of Venetian café life with him. Readers who have access to the EVE can use them to explain such references for their own information, but they have lost rather than gained if they lose the spirit of the game.

In examining the secondary literature on Goethe one discovers that of the two collections, the RE have drawn most of the academic fire. There are few studies devoted primarily to the VE; in addition to the articles of Maaß and Jarislowsky and the derivative introductory material in Lind’s edition of both the RE and VE there is Max Nussberger’s stimulating article “Goethes VE und ihr Erlebnis.”⁹ Traditional discussion of the VE has tended to concentrate on three aspects of the collection: 1) its relation to the fact of Goethe’s life, 2) the relation of the work as a whole and the poems which comprise it to the works of Goethe’s classical predecessors, especially in the genre of the epigram, and 3) the structure—some critics add unity—of the VE. Lind, as might be expected of a com-

information in the SA, occasionally inaccurate. For example, she fails to mention in any context EVE 46, which in H⁵⁵ comes after VE 100 and EVE 27 and before EVE 49, 45 and VE 101 (the last of which she has misplaced); to place EVE 29 after VE 59 and before EVE 48; to place EVE 37 between VE 69 and 70; and to place EVE 36 between VE 72 and EVE 17. At that last place she evinces no reason to follow H⁵⁹ in her scheme as opposed to H⁵⁵, H⁵⁴ or H⁵⁶. Perhaps she does not concur with the findings expressed in SA I.53, 454, that H⁵⁵ appears to be a corrected version of H⁵⁶; if so, then she would at least be consistent in not placing EVE 50 after VE 103 at the conclusion of the collection, but she would still be wrong following VE 72.

⁹ Max Nussberger, “Goethes VE und ihr Erlebnis,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 55 (1930), 379-89. For the others, see notes 5, 8 and 4 respectively.

mentator, tries to cover all three topics, while the others generally have one of the three as the focus of their attention. Jarislowsky's emphasis is on the question of the structure and arrangement of the poems (see below); although Maaß includes comments about the related question of unity, his study is primarily concerned with Goethe's predecessors. His starting point is an examination of the *Paralipomena*—sketch-books and notes—and he calls attention to the fact that a broad field of classical writers influenced Goethe in the writing of the VE. He is usually content with cataloguing and tracing parallels and very rarely points to what is interesting about Goethe's reworking of a classical model.¹⁰

Nussberger's article is by far the most interesting piece on the VE I have found. He begins to break with tradition in a number of ways: he limits the value of comparing the VE with the RE (p. 380), he recognizes the lyric qualities of the collection (“ . . . sehen wir in den VE eine große Kunst lyrischer Instrumentation . . . ,” p. 386), and—most significantly—he offers an untraditional biographical reading. To appreciate the originality of Nussberger's suggestion, one should step back and review the traditional approach. The basic biographical issue lurking behind the VE is a variation of the violent debates about the RE. Is the love affair with Faustina described there real, or is it merely a poetic recreation of the relationship he later had in Weimar with Christiane Vulpius, soon to bear him a son, August?¹¹ These questions may never be answered

¹⁰ On the question of the unity of the collection Maaß appears to be of two minds, at times considering the epigrams as separate entities, as they originally were (when they were of course “closer” to their classical antecedents; here one sees again his lack of concern with what Goethe made with material derived from his predecessors), and at other times, as part of a whole, a whole the structure of which he compares to the *lanx satura* (“mixed dish”) of Roman, and especially Horatian, satire (pp. 88ff.). Maaß's casual remarks on the biographical background of the epigrams show him a traditionalist on that issue, too: there is no doubt in his mind that the poems reflect a time when Goethe's love for Italy had gone sour and when he was in the process of freeing himself from the idealized picture he had of that classical country when in Rome (p. 84). In terms of his love-life Maaß speaks of the VE as a “Christianezyklus” and says that “Der Aufenthalt in Venedig zeigt Christiane zur Venetianerin umgebildet . . .” (p. 80).

¹¹ See VE 101 and 102, which depict this pregnancy or, as some argue, a subsequent one. From a poetic and even commonsensical point of view, 101 only has point if this comfort is being given to a woman who is experiencing her first pregnancy. In considering the biographical views I am leaving aside the extreme position of Kurt Eissler (*Goethe: A Psychoanalytic Study, 1775-1786*, 2 vols. [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963]), who sees in the VE, among other things, Goethe once again trying to keep up with his father (getting to Venice a second time, to match his father's record) and his extreme syphilophobia. As Eissler reads them, the RE are a

satisfactorily, and one would be tempted to ask “Who cares?” except for the fact that some critics have cared a great deal. Those whose admiration of Goethe as a poet can only follow their approval of his conduct have never wanted to believe that Goethe’s description of an ecstatic affair with a young Roman widow could be based on fact. They have argued that after returning to Weimar and becoming involved with Christiane he combined his recent impressions of Italy and his current love in Germany to create the RE of which she is the true heroine. Proponents of the opposite view have been just as insistent. Antonio Valieri believed that from parish records he could establish the identity of Goethe’s Faustina,¹² and others have suggested numerous other candidates. Those who refuse even to consider this idea—primarily Germans—have recourse to the classical precedents, as if Goethe’s choice of a classic form rules out the possibility of his actually having had the experiences. The Faustina of the RE is real—in the RE. No more can be said, and no more need be.

The VE present fewer problems, for Christiane’s place is clearly inscribed in the collection. She is the beloved remaining behind in the north, the one whom the traveler has left as the cycle opens (cp. VE 3, “es ist mein Körper auf Reisen, / Und es ruhet mein Geist stets der Geliebten im Schoß”) and to whom he will return. All the time he spends in Venice is time apart from joy and friends,¹³ a time of boredom (“Langeweile,” VE 27). The final couplet of the VE (103, 11.3f.) refers, at one level, to Christiane:

Alles was ich erfuhr, ich würzt es mit süßer Erinnerung,
 Würzt es mit Hoffnung; sie sind lieblichste Würzen der Welt.

record of Goethe’s first mature sexual encounter, the poet having suffered up to that time from extreme excitability and drastically premature ejaculation. Eissler’s opinion of the works of this period is low: “If we look at the main literary creations of that period, the RE, the two essays [in Latin, on “Priapeia” and Augustine’s “De civitate Dei” (1790; see SA I.53, 197-207)], and the VE, we are able to observe here with great precision the detrimental effect that extensive physical gratification of the passions and its integration has on artistic creativity” (II, 1326). Eissler treats his reader to another such pronouncement betraying his unsophisticated approach to aesthetic creations: “I imagine that the epigrammatic form reduced the danger of the alienating effect that poetry cast upon his personal relationships. . . . [T]hey are at least as much a matter of intellect as of the heart” (II, 1346). Are we to conclude, then, that other poetry is almost exclusively a matter of the heart?

¹² Published under the pseudonym Carletta; *Goethe a Roma* (Rome: 1899).

¹³ Both words appeared in various versions of VE 103; cp. note 7.

