

## HOMOEOPATHY IN THE DAYS OF GOETHE

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In a lecture titled 'Homoeopathy in the days of Goethe' in the 29th International Congress for Homoeopathic Medicine at Washington in May 31—June 10, 1974 ('Homoeopathie in der Zeit Goethes' published in the *Transcripts & Acts* of the XXIXth International Congress for Homoeopathic Medicine) Dr. Henry Von Witzleben, has clearly brought out the views of that great German Philosopher, Goethe (1749-1832) who was a contemporary of Hahnemann, towards Homoeopathy. Though Goethe respected Hahnemann, he ridiculed the law of 'likes cure likes', even in his plays. However, an interesting event in the life of Goethe has been narrated which I found quite revealing and should be known to every student of the history of Homoeopathy, especially the very early days of Homoeopathy. I give below the relevant portion from the above lecture (translated by me):

"It is not clear whether Goethe ever realised that he was indebted to Homoeopathy for his life, as he fell seriously ill, almost past hopes of recovery, in Feb. 1823. On 13, Feb., he felt himself unwell after a restless night. On Feb. 18 he complained of very acute pain in the heart region, on 19th fever was established, on 22nd high fever (rigor?) with outbreak of perspiration which brought no relief. On 23, again acute, severe pain in the left chest, on 24, deterioration of the general condition. Goethe himself was aware of the seriousness of the situation and told his daughter-in-law: "I feel that the moment has come, when the fight between life and death begins in me." In Weimar and Jena the rumour had already circulated that Goethe was dead.

What diagnosis had the medical side made? One presumes it as pericarditis. Immediately there arises some questions. How can one make such a diagnosis in those times. Have the doctors auscultated? It may be possible. His doctors Hofrat Rehbein and Hofrat Huschke, the court surgeon of the Duke's family, were very proficient. Laennec introduced the Stethoscope in about 1815; it is also possible one knew the stethoscope in Weimar 1815. Did one know already to differentiate between 'customary' pericarditis of celebrities, from a 'drab' sometimes haemorrhagic, inflammation? Has one percussed Goethe? Auenbrugger had published his paper on percussion in 1791; he lived completely unrecognized until Cerviscert the Court Surgeon of Napoleon I translated it and in this way it became known in Germany. To me appears the diagnosis of pericarditis on weak ground. Anatomy has pointed out that the pericardium possesses nerves only in the lower portion. That clarifies why the uncomplicated pericarditis have not been detected by pains, particularly severe pain. Now Goethe complained and repeatedly about very severe heart pains (whether they radiated, for instance in the left arm, we don't know) which came in paroxysms. After another such attack, he was

much more weak and looked bad. On 19 Feb. he said, "This unconquerable pain will take me to the threshold of my life." Interesting that he did not say "to the threshold of death." From which one can speculate that despite his understanding of the seriousness of his ailment, he was unconsciously not yet ready to cross it. One must of course assume that it was a question of heart infarct, perhaps with the participation of the pericardium; that would explain the fever; however, to complicate the picture further, lung inflammation may also be thought of because of the rigor and cough. About this diagnosis Goethe's prophesy that his recovery would be a very slow one, also speaks. It lasted almost till summer when he finally overcame the disease.

Can one conclude of heart infarct from the method of treatment and its success? Yes, with fair certainty. Dr. Huschke gave the patient a cup of Arnica decoction with the instruction to take small sips during the course of the day. Probably the root was used, but about the degree of attenuation we do not know anything. (The concept of potentisation was introduced by Hahnemann first in 1827.) Very swiftly a beneficial perspiration broke out and a refreshing night's sleep. He was restored to health, but he was weak and needed rest.

On 22 March, the same date on which Goethe should die nine years later, his *Tasso* was played in the theatre to celebrate his recovery of health. Under loud applause a bust of Goethe was adorned with laurel garland. After the performance, the lady Von Heygendorf (Karoline Jagemann, the actress and lover of the Duke) in her costume of Leonore formally presented the garland to Goethe. No one remembered Hahnemann and I have found no hint that Goethe had known that he had taken for his ailment a specific homoeopathic medicine to which his cure is indebted to."

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