

This section is concerned solely with the poem Beethoven im Himmel mentioned in the first section of this chapter. The German original appears in ref. [5]. It was presumably written in the last five or six years of Boltzmann's life. The English translation we are going to quote is by F. Rohrlich [28]. As Rohrlich himself says, he "had to sacrifice the rhyme in favour of sense and meter" and even then he "had at times to resort to a somewhat free translation. The rhyme is preserved only in the last paragraph to indicate the full flavour of the poem."

Boltzmann called it a Scherzgedicht (jocular poem). That is the way it starts. But one cannot avoid noticing certain facts. It speaks of a journey of Boltzmann's soul, detached from the body, to heaven. It is not necessary to be an expert in psychology to see in this a (perhaps unconscious) desire for death. And in fact, in the last part we also see an example of sudden change of humour (passage from Carnival to Lent!): the thing on the earth most missed by the souls in heaven is pain. And examples of pain and sorrow are explicitly mentioned.

Let us examine the poem in more detail. It starts:

With torment that I'd rather not recall
My soul at last escaped my mortal body.
Ascent through space! What happy floating
For one who suffered such distress and pain.

The last words constitute more than an explicit mention of unhappiness. But they might be considered a casual reference to the pains of human life. This interpretation would seem to be justified by the next sentences, which have rather a light tone, but pain and sorrow are the main theme of the poem, as indicated by its second part.

Boltzmann continues by saying that he passes near other worlds, to which he pays hardly any attention because he has a higher goal: heaven! When he arrives there he hears a wonderful harmony: choirs of angels are singing, but Boltzmann tells them that their songs appear monotonous to him:

They laugh: "A truly German soul you are!
Your art of music causes envy here.
Begin the song 'God praise eternity'
So he will see what we can do up here.
But watch it so in unison we'll be!"

The last sentence seems to have been familiar in Boltzmann's home, when he played with his son. The poem continues with the angels singing "a mighty choral hymn". And Boltzmann recognizes Beethoven's style, though the piece is new to him. Then he questions the angels, who tell him that it was composed by Beethoven "upon the Lord's command" and is the best among their songs. Boltzmann now expresses a desire to meet Beethoven, so that his travel will have had a good purpose. Thus he is led to meet the soul of the great musician, who, after a few words of welcome, asks whether the piece pleased him. Boltzmann is confused and keeps silent. Beethoven encourages him to speak. Boltzmann confesses that he has not found the same beauty in the angels' hymn as he was used to on earth. Beethoven agrees with Boltzmann's judgement and says that he has stopped writing music, because he is not as successful as he used to be. Only for the Last Judgement had he agreed to write the part for trumpets. "The Lord would be embarrassed otherwise."

Why has Beethoven been robbed of his creative spark? The mightiest tone is absent, the tone provided by pain! It is pain that "rings with might and resonates like steel, / and when it grips you every fiber shakes." Then Beethoven quotes examples of pain that make us feel human beings:

"What force commands a mother love her child?
It's without doubt the nameless agonies
She suffered all through many nights eternal
When she and God alone have watched the child.
Have you not wept together with your wife?
If not, you missed that bond that joins forever;
It is the pain that you together shared
Whose memory will linger as your angel.
The saint who suffers pain and grief
Redemption's rays illuminate his way.
No man achieves a hero's worldly fame
Who has not forced himself with all his power;
And as it caused his aching heart to tremble
His valiant deed will live in song immortal.
The Lord himself when he among us dwelt
Was He a king, a rich man or the like?
He was a human's son beset with pain!"

Beethoven affirms that the warmest mode of life is pain and that he built his music on this foundation. But in heaven he lacks inspiration, because there is no sorrow. And here are the concluding lines:

In shock almost I gazed upon his face.
"How truly wondrous are these worldly ways!
Just hours ago I begged for death again,
'Oh spare my heart the suffering and the pain'
But here in heaven pain is what one yearns
Oh human heart your ways one never learns."