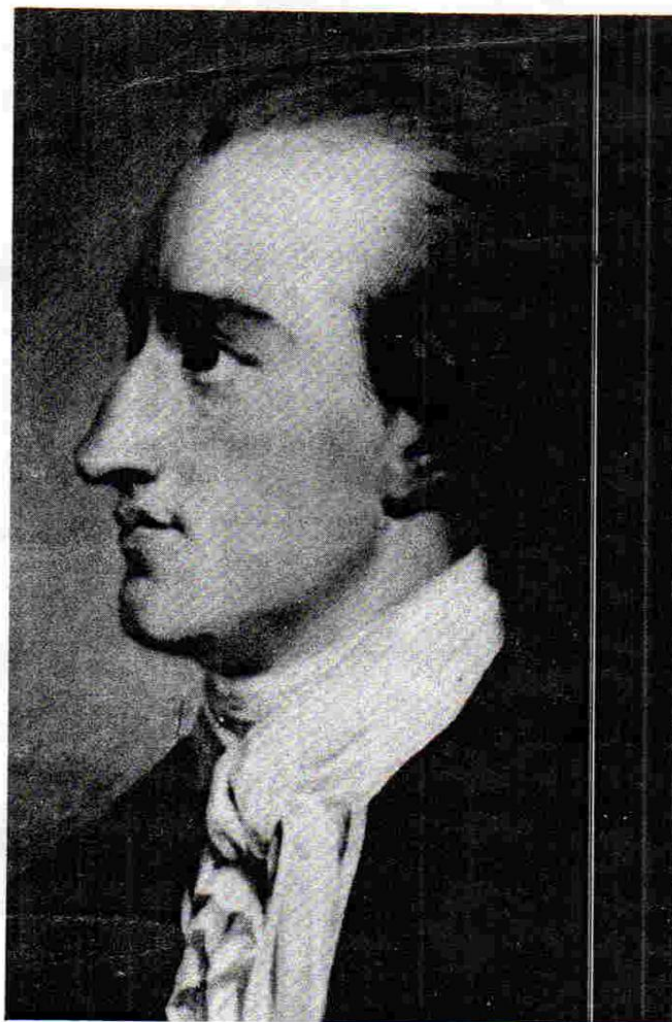


Goethe Reader

compiled by David Rathbone



Goethe as a young man
Painting by Georg May

CHRONICLE OF GOETHE'S LIFE AND WORKS

Born on August 28, 1749 at Frankfurt am Main, son of Johann Kaspar Goethe and his wife Katharine Elisabeth, daughter of Johann Wolfgang Textor, Mayor of Frankfurt.

1765-68

University of Leipzig.
Return home with health ruined by youthful excesses and "with the feelings of one shipwrecked."

Buch Annette [handwritten volume of poems to Anna Katharina Schönkopf]. *Die Laune des Verliebten* [The Whim of the Infatuated, pastoral play].

1768-70

Frankfurt am Main.
Pietistic meetings. Influence of Susanne von Klettenberg, family friend. First interest in the natural sciences.

Die Mitschuldigen [The Accomplices, a comedy].

1770-71

University of Strassburg.
Acquaintance with Herder.
Friederike Brion, daughter of the parson of Sesenheim.

Poems to Friederike. Collection of folk songs.

1771-72

Frankfurt am Main.
Acquaintance with J. H. Merck and his friends in Darmstadt.

Faust (Urfaust) [first version] begun. History of Gottfried of Berlichingen dramatized.

1772

Wetzlar (district court)
Charlotte Buff. J. C. Kestner.

1772-75

Frankfurt am Main.
Acquaintance with Lavater,
F. H. Jacobi. Klopstock, the
Counts Stolberg.

Götz von Berlichingen published anonymously, 1773.

1774

Engagement to Lili Schöne-
mann (later dissolved).

Clavigo (a tragedy). *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*), a novel.