Near the center of the collection VE 49 suggests, in a neat twist on the topos of the beloved's inspiring the poet, that Goethe can write the epigrams only so long as he is away from her:

Wißt ihr, wie ich gewiß zu Hunderten euch Epigramme
Fertige? Führet mich nur weit von der Liebsten hinweg!

Likewise he claims that the book is of value for the reader only in the absence of the beloved:

Wenn auf beschwerlichen Reisen ein Jüngling zur Liebsten sich
windet, Hab er dies Büchlein; es ist reizend und tröstlich zugleich.
Und erwartet dereinst ein Mädchen den Liebsten, sie halte
Dieses Büchlein, und nur, kommt er, so werfe sie's weg (VE 80).

These epigrams, central to the so-called "Christianezyklus," lead away from Christiane to the writing and reading of poetry, to the book itself. At this point it is appropriate to present the most interesting aspect of Nussberger's suggestion, although his route to this same point proceeds via a number of more traditional and, in my opinion, less valid way stations. To suggest that Goethe's experiences elsewhere were transferred to Venice in the VE would not be a particularly unusual argument (pp. 381f.). However, the realm of experience that Nussberger emphasizes is that of Goethe as poet. He points out that when Goethe undertook this trip to Venice he had just concluded work on the edition of his writings which had been appearing since 1787.¹⁴ Nussberger, speaking of the first, introductory epigram, writes, "Als ein Epilog also zum eigenen Schaffen ist die Dichtung gedacht, als Epigramm im echten, antiken Sinn des Wortes, als Grabschrift . . ." (p. 382). In this epigram Goethe compares the VE ("Diese Rolle," 1.12)—and one should extend Nussberger's remark about VE 1 to the entire collection—to the decorations around pagan sarcophagi and urns. The penultimate distich reads

So überwältiget Fülle den Tod; und die Asche da drinnen
Scheint, im stillen Bezirk, noch sich des Lebens zu freuen (11.9f.).

By one interpretation, the contents of the coffin would be the remains of the life experienced in Venice and itself described in the VE, but according to Nussberger's, those ashes would be the corpus

¹⁴ Eight volumes (Leipzig: Goeschen, 1790). A difficulty, though not an insuperable one, with this argument is that although individual epigrams were started in 1790 the VE only took final form a good five years later.

of earlier poetry, now deadened in an eight-volume “collected works.” This presents a basic poetic problem, one again linked with canonicity. The *disiecta membra poetae*, to appropriate that phrase, may be more lively than the same works *coniecta*. Each work, when it comes to an end, experiences a death, and the poet—indeed any subsequent poet, but here the discussion is of the same poet later in his career—must find a new way to life. That death is extreme when a series of volumes proclaims the conclusion of an entire epoch, and Goethe has responded in an equally drastic fashion: the VE are not only themselves alive but lend the appearance of life to the ashes they contain. They commemorate the life that has come to an end, on one level the experiences of Venice, the *res gestae* of a man, and on another, the career of a poet and his growth and achievement in that realm. The heroic act of a poet is to found a realm of poetry. The VE celebrate Goethe’s creation of earlier poetic worlds on the occasion of their containment, and at the same time establish a new poetic realm. In a very special way Venice represented for Goethe a crucial battleground for the winning of new poetic territory and, as I shall show, is in fact a mapping in poetry of the natural world Goethe the scientist perceived.

It is a mark of Nussberger’s good sense and insight that in his words quoted above (in the preceding paragraph) he puts his finger on another important aspect of the VE which seems to have escaped others writing on them, namely, that the collection—or at least, to start with, the first epigram—is epigrammatic in the original sense of the word, a poem to be inscribed on a grave marker. As paradoxical as it might seem, this is actually an innovation on the major collections of epigrams which stand before his as classical models. The characteristic metrical configuration of the epigram, whether Greek, Latin or German, a single elegiac couplet (the name itself records that it became the unit of elegy) or a very few such couplets, was so irresistible a form that no later than the third century B.C. it was being employed for matter that had nothing to do with commemoration of the dead or their deeds. The overwhelming majority of epigrams in the Greek Anthology do not predate this, the Hellenistic period. There were a few fictitious grave inscriptions among them, to be sure, but most extolled the joys of love, a beloved, wine, or poetry itself, offered an invitation to romance or dinner, made a joke or pun, or inveighed against an enemy. The Roman inheritors of the Greek tradition employed the epigram for all these purposes, but their special achievement was in

the last group, the invective, into which they poured that special brand of Roman bite. Catullus and Martial come to mind immediately. These two authors, along with the Greek Anthology, provided the principal models of the epigram for Goethe's time. There is exceedingly little about death in the epigrams one reads in these collections, and—making certain that Catullus's poems about his brother are safely across the border in the neighboring genre of the elegy—nothing about it that is serious. The VE, while they have invective, love, sex, and the like in abundance, frame the whole with a serious consideration of death, so that one is justified in seeing in this a return to the original spirit of the epigram. Goethe, however, does not simply reinvoke death as the original subject of the epigram. He links it directly with that other endpoint of life, birth. Already in the first epigram the figures around the sarcophagus seem to lend life to the ashes within. VE 101 and 102, the last of the epigrams but for one, refer to the coming birth of the poet's son.

One need not wait that long for birth, however, for there is a significant birth image in VE 2. "Über die Wiege Virgils kam mir ein laulicher Wind . . ." (1.4). I have already mentioned (note 7) the difficulties inherent in "Wiege": figuratively, "place of birth," literally, "cradle." "Über die Wiege" then mean "from beyond Andes," the town of Vergil's birth, as Lind translates. But poetry will most often not be content with ready-made figures. If one returns to the concrete, "cradle," Goethe's phrase takes on new meaning and significance. The breeze comes from the other side of Vergil's cradle, from the realm of the unborn (or the dead) as well as from an earlier age. The two following lines confirm this interpretation.

Da gesellten die Musen sich gleich zum Freunde; wir pflogen
Abgerißnes Gespräch, wie es den Wanderer freut (11.5f.).¹⁵

Goethe claims that he has established connection with the muses, the original sources of poetic inspiration, over Vergil's head, so to speak. Once Goethe removed the original concluding couplet of VE 34a (now EVE 19), with its mention of Horace, Vergil remains the only poet mentioned by name in the VE; and Vergil never wrote any epigrams (that are extant, at any rate). It is significant

¹⁵ The motif of the wanderer (and, in a religious context, the pilgrim) recurs throughout the collection. Cf. VE 6, 21, 80, 82, etc.

that Goethe excluded the reference to Horace, whose satires especially stand behind the VE, and that he mentions no epigrammatist in the lines chosen for the collection, although other collections of epigrams, e.g., the *Xenien*, make numerous references to Martial alone. (He also omitted the mottos from Horace and Martial that had stood as head quotations for the epigrams in the paralipomena and early manuscripts.) Goethe's claim is that this poetic realm is above and beyond genre and that, while his poetry remains within western poetic traditions, represented by Vergil—the preceding line of VE 2 is highly reminiscent of the *Georgics* especially—his source of inspiration only passes across Vergil. The generative wind blows over the cradle to him.

