

Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. He admired Spinoza and was also influenced by Leibniz and Shaftesbury. At no time did he develop his outlook systematically, and in his *Maxims and Reflections* he said: "Doing natural science, we are pantheists; writing poetry, polytheists; and ethically, monotheists."

The outstanding fact about Goethe is his development—not from mediocrity to excellence but from consummation to consummation of style upon style. *Goetz* (1773) and *Werther* (1774) represent, and were immediately acclaimed as, the culmination of Storm and Stress. In Goethe's two great plays, *Iphigenia* (1787) and *Tasso* (1790), German classicism reached its perfection. Then, still before the end of the century, *Faust: A Fragment* and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* gave a decisive impetus to romanticism, and *Meister* all but created a new genre: the novel that relates the education and character formation of the hero, the *Bildungsroman*. And *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (3 parts 1811-14, last part 1833) is not only a strikingly original autobiography but created a new perspective for the study of an artist or, indeed, of man in general: life and work must be studied together as an organic unity and in terms of development.

The evolution of Goethe is reflected in his poetry. Perhaps no other man has written so many so excellent poems; certainly no one else has left a comparable record of the development of a poetic sensibility over a period of approximately sixty years. Anacreontic lyrics, the magnificent defiance of *Prometheus*, hymns, earthy *Roman Elegies* (1795), biting *Venetian Epigrams* (1796), the wonderful ballads of 1798, the sonnets of 1815, and, at seventy, the epoch-making *West-Eastern Divan*—nothing in world literature compares with this. And in all these periods Goethe wrote the most moving love poems, from "Willkommen und Abschied" in his twenties to the "Marienbader Elegie" in his seventies. These poems help to account for the fact that Goethe's loves have been, for decades, part of the curriculum in the German secondary schools: not to know Friederike, Lotte, Lilli, and the rest was to be uneducated.

Obviously, men so brought up would on the whole tend to favor a self-realizationist ethic, and at least some forms of moral intuitionism would strike them as clearly absurd. What is good is not seen once and for all; as he develops, a man's moral ideas change; and

Goethe and the History of Ideas

Students of the history of ideas are often preoccupied exclusively with the tracing of connections between ideas. This approach is too narrow and does not allow for the proper appreciation of some of the most influential men. A good deal of history, and of the history of ideas, too, consists in the untiring efforts of posterity to do justice to some *individuum ineffabile* (to use a phrase of Goethe's). Socrates and Jesus, Napoleon and Lincoln are cases in point. So is Goethe.

In view of his intellectual powers and interests, it is understandable that his ideas should have been related again and again to what came before and after him. From the 143 volumes of his works, diaries, and letters (*Sophienausgabe*) and the 5 volumes of his collected conversations (Biedermann's edition) it is not hard to cull a pertinent anthology on almost any subject. Moreover, a vast literature has grown around the implications of his major poems, plays, and novels. In the present chapter, however, we shall concentrate on the historic impact of the poet's life and personality.

2

Goethe invites comparison with the men of the Renaissance, Leonardo in particular, as a "universal man." As a member of the state government in Weimar, he took his official duties seriously and devoted a good deal of time to them; but he took an even greater interest in the arts and in several of the natural sciences; he made an anatomical discovery, proposed an important botanical hypothesis, and developed an intricate theory of colors; he directed the theater in Weimar from 1791 to 1817; and he came to be widely recognized, some thirty or forty years before his death, as Germany's greatest poet. That estimate still stands.

Goethe never considered himself a philosopher, but he read some of Kant's works as they first appeared, and he personally knew

wisdom is attained, if ever, only in old age. Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections* and his celebrated *Conversations with Eckermann* are among the world's great books of wisdom, but their influence does not compare with that of Goethe's own development. It was Goethe's example—his life and his self-understanding—rather than any explicit teaching that led others more and more to study works of art and points of view and human beings in terms of development.

3

The only work of Goethe's that has had an influence at all comparable to his life is *Faust*. Partly owing to the fact that Goethe worked on it off and on for sixty years, partly also owing to his conception of poetry and its relation to ideas, *Faust* is not only no allegory but does not embody or try to communicate any single philosophy of life.

To be sure, *Faust* is more epigrammatic than any other great work of literature except the Bible, and the play has enriched the German language with more "familiar quotations" than could be found in *Hamlet*. But for all that the drama is emphatically not didactic. Shakespeare was Goethe's model, not Dante.