1775

May-July: First trip to
Switzerland, November 7:
arrival in Weimar. Duke
Carl August von Sachsen-
Weimar. K. L. von Knebel,
Wieland, Herder. Goethe
takes over most branches of
the duchy's administration.

Erwin und Elmire (a musical play). *Stella* (A Play for Lovers), 1876.

1776-88

Friendship with Charlotte
von Stein.

Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung (Urmeister) [Wilhelm Meister's theatrical mission] 1777-85.

1779-1780

September 1779 - January
1780: second trip to Switzerland.

Iphigenie in Tauris (first version) 1779.

1782

Raised to nobility by the
Emperor.

1786-88

First Italian trip.

1786

October 29: arrival in Rome. Boarding with the painter J. H. W. Tischbein. Angelika Kauffmann. J. H. Meyer, painter and writer, friend of his later years. K. P. Moritz (Berlin art philosopher).

1787

February: Naples, Vesuvius, Pompeii. March: Palermo, Girgenti, Catania, Taormina, Messina. May: Naples. June: Rome. *Iphigenie in Tauris.*

1788

April 25: departure from Rome. Florence, Milan, Lake Como. *Egmont* (a tragedy).

1788-92

Weimar.
Christiane Vulpius.

1790

March-June: Trip to Venice. *On the Metamorphosis of Plants.*

1791-1817

Director of the Weimar Theatre. *Torquato Tasso*, 1790.
Faust, a fragment, 1790.
Contributions to Optics, 1791-92.

1792

Campaign in France. Cannonade of Valmy. *Der Grosskophtha* [The Grand Cophta, a comedy].

1793

Siege of Mainz.

Der Bürgergeneral [The Citizen-General, a comedy].
Reinecke Fuchs [Reynard the Fox, epic poem], 1794.

1794-1805

Friendship with Schiller.

Römische Elegien [Roman elegies, in Schiller's *Horen*], 1795. *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* [Discussions of German Emigrants], 1795. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*), 1795-96. *Xenia* (with Schiller), 1797. *Hermann und Dorothea*, 1798.

1797

Third trip to Switzerland.

Die Propyläen (periodical), 1798-1800. *Die natürliche Tochter* [The Natural Daughter, a tragedy], 1804. *Pandora* (a festival play). *Des Epimenides Erwachen* [Epimenides' Awakening, a festival play].

1805

Schiller dies.

1806

Marries Christiane.

Faust, First Part, 1808.
Elective Affinities (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*). 1809.

Zur Farbenlehre (Theory of Colors), 1809. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* [Poetry and Truth, autobiography], 1811-32.

1816

Christiane dies.

Über Kunst und Altertum [On Art and Antiquity, periodical], 1816-32. *Italienische Reise* (Italian Journey), 1816-17. *Morphologie* (Morphology), 1817-23. *West-östlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan), 1819. *Wilhelm Meister's Journeying Years* (Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre), 1822.

1823

J. P. Eckerman becomes Goethe's secretary and collaborator.

Novelle [Novella], 1828. *Correspondence of Schiller and Goethe*. 1828-29. *Wilhelm Meister's Journeying Years*. (Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre) (Second version), 1829. *Annalen, Tages- und Jahres-Hefte* [Annals—Day and Year Books], 1830. *Faust*, Second Part, 1832.

Goethe's death: March 22, 1832

Faith is love of the invisible, trust in the impossible and improbable.

There is no finer divine worship than that which requires no image, which springs solely from the dialogue with nature in our breast.

Nature! We are enveloped and embraced by her, incapable of emerging from her and incapable of entering her more deeply. Unbidden and unwarned, she receives us into the circuits of her dance, drifting onward with us herself, until we grow tired and drop from her arms.

Nature, after all, is the only book, every page of which offers a content of greatness.

As though the world outside did not, to him who has eyes, every day and every night reveal its innermost laws! In this consistency of infinite variety I see God's handwriting most plainly.