A conversation with the muses is itself a traditional opening scene. One may compare Hesiod and numerous followers, both Greek and Latin. Another traditional motif is the laurel, sacred to Apollo, god of poetry. Goethe presents his laurel—he is struck with it, not crowned—in VE 5, which opens “In der Gondel lag ich gestreckt. . . .” The gondola is archetypally Venetian, and it is emblematic as well of the journey both through life and across the river Styx to Hades—though of course Goethe has too much taste to point out this symbolism explicitly. It emerges, however, in VE 8, in my view one of the central, if not the most central, of the epigrams.

Diese Gondel vergleich ich der sanft einschaukelnden Wiege,
 Und das Kästchen darauf scheint ein geräumiger Sarg.
 Recht so! Zwischen der Wiege und dem Sarg wir schwanken und
 schweben
 Auf dem Großen Kanal sorglos durchs Leben dahin.

This is one of the oldest epigrams in the collection, first sketched in H⁵⁴, a manuscript dated March, 1790. There the crucial third line read “Wohl so schweb ich als Mensch zwischen Sarg und der Wiege” (cp. SA I.1, 443). The line took at least one more form (“Recht so! Zwischen Sarg und zwischen Wiege wir schwanken und schweben”) before Goethe hit upon the final solution. Metrical considerations apparently did play some part in its revision, although in this case there is no extended metrical critique with suggested corrections from the pen of August Wilhelm Schlegel, as there is for a number of epigrams, but merely the remark “Die metrischen Mängel in diesem Epigramme scheinen mir durchaus glücklich verbessert.” It seems clear, however, that Goethe had already been tinkering with this line for other reasons, and his care

indicates how significant a line he thought it to be. Among the most important alterations, “wir” expresses the idea of fate shared by all men more simply than the awkward “ich als Mensch”; placing “Wiege” and “Sarg” in chronological order strengthens the image of a life journey.

However phrased, the second distich alone would be little more than an appropriately Venetian variation on a commonplace. The strength of the epigram comes from the first two lines. “Diese Gondel vergleich ich . . .”: the reader should sit up and take notice with the third word. Goethe is generously offering a key to his figurative language (cp. the German for simile, “Gleichnis”). Could one translate it, “I trope this gondola as a gently rocking cradle, / and the little chest upon it appears a roomy coffin”? The word “Wiege” links this epigram with VE 2 and Vergil’s cradle, so that tradition, poetry itself, becomes the vehicle for the life journey, and for death. Likewise, “Sarg” casts the reader back to the opening word of the entire VE, “Sarkophagen.”¹⁶ There the sarcophagus was the container of the ashes and was itself enclosed by decorations and, in the final couplet, by this roll of poems. This confirms the combination of VE 2 and 8: once again poems enclose the sarcophagus (literally support it; the coffin may in any case be described as contained by the gondola), with the variation that the living poet is between his poems and the coffin. Once in this mode, it is tempting to go beyond the clues and link the moving gondola with metaphor—transference—itself.

The coffin in the cradle—life containing death—is the image which the opening series of the VE establishes. This will be reversed at the end, when life, the poet’s son about to be born, appears contained within his mother’s body—though the birth itself is significantly not transcribed: it is something beyond the end of the VE. Applying “Sarg” to the womb is not particularly difficult. The

¹⁶ The opening words of the final version, that is, “Sarkophagen und Urnen,” was a very late solution. H⁵⁵-H⁵⁷, H⁵⁹, and J¹ (*Musen-Almanach*), according to the apparatus of the Weimar edition (SA I.1, 440), all had “Seinen Sarkophagen.” The point of this correction, it seems to me, must have been to open the series with the word “Sarkophagen,” with its implications for the figurative and perhaps esoteric aspects of the cycle (cf. note 27), and at the same time avoid the weak opening of the pronoun “seinen,” one which might restrict the image of decorating sarcophagi unnecessarily (and imply each decorates only his own coffin?). If anything, this alteration was made in defiance of metrical considerations, though of course it was effected after the time Schlegel had gone over the poems. At that time he had nothing to criticize in the first line but did in fact suggest “So überwältiget Fülle den Tod” (1.9) as an improvement on Goethe’s original “So bezwinget. . . .”

basic sense of the word is simply “container.” Apparently the first recorded use of “Sarg” to mean specifically “coffin” occurs in the *Nibelungenlied* (1038 [ed. Bartsch], 1). But other medieval writers used the word in a religious context to refer to Mary’s body as the vessel which contained Jesus.¹⁷ The two usages could easily be coordinated to establish Jesus’s prenatal months as an obvious typological prefiguration of his period in the tomb, from which he rose on the third day. Though this material may seem totally irrelevant to the VE—and Goethe has gone out of his way to obscure the connection—it is not. The epigram immediately following VE 8 reads

Feierlich sehn wir neben dem Doge den Nuntius gehen;
 Sie begraben den Herrn, einer versiegelt den Stein.
 Was der Doge sich denkt, ich weiß es nicht; aber der andre
 Lächelt über den Ernst dieses Gepräuges gewiß (VE 9).

The second two lines are all too automatically and unthinkingly categorized as an example of Goethe’s satire of matters of faith and his exposure of the hypocrisy of the Roman Church. There are many lines in the VE which have this tone, and they indeed suit the genius of the epigram (especially in the manner of Martial) and Goethe in one of his guises. But one must not dismiss this particular poem so quickly. Considering the placement of this epigram, right after VE 8, this Good Friday ceremony takes on new significance. Sealing a grave is a variant of the motif of closing the coffin, and it has already been established that it is poetry that encloses the coffin. The nuncio, representative of the church, the one who is aware and smiles at the “Ernst dieses Gepräuges,” is obviously comparable to the poet himself. The numerous poems that employ the religious theme now fit more tightly into the VE. Both poetry and religion have their pilgrims, their charlatans, and their credulous faithful. How far should one transfer Goethe’s seriousness about art and poetry to religion, and conversely, how consistently apply his satiric view of (organized) religion to poetry? Goethe did not intend his reader to be able to answer this question definitively, nor even to pose it so sharply; rather the two views or tones, like *Ernst und Scherz*, are dynamically interrelated and inseparable.

VE 9 is a survivor of what, in several earlier versions, was a full

¹⁷ Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* VIII (1893), s.v. *sarg*, columns 1798-1800.

Easter cycle. After what is now VE 17¹⁸ there stood in H⁵⁵, for example, two poems, one referring to the exposure of relics in Saint Mark's on Maundy Thursday (now EVE 2), the other to the Easter resurrection itself:

“Offen steht das Grab! Welch herrlich Wunder! Der Herr ist
Aufstanden!”—Wer's glaubt! Schelmen, ihr trugt ihn ja weg
(EVE 11).

