

FORM AND MEANING IN MOERIKE'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis an attempt has been made to clarify some of Moerike's basic and vital relationships to life and art. This is important in view of the ever-continuing growth and change in appreciation and evaluation of Moerike's contribution to poetry. Interpretation of individual poems is the approach chosen. Moerike's development as a poet at first glance appears totally foreign to his outward way of life, but, while his inner growth is paramount, there is in fact a significant correspondence between the two. An exploration of this correspondence provides a background for individual interpretations.

Moerike's early poetry shows acute awareness of the threatening powers denominated by Goethe as daemonic. Released primarily by his unhappy love for Maria Meyer - the 'Peregrina-Erlebnis' - their danger was gradually

overcome by the poet, though consciousness of these powers never left him.

This process is then related to Moerike's experience of nature. In his poetry, love stands revealed as the core of this experience. Love, however, is intimately linked for Moerike with the realm of the daemonic, and thus nature too is infused with supernatural significance. But love as an experienced emotion is also seen in Moerike's poetry to have undergone marked change.

From the fusion of nature and love (the daemonic serving as catalytic agent) grows the poet's understanding of beauty, and finds its purest expression in the late poems which might be called 'Ding-Gedichte'. Moerike's sense of what is beautiful in life and art is seen as the factor central to his poetry, partaking in itself of all aspects of his experience, and revealing itself in the perfection of the present moment. Finally beauty achieves liberation from temporal bonds, and attains immortality.

The poet is no longer threatened by loss of the perfect moment, for it has become a part of him.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of art is primarily to provide enjoyment, preferably on several levels at once. Value judgments of a work of art can, of course, vary; certain details of form and especially of content will be perceived in a somewhat different light from generation to generation. That which relates directly to life will remain the same; human nature and the human situation do not change.

There is, then, a difference between technical criticism of a work, i.e., establishing actual content, sources and technique of presentation, and the relating of that work into the organic context of personal experience. It is this latter problem, the relationship of art and the critic, which is the ultimately important one.

A work of art may be appreciated as such, though for the wrong reasons. The history of the well-known sculpture of the death of Laocoon and his two sons could serve as an example. A work stands or falls solely on its own merits. Its validity may not be questioned (as often occurs) on the basis of the artist's character or reputation. Nor may its content, should this be in

disagreement with the personal views of the critic, be allowed to interfere with his judgment of its artistic claims. Rembrandt's 'Slaughtered Ox' in the Louvre remains a great work despite its subject matter being disagreeable to some people. The novels of D. H. Lawrence do not succeed or fail (if such absolute terms may be applied) solely on the basis of subject matter. No matter is of itself artistic in quality; it is the maker who gives it life. It is this life which is the fundamental concern of the critic.

The sensitivity which the critic can bring to a work of art - to a poem - will to a great extent determine the standard of his own enjoyment of the poem. Failing relevant knowledge which can be brought to bear, this enjoyment will not be as complete as it should otherwise have been. Without sensitivity, no amount of knowledge will offset the inevitable failure of the critical attempt. Sensibility and relevant knowledge being present, the critic's intellect exerts a polarizing influence upon the poem. It is for this reason that no two people experience a poem or any other work of art in exactly the same way. The poem is taken apart and then put together again in a slightly different form - restructured - within the mind and heart of the

critic; he is re-creating in his own image. T. S. Eliot points out in a key essay that "there is in all great poetry, something which must remain unaccountable however complete might be our knowledge of the poet, and that... is what matters most"¹. Much of the value of an interpretation lies simply in its being a personal interpretation.

Criticism is a creative act. Criticism, like all creation is difficult. Creation is the outward formulation of an inner process and of the conclusions to which this process leads. This is true of the poet as of the critic. Moerike's creative processes, especially in the earlier years, were 'naiv'. It was said of him that he had but to take up a handful of earth, and a bird would fly from his hand. No critic begins with the handful of earth - could he do so, he too would be a poet. The critic enjoys the plumage of the bird and the beauty of its song; his creative task is the communication of his image of the bird, helping to make others aware of beauty which they, perhaps, overlooked.

If the critic is to be successful, each work of art must, as he comes to it, contribute to his own

¹T.S. Eliot, 'The Frontiers of Criticism', On Poetry and Poets (Faber and Faber, London, 1957), 112

spiritual growth and maturity. Artist and critic are necessary one to another. Both have a creative task to fulfil: the critic creates from a work of art; the poet creates directly.