God could indeed cause us embarrassment if he revealed all of nature's mysteries to us. We would scarcely know what to do for boredom and indifference.

Do not look beyond the phenomena; they are the doctrine.

Everything temporal is but a parable.

It is quite beyond me how anyone can believe God speaks to us in books and stories. If the world does not directly reveal to us our relationship to it, if our hearts fail to tell us what we owe ourselves and others, we shall assuredly not learn it from books, which are at best designed but to give names to our errors.

We must learn to accept that what we have seen and perceived in the simplest context we must come to presume and believe to apply to the most complex; for the simple is hidden within the complex, and that is where in my case faith commences, which is the end of all knowledge rather than its beginning.

God has by no means gone into retirement after the six well-known imaginary days of creation but rather continues as busy as on the first. To put together this coarse world from simple elements and allow it to roll on year after year in the rays of the sun would have surely given him less pleasure, had he not had a plan to found a nursery for a world of the spirit on this material foundation. Thus he carries on his work in higher natures, to draw aloft the lesser ones.

The Christian religion is an abortive political revolution that turned moral.

Since I had heard often enough that everyone in the end has his own religion, nothing seemed more natural to me than to fashion my own.

For myself, the manifold facets of my nature make it impossible for me to be satisfied with but a single way of thinking. As a poet and artist I am a polytheist, while in my role as scientist I incline toward pantheism, and both tendencies are equally marked. When I stand in personal need of a deity, that also is readily provided for. The things of heaven and earth constitute so broad a realm that only the collective organs of all creatures are able to comprehend it.

There is nothing insignificant in the world. It all depends on how one looks at it.

There is no outward sign of courtesy but that has a deep moral source. A proper education would always hand down the sign together with the source.

There is no situation that cannot be ennobled by achievement or enduring.

No energy is lost in the world, nor is it merely the souls of men that are immortal but all their actions as well. They live on through their effects.

What we nourish within ourselves grows—such is the everlasting law of nature.

By nature we have no defect that could not become a strength, no strength that could not become a defect.

Each has his own happiness in his hands, as the artist handles the rude clay he seeks to reshape into a figure; yet it is the same with this art as with all others: only the capacity for it is innate; the art itself must be learned and painstakingly practiced.

Coercion is harsh, but only under compulsion do men show what is in them. Everyone can manage when he is free to do as he pleases.

How may one get to know oneself? Never by contemplation, only, indeed, by action. Seek to do your duty, and you will know at once how it is with you.

We can never directly recognize truth, which is identical with the divine. We see it but by reflection, example, symbol—in single or related phenomena.

Truth parroted loses all its grace, but error parroted is a complete abomination.

Someone said: "Why trouble yourself about Homer? You will not really understand him." Whereupon I replied: Nor do I understand sun, moon and stars; but they pass overhead, and in seeing them and their marvelously ordered orbits I see myself and think that perhaps something may yet become of me.

Any mind susceptible to creative art or literature feels itself translated into an ideal state of nature and grace when confronting antiquity. To this day the chants of Homer have the power to free us, at least momentarily, from the fearful burden several thousand years of tradition have placed on our shoulders.

Among all the peoples, the Greeks have dreamed the dream of life most beautifully.

May the study of Greek and Roman literature ever remain the basis of higher education!

True, we are born with certain innate capacities, but we owe our development to a thousand and one influences from the great world, from which we appropriate what we may. . . . I owe much to the Greeks and the French, and I have become indebted beyond telling to Shakespeare, Sterne and Goldsmith. Yet they all do not exhaust the sources of my culture—to do so would transcend all limits and would also be quite pointless. The main thing is that one have a soul which loves truth and welcomes it wherever it is found.

At bottom we are all collective creatures, whatever we may say. How little we have and we are that we may in the purest sense call our own! All of us must receive and learn, from those who have gone before us as well as from those who are with us. Even the greatest genius would not get very far, if he tried to rely on his own resources alone. . . . Then too, it is at bottom folly to trouble whether one owes everything to oneself or is indebted to others; . . . the main thing is to be strong in will power and to be possessed of the skill and pertinacity to carry out one's will.