One of Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections* is as relevant as it is concise:

It makes a great difference whether the poet seeks the particular for the universal or beholds the universal in the particular. From the first procedure originates allegory, where the particular is considered only as an illustration, as an example of the universal. The latter, however, is properly the nature of poetry: it expresses something particular without thinking of the universal or pointing to it. Whoever grasps this particular in a living way will simultaneously receive the universal, too, without even becoming aware of it—or realize it only later.

In one of his conversations with Eckermann (May 6, 1827) Goethe himself applied these considerations to *Faust*:

They come and ask me what idea I sought to embody in my *Faust*. As if I knew . . . that myself! . . . Indeed, that would have been a fine thing, had I wanted to string such a rich, variegated . . . life . . . upon the meagre thread of a single . . . idea! It was altogether not my manner as a poet to strive for the embodiment of something abstract. . . .

I did not have to do anything but round out and form such visions and impressions artistically . . . so that others would receive the same impressions when hearing or reading what I presented.¹

Goethe's undocinaire attitude is further illuminated by another remark. Only we must recall that on other occasions he frequently referred to himself as a pagan:

I pagan? Well, after all I let Gretchen be executed and I let Otilie [in the *Elective Affinities*] starve to death. Don't people find that Christian enough? What do they want that would be more Christian?²

Goethe tried to picture life as he saw it and people as they are. His primary intention was not to persuade or to instruct, although his tolerance and freedom from resentment naturally move us.

Goethe's attitude may remind us of the words of Spinoza, whom Goethe so admired: "to hate no one, to despise no one, to mock no one, to be angry with no one, and to envy no one."³ Only mockery was part of Goethe's genius—but a mockery that was free from hatred, anger, and envy. In the young Goethe it seems like the overflow of his exuberant high spirits; in the old Goethe, it seems Olympian and yet also an expression of that deep humanity that his frequent reserve concealed from casual observers.

4

While it is obvious that Goethe's heroes are not conceived as allegorical personifications, *Faust* has sometimes been misconstrued as an idealized self-portrait of the poet. But Goethe's male heroes are emphatically not ideals; they are partial self-projections—magnified images of qualities that, when separated from the whole personality, become failings. In *Faust* and Mephistopheles, in Tasso and Antonio, in Egmont and Oranien, Goethe, as it were, divides himself in half—with the result that both male leads are lesser men than the poet himself. But the creation of these splendid caricatures let him breathe more freely.

Of course, this analysis is far too neat to do full justice to the vast complexities of artistic creation, and *Faust* is much more than

¹ Cf. also July 5, 1827; Jan. 3, 1830; and Feb. 13, 1831.

² *Goethes Gespräche*, ed. Biedermann, II, 62.

³ *Ethics*, end of Part II.

the dross of Goethe's gradual refinement. A multitude of different impressions and experiences have found their way into Faust—probably including, for example, the young Goethe's experience of Frederick the Great, whom the boy admittedly admired. The king's brilliant victories at the beginning of the Seven Years' War were wiped out by his disastrous defeat at Kunersdorf and the Russian occupation of Berlin, when Goethe was ten. But Frederick held out, shifted small forces—no large ones were left—wherever they were most needed, and never rested, though no reasonable chance of victory remained. Only the death of the Tsarina and her successor's stunning order to his troops to change sides saved the king. One is reminded of two famous lines near the end of *Faust*: "Who ever strives with all his power, we are allowed to save." And in his last years, when peace had come, the old king designed a project to drain and colonize the Oder-Bruch, which may have helped to inspire Faust's last enterprise.

It would be absurd to conclude that Faust is really a portrait of the king, who was anti-Gothic, enlightened, and immune to the charms of women. Moreover, in the text of *Faust*, the poet himself likens the Philemon and Baucis episode to the biblical tale of Naboth's vineyard; Frederick, in an exactly parallel situation, let a miller keep his mill—not as a matter of capricious grace, but in explicit recognition of the rights of man.

5

Nothing said so far gives any adequate idea of the influence of *Faust*. Goethe created a character who was accepted by his people as their ideal prototype. We shall see in the next chapter that this was by no means his intention. Nevertheless, this was the result; and it is questionable whether there is any parallel to this feat—that a great nation assigns such a role to a largely fictitious character, presented to it so late in its history.

A nation's conception of itself influences not only its attitude toward its own past but also its future behavior. Goethe's vision of Faust is therefore not only a major clue to the romantics' anthologies and historiography but also an important factor in subsequent German history. When we behold Faust sacrificing Gretchen to his

own self-realization and, in Part Two, closing both eyes while Mephistopheles advances the fulfillment of his ultimate ambitions by destroying Philemon and Baucis, we may wonder if his disregard of concrete human beings and his boundless will to power over everything except himself is not part of a prophetic vision of horrors to come.

