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Goethe's Life and Work

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born in 1749 into what he described as a “patrician” family in Frankfurt am Main. He succeeded early as a writer, first with his play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), and then with his novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (1774), which became a best-seller throughout Europe. Werther’s doomed passion for another man’s fiancée led to his suicide, but although the story was based on an episode in Goethe’s own life, the sequel for him was very different. In 1775 Karl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, a young man several years his junior, invited him for a visit; Goethe ended up staying for most of the rest of his life in Weimar, a small independent state among the many that made up Germany at that time.

The only substantial break was a two-year stay in Italy, mostly in Rome, where he painted, studied classical art, and wrote poetry in classical metres. Goethe played many roles in Weimar: administrator, theatre director, dramatist, poet, scientist, and companion to the Duke. In return Karl August gave him (as Goethe put it): “Friendship, leisure and trust; fields, and a house and garden.” The house was a country cottage close to the city, where he lived until his return from Italy, when he began his liaison with Christiane Vulpius, a relatively uneducated young woman who was not accepted socially by the Weimar court; Goethe claimed she had not read any of his works. They cohabited until her death in 1816, only marrying in 1806. They had several children, but only one survived into adulthood.

Goethe’s middle years were occupied with writing the first part of his epic drama *Faust*, and the first part of his two-part novel

about Wilhelm Meister (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*). His friendship with the younger dramatist Friedrich Schiller lasted from 1794 until Schiller's death in 1805. This period is known in German literary history as "Weimar classicism," a time when Goethe reacted against the Romanticism he had helped to initiate in his own earlier "Storm and Stress" period of the 1770s. His dictum "What is classical is healthy, what is romantic is sick" reflects this change in attitude. Nevertheless, viewed as a whole, his work clearly belongs to the Romantic period as normally defined in English literary history, rather than to the classical "Augustan" age of the British eighteenth century. Goethe was not familiar with the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and the first English Romantic poet to win his attention was Lord Byron.

Goethe's later works in other genres, up to his death in 1832, included the second parts of *Faust* and the Wilhelm Meister novel (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*). He became known as "the sage of Weimar," visited by many famous or aspiring admirers, and his conversations were recorded for posterity by Johann Peter Eckermann.

Goethe's literary horizons were wide. He foresaw the emergence of what he called "world literature" (*Weltliteratur*), and his own creative practice drew on many cultures. In a prose maxim, he wrote the following: "Do allow us oriental and southern forms as well as western and nordic ones in our collections of miscellaneous works." He began his career as a poet by imitating North European folk-songs and ballads, going on to learn from the Italian sonnet, the classical Latin elegy and epigram. Beyond Europe, unusually for his time, he studied the lyric poetry of Persia (resulting in the 1819 collection *West-Eastern Divan*) and China (resulting in the 1827 cycle *Chinese-German Hours and Seasons*).

His lifelong devotion to the "task" of self-development is one of the main keys to Goethe's life and work. The Wilhelm Meister novel is known as the first *Bildungsroman* (novel of education, or development, or formation). This genre soon became a dominant form of European fiction, typically telling the story of a young person's individual growth through love affairs and other adventures, as he attempts to find a vocation or position in his society. But in Goethe's own case, the process of *Bildung*, of exploring different aspects of his potentials and talents, ended only with his life.

Shortly before his death he wrote, in a letter dated 17 March 1832: “My most important task is to go on developing as much as possible whatever is and remains in me, distilling my own particular abilities again and again.” The drama of *Faust*, which occupied Goethe over a period of sixty years, reflects this spirit in the hero’s lifelong quest for self-development through many experiences, phases and roles. Because Faust is continually developing, his soul will not be forfeit to the devil, in spite of their bargain. Growth is redemption: “Whoever occupies himself with constant striving, he can be redeemed.”

Another key to Goethe is that all these different aspects, activities and phases represent the fulfillment *over time* of one’s underlying identity. Where traditionally a given human character was seen as essentially set for life, Goethe was among the first to see it as intrinsically developmental, incomplete at any one stage, and only fully unfolded in time. This change of view could be compared to the shift accomplished later by Darwin and others from seeing Nature as fixed order to seeing it as continually evolving. For Goethe the task of self-realization was a lifelong effort to become one’s true self, that is, one’s full self, a process similar to what Carl Jung later called “individuation.”