I am tormented and terrified by the sweeping growth of machinery. It rolls on like a storm, slowly, slowly, but it has taken its bearing, it will arrive, and it will strike.

Wealth and speed are what the world admires, what each pursues. Railways, express mails, steamships and every possible facility for communication are the achievement in which the civilized world vies and revels, only to languish in mediocrity by that very fact. Indeed, the effect of this diffusion is to spread a culture of the mediocre. . . . This is truly the century for able heads, for practical people with a ready grasp, who, equipped with a certain facility, sense their superiority over the masses, even though they lack the highest endowment. . . . Let us as much as possible cling to the convictions in which we were nurtured. We, with perhaps a very few others, are likely to be the last representatives of an epoch that will not soon return.

Our modern wars make many unhappy while they last and none happy when they are over.

War is in truth a disease, in which the humors that ought to serve to sustain health go only to nourish something that is foreign to nature.

Patriotism corrupts history.

There is no patriotic art, and no patriotic science. Like all that is sublime and good, both belong to the whole world. They can be fostered only by the free and unlimited interaction of all contemporaries, always paying due respect to the heritage of the past.

No sooner does a poet seek to become politically active than he must surrender to some party, and the moment he does so, he is lost as a poet; he must bid farewell to his free spirit, to his detached approach, and don instead the fool's cap of blind hatred. As a man and a citizen, the poet will love his country, but the fatherland of his poetic powers and creative work consists of all that is noble and good and beautiful, and that is tied to no particular region, no specific land. He seizes and shapes it wherever he finds it. In this respect he may be likened to the eagle, soaring on high with sweeping gaze, to whom it matters not whether the hare upon which it pounces leaps in Prussia or Saxony. And what does it all mean—to love one's country, to be a patriot in deed? A poet who has striven all his life to fight against harmful prejudice, to root out bigotry, to enlighten the spirit of his people, to cleanse their taste and to ennoble their thoughts and convictions—what can he do that would be worthier and how could he show greater love of his country?

It is a curious thing with national hatred. You will always find it most marked and vehement at the lowest stages of culture. Yet there is a stage at which it vanishes altogether, where one stands above the nations, so to speak, sharing joy or sorrow of a neighboring people as though they had been encountered by one's own.

I think it is true that humanity will win out in the end, but I am afraid that at the same time the world will become one great hospital, with each his fellow's kindly nurse.

He who knows no foreign tongue knows nothing of his own.

A curse upon all negative purism which holds that a broader or subtler term from another language may not be used.

Germans should learn all languages. In that way no stranger will irk them at home, while they will be at home everywhere abroad.

The power of a language lies not in its rejecting but rather in its devouring what is foreign.

Let us carry on our work until we . . . summoned by the world spirit, return to the ether! Then may the Ever Living not deny us new activities, like unto those in which we have tested ourselves. . . .

That my perception be not separated from things . . .
that my perception itself be thinking, my thinking
perception.

The world as a whole moves onward, but youth must
begin ever anew, individually reliving all the epochs
of world culture.



Goethe in Italy
Painting by Wilhelm Tischbein

Since everyone errs, since the wisest have erred, we have no ground for regarding our own errors as shameful.

Only by errors that really irk us do we advance.

The educator's task is not to preserve from error but rather to guide the errant; indeed, to let them savor their errors to the dregs—such is the teacher's wisdom. Whoever barely tastes his error will long nurse it, will revel in it as though in a rare treat; but whoever drains it to the bottom must come to know it, unless he be mad.

To uncover deficiencies is not enough; indeed, it is wrong to do so, unless one knows and cites the means for improvement.

It is our duty to tell others but what they are able to receive. Man grasps but what is to his measure.

We learn only in age what happened to us in youth.