Both the excluded epigrams, like the two included ones, give a cynical twist to the original matter. It is impossible to know why these were excluded, the others not. Perhaps, as Lind would suggest, because they are more offensive. But it may also be, at least in the case of EVE 11, that at the beginning of the cycle Goethe does not want to introduce resurrection, life emerging from the coffin. That by right belongs only at the end, where it receives poetic expression in VE 101 and 102, the poems about the pregnant Christiane. One further remark on the anti-religious tenor of these poems: whatever Goethe's own convictions, in the VE this is no more than a pose. These epigrams express the same unorthodoxy in religious faith as VE 80 (cp. above) does in poetic. But while many modern readers are eager to establish Goethe's religious nonconformity, they recognize he is no heretic in poetic matters. They fail to realize that in poetry, heresy is rhetorical and interacts with the other rhetorical systems.

Jarislowsky's purpose in the article mentioned above (cp. note 8) was to discover a structuring principle to the VE.¹⁹ Her method is highly analytical. She divides the epigrams into four main groupings: I) “Einleitungsepigramme,” II) “Erotica,” III) “Allgemeine Betrachtungen,” and IV) “Persönlich gerichtete Urteile.” Groups II, III and IV each have three subdivisions (a, b and c). She readily admits that examining each group alone gives no idea of the “unity” of the collection (p. 91). Moving in that direction, she is able to identify one or two patterns (e.g., mention of the church is often the occasion for a bitter general observation [group III], etc.), but such small groupings hardly reveal anything about the overall structure. For a generalization at that level she is reduced to remarking that epi-

¹⁸ “Not lehrt beten, man sagt's; will einer es lernen, er gehe / Nach Italien! Not findet der Fremde gewiß.” Cp. the epigram about need and worship in the poetic sphere, VE 49, quoted above.

¹⁹ For a convenient summary of her views, see Lind, *op. cit.*, pp. 170f., “The Structure of the VE.”

grams with erotic content (group II) enclose and articulate others; in other words, they are scattered throughout.²⁰ In between, epigrams of a certain type tend to appear in clumps. At the conclusion of her article she produces a table which lists each epigram with its classification. Looking at this one has a sort of synoptic view of the collection—according to Jarislowsky’s schema. I have serious reservations about the value of such an approach. It gives one no idea of the experience of reading through the entire cycle, for when the reader is involved in reading, he is not looking down from above. The erotic, in one aspect or another, is more or less ubiquitous in the VE, and I can hardly conceive of a reader taking the cue from the appearance of an “erotic epigram” that he is about to enter a new section of the work.

Maaß, at the other extreme, may have gone too far when he called the VE a mixed dish—*lanx satura*—and left it at that. The VE, as Goethe’s remark to Schiller quoted above indicates, were in fact not a mere random collection of poems. Yet if Goethe had any principle by which he organized them—and I doubt he did: he organized them according to his own poetic instinct—he would undoubtedly not have wanted it to be obvious. The concept of artful disarray, of apparent disorder and random selection goes at least as far back as the Hellenistic period, and in the entire VE Goethe may have been imitating whole epigram collections as he imitated individual epigrams in a number of single poems.

Exploring the organization of collections of poems is a recurrent endeavor, and a recurrent problem. It is wrong to approach the task with the idea of second-guessing the poet—at best one will construct a plausible reason to explain what the poet simply did. Even if one is content merely to describe the arrangement and its effects, the effort involved is only in a few cases worth the interpretative value it nets. Such is my feeling about the VE, but I will try to sketch briefly what I see as the structuring tool at work. I am not presenting a fully developed system or schema. I refuse to find and enunciate a reason for the placement of every poem because this would inevitably involve that problematic second-guessing—in any event one can always invoke intended disorder on the poet’s part—and would distort the perspective of this survey of the VE.

Not with the rigor of a schema but often enough to suggest a

²⁰ From this Lind draws the yet more general conclusion that, “Love, then, is the binding element in the VE, holding the various groups of different subject matter together and defining their extent” (p. 171).

pattern, new sections seem to begin with one or several epigrams of “reinvocation,” as I call it—an epigram that speaks about itself, the collection or poetic inspiration—and the appearance of a “scolding voice.” The questioner, the voice of common sense or public opinion, the skeptic—all these are occasional if not frequent visitors to love and personal poetry of all sorts, to epigram and elegy especially. Horace, Martial, Ovid and numerous others have employed this verse variation on the hackneyed “straw man.” In a collection as tightly organized and unified by the experiences of its speaker as the VE, this voice gains its own character and unity. At its—I should say his—first appearance Goethe characterizes him as a scolder: “‘Weichling!’ *schölte* mich einer, ‘und so verbringst du die Tage?’” (VE 3, 1.5, my emphasis). In this epigram alone he appears a second time (11.13f.): he cannot understand Goethe, who must explain his meaning more clearly. It will be more efficient if, instead of running through all the appearances of the scolding voice at once, I introduce each along with the poems of (re)invocation that articulate each section. One point, however: there are other voices which appear in the epigrams, i.e., an old woman watching Bettine (VE 43), political reactionaries (VE 55, 57), a whore (VE 72). These are not “scolding” voices, for even if Goethe disagrees with them (e.g., VE 55 and 57), they are not directed at him; they are, as it were, overheard. (Daphne [VE 5] indeed speaks to him but is obviously not scolding him in the same manner as the voice I am describing.)

The opening two poems constitute the initial invocation, the third introduces the scolding voice. The first major section (through VE 21) in general sets the Venetian scene and presents all the various motifs of the cycle. Already in the first three epigrams one met birth, death, life, poetry, love, wandering. Quickly come religion, politics, pilgrimage, all in a seeming jumble. The transition to the second section—the breaks are not sharp—begins at VE 22, when Goethe invokes “Jupiter Pluvius,” giver of water.

Gibst Venedig zu trinken, dem Lande grünendes Wachstum;
Manches kleine Gedicht gibst du dem Büchelchen hier (11.3f.).

VE 23, 24 and 25 are all short and play with various aspects of Venice, the city of mud and water. The scolding voice reappears in the next: “‘Schläfst du noch immer?’” VE 26 begins. Goethe defends himself, and if one recalls the Martial subtext (4.60, “*Nulla fata loco possis . . .*”), with the equation of Tibur and health, Sardinia and death, one immediately understands that Goethe is

claiming here that to be without a bed-mate is tantamount to death. The reinvoication is completed in VE 27: though sundered from the traditional nine muses and his beloved, Goethe has found a new goddess to inspire his poetry: “Langeweile! du bist, Mutter der Musen, begrüßt” (1.6). (Is Goethe in the VE, then, the first of the moderns, invoking boredom long before *Les fleurs du mal*, his Venice a precursor of Baudelaire’s Paris?)