Full self-development may involve contradictions. Goethe appears to take both sides of most oppositions. It may be necessary to experience both sides of a situation or an issue, or to manifest qualities that seem like opposites. Goethe is both poet and scientist, romantic and classicist, a northerner attracted to the south, a westerner drawn to the east, an innovator and traditionalist, an adherent of both the ancient and the modern, of both the local (Weimar) and the global (world literature). To experience and reconcile these great opposites over a lifetime he sees as the way to human wholeness.

THEMES OF GOETHE’S POETRY

I have employed the idea of paired concepts as the basis for arranging my selection of Goethe’s poems into four broad sections, based not on a single theme but on a major opposition or pairing: Love and Solitude; Gods and Humans; Nature and Art; and Wit and Wisdom. Within each section, except the last, the order is roughly chronological, reflecting the idea of self-development over time,

unless there are key thematic links which justify placing poems together, as in the cases of the Mignon and Harpist poems. In the final section, I have followed a thematic sequence from autobiography, through social satire to general reflections on life.

Love and Solitude

Goethe wrote love poems from ages eighteen to eighty. Many are based on personal experiences, from the 1771 “May Song” he devoted to Friederike Brion, the daughter of the parson of a village near Frankfurt, to the 1828 Dornburg poems written for Marianne von Willemer, an actress married to a Frankfurt banker (she was his collaborator on the *West-Eastern Divan*, in which she and Goethe appear in the fictive guises of Suleika and Hatem). The moods of Goethe’s love poems range from the joys of united lovers, to the sadness and longing of the separated. The forms are equally various, from narrative ballads such as “Mountain Castle,” to sonnets like “Travel Provisions.” There is also a set of three pastorals, lightly satirical poems about the loves of shepherds and shepherdesses. In “The Elf-King” the father’s love for his son fails to save him from supernatural entrapment and death.

Solitude is an important counter-theme to love. Goethe finds a place for the unfortunate in love, as well as the fortunate. Many poems express the sadness and grief of the bereaved lover (“The King in Thule”) or the betrayed lover (“The Spinster”). “To the Moon” conveys a mood of disillusion about love, and ends with the consolations of retirement from the world. But the most striking treatment of the solitude theme is perhaps a group of seven poems taken from the novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. Three concern Mignon, an androgynous young woman who is devoted to Wilhelm, but is suffering from a mysterious trauma in the past, probably in Italy, which she has vowed to conceal. Four are about the Harpist, a lonely wanderer and beggar, who turns out to be Mignon’s father through an incestuous union with his own sister. These two characters embody the pathos of lonely and homeless wandering which counterpoints the sense of community celebrated in “Bonding Song” and the knightly orders or “noble companies” evoked in other poems.

Gods and Humans

In his early twenties Goethe moved away from the Lutheranism in which he had been brought up, and gravitated towards Spinoza's philosophy of God-in-Nature. At the same time he became interested in other religious traditions, including Greek polytheism and Islamic monotheism. This openness to all religious traditions, unusual in his time, is evident in his poetry throughout the rest of his life, and eventually included the God of Christianity he had begun by rejecting. A prose maxim reflects his general attitude to religion, though he did not consistently adhere to its prescriptions: "Researching into nature we are pantheists, writing poetry we are polytheists, morally we are monotheists."

There is a wide range of feelings about religion in Goethe. "A Song about Mohammed," originally set out as dialogue between two devotees, imagines the prophet as a force of nature, a river which gathers tributary streams as it runs through the mountains to the plains. The early poems based on Greek myths contrast Prometheus' truculent defiance of Zeus with Ganymede's rapturous love of him. At times Goethe seems to accept the injustice of the gods: "Winter Journey in the Harz Mountains" contrasts the fate which "a god" has ordained for the unfortunate man left by the wayside (based on Goethe's depressive acquaintance Friedrich Plessing), and the fortunate poet (clearly Goethe himself), whose way through life is protected by love, and whose poetry is inspired by Nature. "Human Limits" advises against trying to rival the gods ("no human being should measure himself against the gods") while "The Divine" counters with the need to imitate them ("a human should be like them"). Some poems urge us to seek immortality, while others advocate an acceptance of transience. "Eternal" is one of his favourite words, which can be applied in paradoxes, such as "The moment is eternal." Poetically Goethe seems to exult in having it both ways.