The happiest man is he who is able to integrate the end of his life with its beginning.

There is no surer way to blunt a resolution than to keep talking about it.

Through nothing do people reveal their character more than by what they laugh about.

Fools and wise men are equally harmless. It is the half-fools and the half-wise who are the most dangerous.

Man cannot long endure the state of awareness or consciousness. He must ever again escape into the unconscious, for there live his roots.

As for solitude, I cannot understand how certain people seek to lay claim to intellectual stature, nobility of soul and strength of character, yet have not the slightest feeling for seclusion; for solitude, I maintain, when joined with a quiet contemplation of nature, a serene and conscious faith in creation and the Creator, and a few vexations from outside is the only true school for a mind of lofty endowment. Unless one dream one's finest dreams in solitude, unless one reach the point of being able to dispense with all human company, all distraction, all traffic with the world—even the companionship of great souls and first-rate minds—unless one be self-sufficient, finding the first and best entertainment within oneself, within the depth of one's own person, one ought to sweep one's claims to greatness into one's pocket with the other bread crumbs and almoners' pence there accumulated, one ought to steal away out of the sacred presence of a nature to which one does not belong.

We read far too much that is trivial, that merely passes the time, without further profit. We ought really to read only what we admire.

This gives me occasion to report and confide something odd to you, namely that following a stern and swift resolution I have done away with all newspaper reading. It is unbelievable how much time I have gained and how much I have accomplished in the six weeks since I have let all the French and German newspapers rest in their wrappers.

Behind him lay, in waning haze reflected,
The coarse-grained stuff that keeps us all subjected.

If it's the greatest, the highest you seek, the plant
can direct you.
Strive to become through your will what, without
will, it is.

On surface contemplation of a library one feels as
though in the presence of a vast capital silently
yielding incalculable interest.

We really learn only from books we cannot judge.
The author of a book we were able to evaluate
should learn from us.

All the clever thoughts have long since been
thought. What matters is to think them anew.

The world advances only because of those who oppose it.

Great necessity ennoble man, petty need humiliates him.

What would it not take, not to let the whole world merely lie beneath one, invoking a higher nativity, but rather to acknowledge as divine even lowliness and poverty, scorn and contempt, shame and misery, suffering and death—indeed, to honor and cherish even sin and transgression, not as obstacles, but as aids on the road to sanctity!

How far mankind had to travel before reaching the point of showing mildness to the guilty, mercy to the criminal, humanity to the inhuman! . . . Men are rarely responsive to the beautiful, more often to the good, and we must hold in the highest esteem those who at great sacrifice have sought to foster goodness!

Among all discoveries and postulates perhaps none has exerted a greater effect on the human mind than the Copernican theory. Scarcely was the world acknowledged to be round and complete in itself, when it was asked to renounce the enormous privilege of being the center of the universe. No greater challenge was perhaps ever issued to mankind, for many things went up in smoke with its acceptance—a second paradise, a world of innocence, poetry and piety, the testimony of our senses, the convictions of romantic faith. Small wonder people were reluctant to let all this go, that they opposed by every means

In politics as on a sickbed men toss from side to side in hope of lying more comfortably.

Legislators and revolutionaries who promise both equality and liberty are visionaries and charlatans.

They fight, we hear, to safeguard human rights.
Look close and see it's slave 'gainst slave that fights.

Freedom is nothing more than the opportunity to do what is reasonable in all circumstances.

Which government is the best? That which teaches us to govern ourselves.

Without serious intent nothing is possible in this world, yet among those we call educated we find few who take things seriously. They tackle work and business, art and even amusement but with a kind of defensiveness. We live as we read a stack of newspapers, just to be rid of them. We seek to know many things, for the most part what concerns us least, and we fail to note that hunger is not appeased by snapping at the empty air. Whenever I meet someone, I ask at once: What does he do? How? In what sequence? And the reply determines my interest in him for all time.