None of the sections I delineate is totally uniform, but the next one (through VE 45) has as its fairly central focus the artist. VE 29 and 33 complain about the sad state of German and German poetry, 34a and 34b touch on Goethe’s relations with his patron, and 35 urges that, in spite of everything, one should keep on living and writing poetry. Then with VE 36 the Bettine cycle begins, poems about the little street acrobat whose connections with various arts are manifold. In VE 36 she is the model of the *putti* in the works of famous painters whose pictures Goethe sees in Venice, in 37 she is a wonderful carved wooden figurine, in 41 her performance moves the audience as do great artists (Breughel, Dürer—note that these are northern Europeans in contrast to Bellini and Veronese in 36), poets, and dreams. Finally, in VE 45, her power is as strong as if she were begging—another VE motif, cp. 30 and 31—by holy relics: recall once more that the power of religion is comparable to the power of poetry itself.

Reinvoication for the next phase begins with VE 46 and is complete by 49. In 47 the scolding voice once again appears, this time to complain about the length of the Bettine section.

“Welch ein Wahnsinn ergriff dich Müßigen? Hältst du nicht inne?
Wird dies Mädchen ein Buch? Stimme was Klügeres an!” (11.1f.)

Goethe’s voice responds

Wartet, ich singe die Könige bald, die Großen der Erde,
Wenn ich ihr Handwerk einst besser begreife wie jetzt (11.3f.).

Despite the implied delay, he in fact announces the major focus of the coming section (through VE 58), in which almost every epigram has a political slant, whether a general opinion on rulers or fanatics or a specific one about the French revolution or Christ. Finally, VE 47 concludes with an explicit comparison of Bettine and the poet.

Doch Bettinen sing ich indes; denn Gaukler und Dichter
Sind gar nahe verwandt, suchen und finden sich gern (11.5f.).

VE 59 presents a minor variation of the scolding voice, for the voice (perhaps one of Goethe's own) addresses the epigrams themselves, not their poet, and they respond. This epigram and the following three constitute the introduction to the next section; all four (VE 59-62) discuss what an epigram should and should not include. In VE 59 the voice is no doubt reacting to the outspoken political poems of the preceding section, but in the next one Goethe is preparing a transition to what is the most risqué portion of the VE.

Wie dem hohen Apostel ein Tuch voll Tiere gezeigt ward,
Rein und unrein, zeigt, Lieber, das Büchlein sich dir (VE 60).

It is again interesting that Goethe has gone to an important Christian text (Peter's dream in Acts 10) for an image for the secular poet. It is hard to find a general characterization for this section. "Moral" would cover everything, but is admittedly vague. Its most distinctive part is the "Lazerten" poems, the most "impure" group of the entire cycle (VE 67-70; 71 and 72 are closely allied). These lizards are Venice's street-walkers; what their particular specialty is was discussed above. Even with the yet more explicit poems now excluded from this cycle, it stands out in one's memory of the work. Goethe may well have decided to cut this section to the bone so that it would be just one part of a greater structure and not overwhelm it.

The scolding voice comes forward with great indignation after this section.

"Hast du nicht gute Gesellschaft gesehn? Es zeigt und dein Büchlein
Fast nur Gaukler und Volk, ja was noch niedriger ist" (VE 75,
11.1f.).

Goethe's defense, that so-called good society provides no occasion for the smallest poem—there is a joke here: he means not only the least poem but especially the "smallest" poem, the epigram—serves as part of the reinvocation, along with the following epigram, in which he laments the poverty of his language. The next three epigrams vary what might appear, at least in this exposition, as a mechanical progression. They are a feint: the scolding voice appears again (VE 77), asking Goethe why he busies himself with optics when there is more profit ("Gewinn") in moving a gentle heart. Goethe pretends that this is beneath him, and in the new two epigrams (VE 78 and 79) appears to go off on a scientific tack. But

love—"rühren ein zärtliches Herz"—is indeed to be the central focus of this section, and VE 80 (quoted above) brings the reader back. It also serves as a final reinvocation poem for this transition. Note that these shifts occur over two to six epigrams; none is instantaneous.

This section, concentrating on "Amor," has in a sense no end. The scolding voice never reappears. At VE 95 and 96 there is a suggestion that the cycle is entering its concluding phase. In the second of these two epigrams Goethe goes all the way back to the births of the god and of his mother, a preparation for VE 101 and 102. The ocean reappears, but it is no longer merely the ocean that surrounds Venice. It is the source of light, life and love. The ocean remains central to VE 96 and 97, which introduce the theme of departure. Goethe is preparing to leave Venice and return to his beloved in the north, although 98 and 99 delay the departure. In some ways VE 100 is a "deinvocation." Goethe is praying that his poeticizing powers be limited and that what he touches be not so completely transformed as Midas's food was. Goethe wants to enjoy it in the flesh as well. At the same time, this does not push the final three epigrams totally out of the structure of the cycle. As I have pointed out above, these poems on birth, death, metamorphosis, poetry as opposed to life, and emergence from a container balance the poems which open the collection. I have already mentioned how the "hope" and "memory" of the final epigram fit the Christiane story that seems to lie behind the VE. A discussion of other, more important aspects of this final poem will comprise a portion of the concluding section.

Before that conclusion, however, it seems worth pointing to one interesting structure that appears, with variations, in two sections. Perhaps this may lead to the discovery of more such patterns. Two sections, the one on "art" (VE 22-45) and the one I termed "moral" (VE 59-74), have within them portions that concentrate on particular emblematic figures. These are of course the Bettine and "Lazerten" cycles. If one examines the poems that mark the transition into these subcycles (VE 36 and 67) some similarities, as well as some contrasts, emerge. Both begin with experiences any visitor to Venice (or Italy) has had, first, the exhaustion that follows excessive museum and gallery viewing, and second, the wonder and amusement to be had watching the little lizard-like animals spring about the rocks and stone walls. The key to both poems, and to the transition, is the word "Bild" (VE 67, 1.8; cp. "Urbild," VE 36, 1.5), to be

rendered “image” or “figure” in the sense of “figurative” language. That Goethe is exercising his right as a poet he makes quite explicit in the last lines of VE 67 and the opening lines of the following poem.

Wollt ihr mir's künft'ig erlauben, so nenn ich die Tierchen Lazerten;
Denn ich brauche sie noch oft als gefälliges Bild (VE 67, 11.7f.).

The image of these lizards helps the reader imagine the prostitutes Goethe begins to describe in the following epigram.

Wer Lazerten gesehn, der kann sich die zierlichen Mädchen
Denken, die über den Platz fahren dahin und daher (VE 68,
11.1f.).²¹

Goethe goes to the realm of animal activity to find an image for the prostitutes—and in that very manoeuvre makes his first commentary on their activity. Bettine is introduced by means of images from the visual arts, particularly appropriate as this entire section explores the arts and artists. The actual mechanism of comparison is more complex. In terms of the chronology presented in VE 36, Goethe views the *putti* first and then, turning to life, discovers Bettine. In his praise of her, Goethe reverses this order, seeing in her the original of the artists' representations: “Gauklerin, da ersah ich in dir zu den Bübchen das Urbild” (VE 36, 1.5). In the following epigram (VE 37), Goethe first describes a carved figure, but Bettine herself comes at the end and is said to be much, much more. Bettine is a model for art and the image of it. Contrasting Goethe's manner of introducing her with the introduction to the “Lazerten” (in that order) is obviously an experience not open to a reader of the VE his first time through. The simple realization that such patterns are there to be found will, I hope, encourage many others to give the poems not just a first but a second reading.