In later poems Goethe ends up with a pantheon of "eternal beings" which represents his own synthesis of world religions. "God" is there, but immanent in the world rather than transcendent, or, to put it in the terms he uses in "Prooemion," a God who acts from *inside* Nature rather than from outside.

"One and All" praises the surrender of the separate, suffering

self to be dissolved into infinity in a way reminiscent of Buddhism, yet “Legacy” praises the persistence of identity through time (“No being can melt into nothingness”). “Orphic Words” gives voice to several views of the human condition, including contradictory-sounding ones like astrological predestination (“Our freedom is deceptive”), social constructionism (“Your self is formed by your society”), and hope (“It gives us wings”).

Finally comes peace as reconciliation: “All strife and struggle have become / Eternal peace in God the Lord.” The mystical ending of *Faust II* reveals a vision of how “Almighty Love” creates and sustains all things. Goethe’s “divine humanism,” at times reminiscent of that of William Blake, is expressed in his reflection on the astronomer Kepler’s sense of “the most exact fusion between the divine in himself and the divine in the universe.” This could well describe Goethe’s own sense of the highest human potential.

Nature and Art

Some of Goethe’s early lyrics are pure love-songs to Nature, seemingly effortless effusions of joy. But this is balanced by a more sober appreciation of her destructive as well as her benign aspects. Stillness may be the prelude to a storm. Voyages may be “fortunate” (a favourite word of Goethe’s), or may end up on the rocks if the sailors are careless or over-confident.

Nature and art are often seen as opposites, but as Goethe puts it in his sonnet “Nature and Art,” they often “meet unexpectedly.” Nature inspires and re-inspires the artist; the second mode here is important for Goethe, who knows that the initial impetus may need one or many renewals. Similarly, the artist’s task is to renew creation, “to re-create created forms.” Goethe celebrates Imagination as “My Goddess,” who bridges the gaps between God, Nature and humanity, and whom he evokes as Jove’s favourite daughter and our “faithful spouse.”

Goethe believed both that Nature is creative and that creativity is natural. But his poems about the vicissitudes of the artistic life show that it is not always easy: he is hard on dilettantism. Only with discipline and perseverance is the artist rewarded with completion. An artist’s night-time projects may prove difficult to realize the next

day. Goethe sees his poetic gift as a “golden lyre,” a loyal friend who can bring relief to suffering.

Wit and Wisdom

From his Italian sojourn onwards, Goethe frequently wrote epigrams. Some are autobiographical, as is the one describing the traits he has inherited from his parents and great-grandparents, or another in which he pays tribute to “his” Duke, whose patronage has proved more beneficial (and profitable) than that of the European reading public.

Politically, Goethe usually comes across as a skeptic. He had a low opinion of “the crowd,” particularly its role in the French Revolution, but he also castigated the aristocracy for deceiving the people, and “the powerful” for circulating debased coinage. Demagogues and charismatic leaders come in for scorn, as do professors of theory. Among the qualities advocated by Goethe are originality, spontaneity and generosity, but they are predictably matched by authority, decorum, and respect for tradition. Some epigrams offer wisdom, in the form of pithy advice about social conduct, personal relationships, politics or simply how to be happy. Others offer wit, in the form of sardonic observations about how people often act like fools.

Formally, the epigrams are varied, ranging from the long-lined unrhymed classical “elegiac distich,” to shorter-lined couplets or quatrains (both rhymed and unrhymed), as well as poems running to eight or more lines. Many of them were collected into sequences such as the *Venetian Epigrams* of 1790, or the *Zahme Xenien* (“tame xenias,” from the Greek *xenia*, gifts from the host) assembled towards the end of Goethe’s life. Other poems which Goethe classed as epigrams take up themes which make them more suited to the other divisions of this selection.

PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION AND TRANSLATION

This selection of Goethe’s poems consists of only a fraction of his prolific output in verse. Many, but not all, of his best-known shorter poems are included, and the choice is limited to those of which I