Moerike's shy but deep-rooted independence as man and artist has always precluded his being fitted comfortably into any literary classification. With the passing of time, Moerike's image has undergone numerous changes. Never has he been a 'popular' poet, but, as the changing attitudes testify, he has always been very much a living poet.

Herbert Read has stated that

- Poetry is properly speaking a transcendental quality - a sudden transformation which words assume under a given influence - and we can no more define this quality than we can define a state of grace.¹

Poetry is a transcendental quality; the present work is more in the nature of an appreciation than a technical analysis, and is based on individual poems. There has been a concentration on the particular (Moerike's own approach) with the assumption that the general will thereby be provided for.

¹Herbert Read, Collected Essays in Literary Criticism (Faber and Faber, London, 1938), 41

The sum total of Moerike's work exhibits a wide range. Moerike's prose and letters are here referred to only insofar as they contribute in a vital way to those aspects of Moerike's poetry under discussion. Actual selection of poems occurred, of course, on an arbitrary basis: the poems were to be representative of Moerike's attitude to life and art - which for him were essentially one. Many anthology favourites have been passed over; a number of less well-known poems are discussed at length.

The dimension of Moerike's poetry is one of depth rather than width. Its range is greater than, perhaps, has hitherto been generally recognized. Much of this range it has been impossible to consider in the present work. Moerike was a consummate translator as poems as different in spirit as "Akme und Septimius" and "Seufzer" so eloquently testify. Moerike was an idyllic poet: "Idylle vom Bodensee" and "Der alte Turmhahn" are rightly regarded as masterpieces of the genre. This facet of Moerike's poetic character is but an aspect of his pervasive sense of humour. Moerike was a great humourist, writing pieces ranging from elaborate jokes patterned on classical models, through folk humour, to verses whose spirit was not again approached until the appearance of

Christian Morgenstern. But, above all, Moerike was interested in human life and experience, seeing in the individual not a reflection of the whole, but the complex and beautiful whole itself.

Choosing 'representative' poems for purposes of discussion is courting the danger of fragmentation. Moerike, of all poets, shows an internal unity, organically united elements of nature, love and beauty. It is this pull of opposites which has moulded the form of the thesis itself.

Though Moerike, under cover of humour, can be serious - his humour often has an unconsciously serious purpose - he is never solemn. Moerike's innate good-nature and lack of pretension must also serve as a guide-post to the critical appreciation of his poetry. It is well that any critic, when tempted to approach the poetry of Moerike with preconceived and self-imposed theories, should bear in mind the fate which may in his capacity as 'Rezensent'¹ befall him:

Der Mann sprach noch verschiedenes hin und her,
Ich weiss, auf meine Ehre, nicht mehr;
Meinte vielleicht, ich sollt' ihm beichten.

¹Moerike, "Abschied" (1837), Werke, I, 228

Zuletzt stand er auf; ich tat ihm leuchten.
Wie wir nun an der Treppe sind,
Da geb' ich ihm, ganz froh gesinnt,
Einen kleinen Tritt
Nur so von hinten aufs Gesaesse mit -
Alle Hagel! ward das ein Gerumpel,
Ein Gepurzel, ein Gehumpel!
Dergleichen hab' ich nie gesehn,
All meine Lebtag nicht gesehn,
Einen Menschen so rasch die Trepp' hinabgehn!

Mein Wappen ist nicht adelig,
Mein Leben nicht untadelig,
Und was da wert sei mein Gedicht,
Fuerwahr das weiss ich selber nicht.

- Moerike

CHAPTER I

EDUARD MOERIKE: AN INNER BIOGRAPHY

Wollest mit Freuden
Und wollest mit Leiden
Mich nicht ueberschuetten!
Doch in der Mitten
Liegt holdes Bescheiden.¹

Ich bin am 8. September 1804 zu Ludwigsburg geboren, ein Sohn des im Jahre 1817 als Landvogtei- und Oberamtsarzt verstorbenen Dr. Karl Friedrich Moerike.²

So, prosaically enough, begins Eduard Moerike's own account of his life. And, indeed, it was in many ways prosaic, seemingly unmarked by incidents in any way unusual, by outstanding circumstance - or even by much recognition on the part of a contemporary generation which could (and did) reward its favoured poets with adulation and hard cash.³ It was on its surface the peaceful life of a nineteenth century parson assigned to small and sleepy villages in the Kingdom of Wuerttemberg, and of a lecturer on German literature in a school for young girls. The man who lived it was averse to formal work and even known at times to have neglected duty - strange behaviour in a man of Prussian descent and holder of office under state control. He brought

a curious ambivalence to all relationships with others. He was a man of infinite delicacy and tact, remarked by everyone who met him for his inner grace. In all things and above all he was a poet, a poet whose stature has been growing slowly but very surely since the time his poems first appeared.