At the outset I spoke of the danger uncanonical books face, the

²¹ Lind translates these two lines of VE 68 as “He who sees lizards can think of them as pretty girls / Who walk around in the piazza from this place to that,” while the German really means “He who has (ever) seen lizards can imagine the pretty girls who walk back and forth across the piazza.” He has in essence got the figuration backwards. He renders “gefälliges Bild” in the last line of VE 67 as “pleasurable image”; the point of “gefälliges” falls here, I believe, somewhere between “apt,” “convenient,” “handy,” on the one hand, and “pleasing,” “nice,” “pretty,” in the sense of euphemistic for referring to whores, on the other. I would be hard pressed to pick one word—unless it be “pleasing,” i.e., to both speaker and reader—but it would not be “pleasurable.”

danger that they may be pulled off course and into the orbit of some greater work. The laws of the literary universe are like those of the physical one. To resist such attraction a work must have sufficient energy in its own system, sufficient momentum. There must be other forces at work pulling on any literary planet to counter a major threat. These other forces in the literary universe are works with which the work in question is read, either later works which it has at least in part generated or works from any period which it has drawn near it by its own power. (Needless to say, the works of mere epigones will not offer much aid against external threats to the system.) These forces represent the interpretative tradition that surrounds a work and guides any new reader approaching it. At first it may appear that there is no real interpretative tradition for the VE, no primary aids to reading. In fact, the tradition is only unrecognized and in part esoteric rather than non-existent.

A primary text in the subsequent tradition would be Thomas Mann's *Tod in Venedig*. It appears clear to me from the text that Mann belongs to the small group of readers on whom the images and significance of the VE were not lost. For example, in the famous gondola trip of chapter three Mann takes up themes and even phrases from the VE and particularly the key epigrams 1, 2, 5, 8 and 103 to create a tapestry of Goethe reminiscences that at once revives the unread VE and, in a number of striking ways, revises it. However, this must remain merely a suggestion for the present. An extended development is impossible here, and in any event would be out of place in a discussion of the VE.²²

²² Noteworthy however is that the VE appear to have been overlooked by Mann scholars in this connection. For example, although T. J. Reed, the editor of *Tod in Venedig* (TiV) for the Clarendon German Series (Oxford: 1971) notes parallels to von Platen's "Venedig," there is no mention of the VE in the notes, otherwise exceptionally full on the matter of Mann's sources (e.g., Plato's *Symposium*, Plutarch). It is indeed possible to be inspired at one level, say stylistically, by one author and at a deeper level by another, as Werner Vordtriede suggests in his important essay "Richard Wagners 'Tod in Venedig'" (*Euphorion* 52 [1958], 378-96), in which he presents passages from Wagner's *Mein Leben* as subtexts and inspiration for TiV. Yet here Goethe's influence stems from Mann's reading *Die Wahlverwandschaften* (p. 392, following R. Hinton Thomas), and Vordtriede gives yet more striking testimony to the neglect visited on the VE. As a counter to Mann's rhetorical question "Who can look at a Venetian gondola and not think of death?" Vordtriede opposes Goethe, quoting a passage from the *Italienische Reise*. He continues, "Hier sieht ein sich schon nach dem Klassischen vortastendes Auge. Die Todesvision ist erst ein romantisches Erbe" (p. 384, citing for the last remark Byron, *Beppo*, st. 19). In the context of this essay one need hardly add that Goethe himself had made this con-

The surest ground for interpretative aid will be the VE themselves, and I believe that in the last epigram of the cycle there is a clue to a hitherto unrecognized tradition buried in the VE.

Und so tändelt ich mir, von allen Freunden geschieden,
 In der Neptunischen Stadt Tage wie Stunden hinweg.
 Alles, was ich erfuhr, ich würzt es mit süßer Erinnerung,
 Würzt es mit Hoffnung; sie sind lieblichste Würzen der Welt (VE
 103).

It should be clear how this fits the biographical substratum, Christiane, the beloved, as well as continues the motif of boredom. I wish to concentrate on the second line, which no doubt looks innocent enough. “Neptunische Stadt,” one at first imagines, is just an allusive and mythological way of expressing “city of the sea,” a fitting epithet for Venice. The reference to Neptune was in fact not always there: in H⁵⁶ Goethe simply referred to the city’s muck and mire, “In dem Venedischen Pfuhl. . . .” Well, one might then argue, in a work with classical precedents and pretensions, Goethe wanted the reinforcement of a final reference to traditional classical mythology. Goethe may have been quite happy to give that impression, for it of course is a final reference to traditional classical mythology.

The adjective “neptunisch” reveals an entirely different range of meanings when one recalls Goethe’s deep interest in the earth sciences.²³ He was actively involved, as a keen amateur if not a professional, in the most important geological controversy of his day. At

nection over twenty years before—and in a so-called “classical” work. What is in order is a thorough investigation of the Venice theme that would review the status of the Goethe-Wagner-Mann links (to my mind Vordtriede exaggerates the melancholic in the passages he cites from *Mein Leben*, which, verbally, bear little resemblance to either Mann or Goethe) as well as consider a number of other authors who have written about Venice, both German (e.g., from the Venice poems of von Platen and Nietzsche to the post-TiV artist novel of Franz Werfel, *Verdi. Ein Roman*) and foreign (e.g., Byron, Ruskin). Ideally, in such a discussion one would confront the problems the “topos” poses interpretation and the study of literary relations. It does not seem ultimately justifiable that the appearance of what can be labeled a “topos” should anesthetize the reader (or critic) to either the sense of the passage or its literary resonances, whether they be cumulative or distinctive voices within a tradition.

²³ Goethe assembled an extensive mineral collection and advised the duke—quite a devotee of geology himself—on the state mines. See Max Semper, *Die geologischen Studien Goethes: Beiträge zur Biographie Goethes und zur Geschichte und Methodenlehre der Geologie* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit & Comp., 1914), pp. 29, 296 n. 21. His notes, letters and journals are full of observations about the formations he has seen. Two volumes of his collected works (SA II.9 and 10) are devoted to his scientific publications on the subject.