There is nothing in the past that one should wish back. There is only the ever new, taking shape from the expanded elements of the past; and true nostalgia must always be productive, creating something new and better.

The like leaves us unmoved; it is contradiction that makes us productive.

Let a man say he is free, and he will instantly feel constrained; but let him acknowledge limitations, and he will feel free.

Like the whole in which we are contained, our life is incomprehensibly composed of freedom and necessity. Our willing is a harbinger of what we shall do in all circumstances. These circumstances, however, seize upon us in their own way. The What lies within us, the How seldom depends on ourselves, nor must we inquire after the Why. . . .

Perhaps man's greatest merit will always be to gain the greatest possible control over circumstance, and to let circumstance have the least possible control over him.

Assuredly he alone is happy and possessed of greatness who, to be something, needs neither to rule nor to obey.

Few people love others for what they are. Rather do they love them for what they project into them. What they really love is themselves, their idea of the other.

The obscurity of certain maxims is but relative. Not everything that is obvious to the formulator can be made clear to the listener.

*Voluntary dependence is the fairest state of all—
and but for love, how would it be possible?*

Misery too has its virtues. I have learned much in illness that I could have learned nowhere else in my life.

Every need denied real gratification constrains to faith.

Divinity inheres in growth and change, not in frozen finality.

One never goes farther than when one no longer knows whither one goes.

The older I grow, the more I trust in the law by which the rose and the lily bloom.

Life's purpose is life itself.

Nature, with a few drafts from the cup of true love, repays us for a lifetime of stress and strain.

All in all, a writer's style is a true reflection of his inward life. Anyone who seeks to write a clear style, let him first achieve clarity of mind; and anyone who seeks to write in the grand manner, let him first achieve grandeur of character.

Those who reproach an author for being obscure should first look inside themselves, to see how much light there is in there. At dusk a plain hand becomes illegible.

Hacks always want to get done with it, finding no pleasure in the work itself. A truly great talent finds its highest joy in the execution.

If spirit and higher education were the heritage of all, things would be easy for the poet. He could always stick to the truth and need never hesitate to say his best. As it is, he must always keep to a certain level. He must consider that his works will come into the hands of a mixed world, hence has reason to take care lest too much frankness give offense to the majority of good people. Then too, time itself is a curious thing. It is a tyrant with moods of its own. In every century it shows a different face to what people say and do. What was permitted to the ancient Greeks to say is no longer appropriate for us to say, and what Shakespeare's earthy fellow citizens accepted without flinching, the Briton can today no longer tolerate, so that a "family Shakespeare" has become a definitely felt need in our time.

Never mind studying contemporaries and those who strive with you. Study the great men of the past, whose works have maintained their value and stature for centuries. A truly gifted man will naturally so incline; and the desire to delve into the great precursors is the very mark of a higher endowment. Study Molière, study Shakespeare, but above all study the ancient Greeks, ever and always the Greeks.

“To you more than any other I ever owe gratitude and veneration, born of the devotion of a disciple for his teacher, or rather of a son for his spiritual father.”—*Carlyle*

“The undisputed prince of European literature.”
—*Byron*

“The old Eternal Genius who built the world has confided himself more to this man than to any other.”—*Emerson*

“Nature has endowed him more generously than anyone since Shakespeare.”—*Schiller*

“Of all poets and thinkers I owe most to Goethe.”
—*Gide*

“Among all German poets Goethe is the one to whom I owe most.”—*Hesse*

Goethe is thus exemplary: his stormy naturalism: that gradually becomes strict dignity. As a stylized human being he has reached heights never achieved by any other German. Today people are so narrow-minded as to reproach him for this and even lament that he ever grew old. Just read Eckermann and ask yourself whether any human being in Germany ever achieved as much in such a noble form. To be sure, it is a long way from this to simplicity and greatness, but we should by no means ever believe that we can simply ignore Goethe; rather, like him, we must always begin anew.

Nietzsche

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Summer—Autumn 1875