Ludwigsburg, the birth place also of Justinus Kerner, Ernst Friedrich Kauffmann, Friedrich Theodor Vischer and David Friedrich Strauss, is, with its wide streets lined with lime and chestnut trees and its many open squares, quite different in nature from the older towns and villages of Swabia. The town, laid out one hundred years before Moerike's birth, reached its height under Duke Karl Eugen (1728 - 93). For the imaginative young Eduard, the town with its rococo palace and romantically beautiful palace gardens containing artificial ruins - and at that time, in accordance with contemporary custom, Aeolian harps which at the breeze's lightest touch produced their haunting tones - brought lasting impressions. The motif of the wind-played harp was to recur in his poetry.⁴ In the stillness of the town, the streets of which were used so seldom that grass grew in them, he could enter the dream world of his own imagination, a secret world in which he loved to

dwell. A teacher is said once to have asked the dreamy lad, "Von welchem Brueckle hast jetzt eben wieder 'nunterguckt?"⁵

In his novel Maler Nolten which, at least in part, traces the inner development of the artist as a young man⁶, the reader is provided with a brief glimpse into this childhood world with its "stille gedaempfte Licht" in which things assume lives of their own and where, behind each visible thing there is an indefinable spirit, "ein geistig Etwas". Fantasy is the important element here. The picture which emerges is that of a very sensitive and somewhat withdrawn child with interests differing from those of the other children. He was inclined toward quiet pursuits and took an interest in various curiosities of nature; some of these interests remained with him throughout his life (his active interest in the collection of rocks and fossils, for example⁷). In some little alcove or in the attic, secure from interruption and all disturbances, he would sit and sketch, or simply give himself up to his thoughts and to a deeply felt inner harmony of soul and nature. To this were added religious feelings, although young Vicar Moerike in recalling them is careful to qualify his reminiscence: "...dass ausdruecklich religioese Gefuehle dabei wirkten, wuesste ich nicht, ausgeschlossen waren sie auf keinen Fall".⁸

In retrospect he saw his childhood not altogether as a time of shyness and child-like introspection. Even then he was filled with "Lust zu fabulieren"⁹, and often told the other children stories of the ghosts and spirits standing ready to his every wish, and even on occasion showed the two knotholes in which dwelt these spirits good and bad. His tales found ready acceptance among the other children, at which he expresses no surprise: "natuerlich! hab' ich's doch beinah selbst geglaubt!"¹⁰ The experiences of childhood were to influence the poet, sometimes in all but imperceptible ways, for child merged into poet and the poet never lost his childhood innocence of vision.

The family group in which young Eduard grew up appears to have been an especially happy one. Aside from his mother, his elder sister Luise and his elder brother August made a lasting impression upon him, influencing him strongly in moral and spiritual matters. He was also closely bound to his younger brothers and sisters, especially to Klara who was later to become his housekeeper. A little manuscript (dated 1817) is still extant, attesting to the strong ties between the children; in this document they pledge to love one another forever, "noch im Grabe und in der Ewigkeit"¹¹, and, should the document be damaged in any way, immediately to renew it.

But very early he experienced the heaviness which life could bring. In 1817, after lengthy illness and severe suffering, his father died. Two years earlier he had suffered a stroke; Moerike later wrote of this occurrence that it marked the beginning of the decline of his family's fortunes¹² - they never altogether recovered. As a result of this stroke, Dr. Moerike was partially paralyzed, could speak only with the greatest difficulty, and was afflicted with a severe weakening of memory. The son describes in moving terms the suffering of his father and of the effect upon himself:

... Wenn oft der jammervoll Dasitzende mich unter Traenen zwischen seinen Knieen hielt und mir ein schwer zu erratendes Wort mit Liebkosungen gleichsam abschmeicheln wollte, um den andern zu sagen, was er verlange - so waren das Augenblicke des herzerreissenden Elends, die unausloeschlich in meiner Erinnerung stehen. Hier musste der Knabe den Ernst des Lebens, dem er entgegenwuchs, und die Hinfaelligkeit alles Menschlichen mit erschuetternder Wahrheit empfinden. ¹³

|← After the death of his father, he went to live in Stuttgart with his Uncle Georgii who felt that young Eduard was by nature best suited to a career in the church.

Accordingly he entered the protestant 'Seminar' in Urach where all was ordered in monastic discipline. It