issue was the interpretation of the geological strata to explain the history of the earth. The central figure of one school, the “Neptunists,” based in Germany, was Abraham Gottlob Werner. Werner argued that the planet was originally covered by a great sea in violent motion in which were dissolved or suspended all the minerals. As the sea began to grow calm, these gradually sank to the foundation rock below or crystallized on the sides of mountains cut by powerful underwater currents on the floor of this primeval sea. The Neptunists believed the role of volcanoes and volcanic action was slight and envisaged a slow, continuous, entirely non-catastrophic earth history. Their theory, incidentally, could be made to coincide with Genesis: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (1.2 [KJV]). Opposing them were the Plutonists. They were the first to recognize the awesome power of volcanic action. They believed that the earth from time to time underwent massive convulsions, volcanic upheavals punctuated with explosions, and that at these times huge land areas were raised and lowered. As proof they pointed to strata of sedimentary rocks now tilted wildly from level. (Werner claimed such rocks were formed on the sides of existing mountains just as minerals in solution will crystallize on the sides of the container.) They in turn were asked where the source of this power lay. Some believed, as do geologists today, that the center of the earth was hot and even molten. The Plutonists eventually won the battle and their views form the basis for present understanding. Their theory was, however, different from present geological explanations in one important aspect. The Plutonists’ description of the earth’s history was violently catastrophic. They had no conception of the billions of years the process they sketched actually required. In this one respect, that is, gradualism, the Neptunists were closer to the truth.²⁴

²⁴ For a general survey see Frank Dawson Adams, *The Birth and Development of the Geological Sciences* (Baltimore: 1938). The most relevant chapter is VII, “The Birth of Historical Geology with the Rise and Fall of the Neptunian Theory,” which concludes with a short section (5) on “Goethe and the Great Controversy” (pp. 247-49). For an older more detailed history from a German perspective, see Karl Alfred von Zittel, *Geschichte der Geologie und Paläontologie bis Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich and Leipzig: 1899). For a thorough portrait of Goethe as student of geology Semper’s study (see note 23) is indispensable, an exhaustive chronicle of Goethe’s involvement with geology. Semper analyzes Goethe’s scientific writings from the geological point of view but touches only briefly and very casually (in a section entitled “Dichtungen geologischen Inhalts”) on the traces of Goethe’s

Goethe was a Neptunist, though not an extreme partisan. He had arguments with certain elements of Werner's theories, but was apparently fully convinced at the meeting he records in a letter dated September 19, 1789.²⁵ It was at this time that he wrote "Vergleichsvorschläge die Vulkanier und Neptunier über die Entstehung des Basalts zu vereinigen" (SA II.9, 304ff.). Even if he at times quibbled with specific assertions and claims of the Neptunists, by his very nature and instincts he would have nothing to do with the Plutonists.

Denn was ist die ganze Heberei der Gebirge zuletzt als ein mechanisches Mittel, ohne dem Verstand irgend eine Möglichkeit, der Einbildungskraft irgend eine Thulichkeit zu verleihen? Es sind bloß Worte, schlechte Worte, die weder Begriff noch Bild geben. Hiemit sei genug gesagt, wo nicht zu viel (SA II.9, 257).

These words were written late in his life, in 1830, in fact, after Werner's death. At this time Goethe was almost alone clinging to the old Neptunist faith. But as his words betray—note his scorn at "ganze Heberei," "bloß" and "schlechte Worte," and the opposing ideals of "Einbildungskraft," "Begriff," "Bild"—he held to the Neptunist position primarily as a poet and thinker.

Goethe wrote these "Verschiedene Bekenntnisse" (I, "Geologische Probleme und Versuch ihrer Auflösung") about the same time he was finishing *Faust II*, and it is in the "Klassische Walpurgisnacht" of Act II and in the first scene of Act IV that Goethe provides these ideas full poetic expression. My aim is not to give an exposition of these portions of *Faust II*²⁶ but to suggest that

geological interests in his poetry. Semper makes no mention of the VE; he writes, "Es bleibt die klassische Walpurgisnacht des Faust als die einzige Stelle, in der ein geologisches Thema künstlerische Gestaltung erfahren hat . . ." (p. 239). A thorough study of Goethe's poetic use of geological motifs remains to be written.

²⁵ Semper, pp. 89ff., 305 n. 214.

²⁶ It would severely unbalance this section of the paper to summarize even these parts of *Faust II*. For the reader who wishes to locate the portions to which I refer, they are, in Act II, the second scene marked "Am Obern Peneios" (7495ff.), n.b. Seimos's interruption of the Sirens (7519ff., 7550ff.), Mephistopheles's banter with the Lamias (7752ff.; n.b. "Lacerte," 7774) and, above all, the whole Homunculus episode with Anaxagoras, the representative of the Plutonists, and Thales, who espouses a Neptunist position (n.b. 7851ff., 7871f., 7939); the final scene (8034ff.), "Felsbuchten des Ägäischen Meers"; and, in Act IV, the first scene, "Hochgebirg," of which 10071-10233 constitute a virtual debate between the two schools, Faust championing the Neptunists' cause and Mephistopheles the Plutonists'. For *Faust I* I have used the volume with commentary by Erich Trunz (Hamburg: Christian Werner Verlag, 1963). For a more recent study, cp. Dorothea Lohmeyer, *Faust und die Welt* (Munich: 1977).

this text from Goethe's final years belongs to the interpretative tradition of the VE. It is worthy of note when any early work receives a strong commentary by its author later in his life. Skeptics of the significance of the VE should note the tribute Goethe himself paid the collection in *Faust II*. One might well study the relations obtaining between these two works within Goethe's literary production. Here, however, I will only suggest possible areas for future exploration and conclude with a return to the VE and a final consideration of its poetic structure.

One of the first links the passages from *Faust II* establish is that between the political and geological spheres. This emerges most clearly from the speech of Seismos, who relates his part in the titans' revolt (7560), and the debate between Anaxagoras and Thales to which Homunculus listens. Thales belittles the strife Anaxagoras celebrates: "Mit solchem Streit verliert man Zeit und Weile / Und führt doch nur geduldig Volk am Seile" (7871f.). Anaxagoras, the Plutonist, offers Homunculus kingship over the inhabitants of these newly arisen crags (i.a., Myrmidons and Pygmies), but Thales, the Neptunist, advises Homunculus against it—"Mit Kleinen tut man kleine Taten, / Mit Großen wird der Kleine groß" (7882f.)—and then takes him off to the sea. In Act IV, Mephistopheles is the proponent of "Tumult, Gewalt und Unsinn" (10127); significantly, in turning down his offers of earthly power, Faust says, "Und man erzieht sich nur Rebellen" (10159). Clearly, rebellion is of a piece with Plutonism. If one returns to the VE, it becomes apparent that the epigrams that deal with politics, especially the recent history of France, are now more easily integrated into the poetic system. Goethe, as a number of the VE show, is no admirer of the most reactionary and insensitive opponents of social change, yet at the same time he is no friend of the violent turn of events in France. To be a Neptunist in politics would not be to favor no change at all, but rather gradual change.

The conclusion of Act II is a celebration of the power of Eros, which draws Homunculus on to unite himself with water—as fire (especially 8458-85).

Was flammt um die Muschel, um Galatees Füße? . . .
 Welch feuriges Wunder verklärt uns die Wellen,
 Die gegeneinander sich funkelnd zerschellen? (8466; 8474f.)