Goethe saw the dangers of a Faustian striving and attempted in a great variety of ways to dissociate himself from Faust. As will be shown in the next chapter, he came to distinguish two kinds of striving: the romantic, unconditional, and hence destructive kind Faust represents and his own classical, self-disciplined devotion to his work. These two kinds of striving correspond to, and probably helped to inspire, Hegel's contrast between the "good" and the "bad infinite." And Hegel used his influence as a professor of philosophy in Berlin to remind his students: "Whoever wants something great, says Goethe, must be able to limit himself."⁴

Hegel's whole *Philosophy of Right* is profoundly influenced by Goethe's example—by his life rather than by any epigram. It teaches that freedom must be sought within the limitations of a responsible role in the civic life of a community and that the realm of art and philosophy does not involve a rejection of civic life but only its fulfillment. The British idealists were to teach much the same doctrine, under the dual influence of Hegel and Goethe himself.

No doubt, Goethe thought of embodying this idea in his *Faust* when he decided to let Faust end up winning land from the sea. Here was some possibility of presenting in concrete terms the limitation of a previously unconditional striving. Any number of details suggest, however, that Goethe did not go through with this notion. His whole bent was undidactic. In the end Faust still resents the here and now, is ruthless with his neighbors, and employs slave labor while he dreams of freedom in the future; and in his last scene he is not only physically blind but completely unaware of his environment and situation. Nothing whatever will come of his efforts, and, while he thinks drainage ditches are being dug, it is in fact his own grave.

⁴ *Philosophy of Right*, addition to §13.

If Hegel was profoundly influenced by Goethe himself, Schopenhauer found the quintessence of human nature—indeed, of the universe—in Faust. His metaphysical conception of the ultimate reality as relentlessly striving, blind will may be considered a cosmic projection of Faust's ceaseless aspiration.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, did not take his cue from Faust, as the popular misinterpretation of his philosophy would imply, but from the old Goethe. Departing from established estimates, he disparaged *Faust* and emphasized, like no major interpreter before him, the surpassing greatness of the never popular old Goethe. Pointedly, he called the *Conversations with Eckermann* "the best German book."⁵ The greatest power was, to Nietzsche's mind, the perfect self-control and creativity of the old Goethe. One of Nietzsche's least plausible notions, his doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same events at gigantic intervals, is intended partly as the most extreme antithesis to Faust's repudiation of the present. While Faust is willing to be damned if ever he should say to the moment, "abide," Nietzsche says in the penultimate chapter of *Zarathustra*: "If ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, ' . . . Abide, moment! then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally. . . . For *all* joy wants—eternity." (The contrast between Faust and Goethe will be considered more fully in the next chapter.)

While Hegel had found in Goethe the demonstration that the State is the proper basis and framework for the development of art and culture, Nietzsche illustrated his diametrically opposite claim, that state and culture thrive only at each other's expense, by also citing Goethe. Goethe had flourished when Germany was fragmented and lacked a state, while France was the great European power; and, after 1871, defeated France became a great cultural center. The Alpine recluse did not take the Weimar court as seriously as the Berlin professor had done. Nietzsche also pointed to Goethe's antipolitical opposition to the so-called Wars of Liberation against Napoleon.

Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche could all have said to Goethe what Hegel wrote to him on April 24, 1825: "When

⁵ *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, §109.

I survey the course of my spiritual development, I see you everywhere woven into it and would like to call myself one of your sons; my inward nature has . . . set its course by your creations as by signal fires." The full truth of this statement, as far as Hegel is concerned, should become apparent in chapter 8. The point is not that Goethe provided convenient quotations for the philosophers. Nineteenth-century German philosophy consisted to a considerable extent in a series of efforts to assimilate the phenomenon of Goethe.

The ethics of Plato and Aristotle, the Cynics and the Cyrenaics, the Stoics and the Epicureans was largely inspired by the personality, the life, and the death of Socrates. The image of the proud, ironic sage who found in wisdom and continual reflection that enduring happiness that riches cannot buy and whose character had somehow had such power that a despot, lacking self-control, seems like a slave compared with him—this wonderful embodiment of human dignity captivated all the later thinkers of antiquity, became their ethical ideal, and led to a new conception of man. Socrates' fearlessly questioning iconoclasm and his defiant decision to die rather than to cease speaking freely had an equal impact on the modern mind. His character and bearing have influenced the history of philosophy as much as any system.

Goethe is one of the few men whose personality has had a comparable influence. His character, too, became normative for others; so did some of the characters he created; and his tolerance as a man and as a poet furnishes a prime example of an ethical attitude that is above resentment.