When Giants Meet: Goethe and Beethoven

Bettina von Arnim
(1810)

Who among us could replace this genius? from whom could we expect a similar achievement? All human activity is like the pendulum of a clock that comes and goes for him: he alone is free and produces of his own free will, as he wishes, the uncreated and the unexpected. What matters then his traffic with the world, to him whom the rising sun finds already engaged upon the hallowed task of every day and who hardly lifts his eyes at sunset to glance about him; he who forgets to feed his body and whom the torrent of his inspiration keeps far removed from the platitudes of daily life? He has told me himself: "From the moment when I open my eyes I begin to groan, for what I see goes against my religion, and I must despise the world which does not sense that music is a more sublime revelation than all wisdom and all philosophy; it is the wine that inspires and leads to fresh creations, and I am the Bacchus who presses for mankind this wine of magnificence, it is I who makes them spiritually drunk; and when they find themselves with an empty stomach once more, they have in their intoxication fished in all sorts of things that they bring back with them onto the dry shore. I have no friend, I have to live alone with myself; but I know well that God is closer to me in my art than to all others, and I advance with him without fear, having recognized and understood him every time. Nor do I feel anxious about my music which could have no adverse destiny: he who freely opens his mind and his feelings shall be forever exempt from all the misery in which the others drag along."

All these things Beethoven said to me when I saw him for the first time. A great sentiment of veneration took hold of me on hearing him thus reveal his thoughts to me who must have seemed to him so puny. I was the more surprised since I had been assured that he was misanthropic and would engage in conversation with no one. Nobody wanted to introduce me to him; I had to seek him out for myself. He owns three apartments in which he hides in turn; one in the country, one in town, the third in the bastion; it was there, in the third, that I was to find him. I went in unannounced; he was at the piano; I told him my name. He received me affectionately and asked me at once whether I would like to hear a song he had just put to music. And then he started to sing Kennst du das Land ... ["Knowst thou the land," one of Mignon's songs from Goethe's Wilhelm Meister] in a voice so powerful and penetrating that its melancholy took possession of me.--"Is it not beautiful?" he asked me enthusiastically, "Wonderful." "I shall sing it a second time." He rejoiced at my delightful approval. "Most humans," he said to me, "are moved by something good, but they are in no way artistic natures; artists are made of fire; they do not weep." And he began once more to sing another song of yours, which he had composed in the last few days. ...