A similar image concludes the Amor section of the VE:

Du erstaunest und zeigst mir das Meer; es scheint zu brennen.
 Wie bewegt sich die Flut flammend ums nächtliche Schiff!
 Mich verwundert es nicht, das Meer gebar Aphroditen,
 Und entsprang nicht aus ihr uns eine Flamme, der Sohn? (VE 95)

The movement depicted in *Faust II* is a reversal of the epigram: it is a return to water rather than emergence from it. In the VE, emergence from containment suits the closing epigrams, while the Homunculus episode, although the end of an act, is not the end of the entire drama. What in Homunculus, drawn on by the power of Eros, flows into water, will, in *Faust*, ultimately emerge and rise from the sea.

The long debate between Faust and Mephistopheles at the beginning of Act IV is an intriguing poetic exposition—in context—of Neptunism versus Plutonism. For the purposes of the VE, the significant passages actually come as discussion moves away from strictly geological arguments. Mephisto shifts from his description of the violent earth movements to the earth's "Oberfläche" (10129) and from there to a political offer. Faust is totally uninterested. Mephisto gives up trying to guess (cp. Faust's "Errate!" 10134) and asks him to reveal what great thing attracted him ("ein Großes zog mich an," 10134).

Mein Auge war aufs hohe Meer gezogen;
 Es schwoll empor, sich in sich selbst zu türmen,
 Dann ließ es nach und schüttete die Wogen,
 Des flachen Ufers Breite zu bestürmen.
 Und das verdroß mich . . . (10198-202).

Mephistopheles sees nothing new in this endless rolling of the ocean, as he remarks in an aside ("Das kenn' ich schon seit hunderttausend Jahren," 10211). Faust continues, coming to his great plan to contain the sea.

Sie schleicht heran, an abertausend Enden,
 Unfruchtbar selbst, Unfruchtbarkeit zu spenden. . . .
 Was zur Verzweiflung mich beängstigen könnte!
 Zwecklose Kraft unbändiger Elemente!
 Da wagt mein Geist, sich selbst zu überfliegen;
 Hier möcht' ich kämpfen, dies möcht' ich besiegen (10212f.;
 10218-21).

But the execution of this plan is postponed until Act V, for at once trumpets sound, and Faust becomes involved in the emperor's war.

Has it ever been noted that from a Neptunist point of view,

Faust's plan is the most natural, inevitable one that could be devised? According to the Neptunists, the earth took shape as the waters receded. Faust is proposing simply to continue this trend. He wishes to establish a larger realm for human habitation and activity. Perhaps the reader will recall that above, in the discussion of VE 1, I made the assertion that the heroic deed of a poet is to establish a poetic realm. What Faust does at the conclusion of the drama, then, I see as an interpretation of the task Goethe undertakes in VE. There I also claimed that for Goethe Venice was a uniquely significant battleground for the winning of new poetic territory. In terms of physical geography, Venice is precisely in the position most critical for Faust and all Neptunists. A number of the epigrams refer to the liminal status of the city: it is a world between the land and the sea. In the somewhat reductive mode which characterizes the VE which describe Italy and Venice, it is a world of rain (VE 22), mud (24), puddles (25), shell fish (37, EVE 5), not to mention gondolas (VE 5, 8). Even the characteristic Venetian animals are amphibian, not only the "Lazerten" but especially the frogs which represent all the city's inhabitants (VE 23, 25). The scolding voice (among others) would say that the matter Goethe has chosen for the VE is liminal as well, on if not beyond poetic limits. Goethe was very literally engaged in an attempt to push back the sea of the unpoetic, to bring these then unseemly matters into his Venetian collection. Goethe actually describes this act several times in the VE; in one I have mentioned already the poet compares himself to the Apostle Peter (VE 60) and refers to a decisive moment in the history of Christianity. In his dream Peter is instructed by God to eat foods not permitted the Jews.²⁷ Refusing, he is com-

²⁷ This epigram operates as well in another system that has not been discussed at all, one linked by images of eating or food. Note the seasoning in VE 103, the epigrams on Midas (VE 100) and on the host and transubstantiation (VE 19, EVE 9)—potent images, even if they appear but once each. The opening line of VE 1 also fits into this system in an extraordinary way. Once it is recognized that geological lore provides a key to potential esoteric meaning, the word "Sarkophagen" ought to be examined. (Recall that this word was moved to its present, prominent place at a very late stage of Goethe's work on the collection; cp. note 16.) The word "Sarkophagen" is unusual in German and in employing it Goethe was aware of its Greek roots. Literally, it means "flesh-eating." One may at first imagine this word came to be applied to a coffin because a coffin in a way opens its mouth to devour the corpse. This is almost certainly not the case. Greek *σαρκοφάγος*, *-ον*, in addition to its usual meaning "carnivorous," came to be applied to a certain limestone quarried at and apparently best known from Assos in the Troad. This limestone was reported to have the property of consuming the flesh, or at least accelerating the decomposition of bodies buried with it. It may have been a sort of lime thrown into coffins, or perhaps coffins were actually made of it, as Albertus Magnus asserts (without men-

manded again. On the basis of this, we are to believe, the early church decided that Jewish laws about diet, circumcision and other matters would be abrogated for gentile proselytes of the new faith. Change leads to more change. Here in VE 60, the waters of religious legalism are pushed back; first, Peter accepts the hitherto forbidden foods, and as a consequence the church accepts many new converts. Does Goethe expect that the changes he has effected in the poetic sphere will accelerate and have equally momentous consequences?

If the poetic world is like the physical world Goethe, a Neptunist, would have described, then he too, like Faust, is merely actively pursuing a trend that is already inevitably and inexorably in process. Venice is the “Neptunische Stadt”—a world of poetry. Not, like the city Yeats chose to represent his ideal poetic world, a world of stasis, but a world of gradual change always in the direction of more land, less sea. At the opening of the cycle Goethe, mindful of the water, Neptunist origins of the earth, sets the cradle in the water, and the container, the coffin, in turn within it. As Vergil’s cradle it represents poetic tradition as well. Life, then, like land, emerges to push back the very water that gave it birth, and poetry tradition. The final epigram is not actually a farewell to Venice. Goethe says that alone and without friends (final version; cp. note 7) he dallied out of time, spicing that period with reminiscence (the German “Erinnrung”) and hope. This is indeed the world of poetry, timeless, lonely, hearkening to a past and projecting a future. From this Venice there is no final leave-taking. It is accessible in all poetry, and the VE should be especially prized for transcribing Goethe’s travels there.

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tion of his authority for this, *De Mineralibus* II.17). Goethe may or may not have known this passage. He certainly knew the original sense of sarcophagus from Pliny, who discusses it twice in the *Natural History* (2.221 and 36.131). It is quite easy to prove that Goethe knew Pliny thoroughly and depended on him; see Ernst Grumach, *Goethe und die Antike* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1949), 2 vols. With the help of the index, one can compile quite a large list of references to all parts of Pliny (e.g., in May 1797 Goethe’s diaries and a letter to Schiller indicate he was reading *NH* 35) in Goethe’s published works, sketchbooks and letters, for the whole course of his career.