

# Introduction

Reading a French translation of his drama *Faust* in 1828, Goethe was struck by how “much brighter and more deliberately constructed” it appeared to him than in his original German. He was fascinated by the translation of his writing into other languages, and he was quick to acknowledge the important role of translation in modern culture. Literature, he believed, was becoming less oriented toward the nation. Soon there would be a body of writing—“world literature” was the term he coined for it—that would be international in scope and readership. He would certainly have been delighted to find that his writing is currently enjoying the attention of so many talented translators. English-speaking readers of *Faust* now have an embarrassment of riches, with modern versions by David Luke, Randall Jarrell, John Williams, and David Constantine. Constantine and Stanley Corngold have recently produced versions of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the sentimental novel of 1774 that made Goethe a European celebrity and prompted Napoleon to award him the Legion d’Honneur. Luke and John Whaley have done excellent selections of Goethe’s poetry in English.

At the same time the range of Goethe’s writing available in English remains quite narrow, unless the reader is lucky enough to find the twelve volumes of Goethe’s *Collected Works* published jointly by Princeton University Press and Suhrkamp Verlag in the 1980s. The Princeton edition was an ambitious undertaking. Under the general editorship of three Goethe scholars, Victor Lange, Eric Blackall, and Cyrus Hamlyn, it brought together versions by over twenty translators covering a wide range of Goethe’s writings: poetry, plays, novels and shorter prose fiction, an autobiography, and essays on the arts, philosophy, and science. Its size made the Princeton edition more suited to the library than the general reader’s bookshelf. There has long been demand for an edition of the collected works that offers the reader a similar breadth of coverage in a more manageable format. The present volume satisfies that demand. Drawing on the twelve Princeton volumes, it offers readers a representative picture of Goethe’s writing in a single self-contained and relatively portable volume. (We have made one exception to the rule of only using versions from the Princeton/Suhrkamp collection: the version of *Faust: Part One* by Stuart Atkins that originally appeared in Volume II of the collection is

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replaced here by John Williams's excellent version, originally published by Wordsworth Classics.) It contains a broad selection of Goethe's writing in different genres—lyric, drama, prose, autobiography—as well as a range of essays on cultural, philosophical, and scientific subjects. We believe that it is the most comprehensive and representative selection of Goethe's writing that has ever been made available to the English-speaking reader in a single volume.

The volume has been produced first and foremost with the general reader in mind, though we hope it will also prove useful for students of European and comparative literature, where Goethe is an important but often inaccessible figure. Readers will find many of Goethe's canonical works here. There is a selection of poems in various forms from the full span of his career, including several of the remarkable lyrics that were set to piano accompaniment by Schubert and others. Music lovers will also be familiar with operatic versions of *Faust* by Gounod, Berlioz, and others, as well as the overture and incidental music that Beethoven composed for *Egmont*. This latter play is rarely seen in English translation, though it is central to the German canon of Goethe's writings. Also hard to find in English translation are his neo-classical dramas *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Torquato Tasso* and the novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, which stands at the head of the important German tradition of the *Bildungsroman* (novel of education) and influenced, though invisibly to most Anglophone readers, the "art novel" tradition of George Eliot, Henry James, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce. One aim of this volume, then, is to present a broader picture of Goethe than is usually seen in the English-speaking world—a Goethe as he has been read both in Germany and in the wider non-Anglophone world.

We also felt it was important to include a wide selection of the nonliterary essays, with special emphasis on his writings on art and science. As well as providing a context for his literary works, these essays have much intrinsic value, even if Goethe's place in the history of science is controversial. Like his father, Goethe took academic study and scholarship very seriously, and both were avid art collectors. Goethe was well read in art history and aesthetics, philosophy, theology, and science. He firmly believed that any creative work, even the very direct and life-oriented poetry that is one of his hallmarks, had to be informed by ideas from these fields; in this broad sense he was a determinedly philosophical writer. This is the Goethe whom the reader will meet in these pages: a lover, a thinker, a scholar, a practical man, a controversialist, a writer of very diverse moods and urges.

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"I came into the world in Frankfurt am Main on the stroke of 12 midday on 28 August 1749. The stars were set fair." So begins Goethe's autobiography, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*. It might seem odd for a poet to characterize himself as lucky, but Goethe certainly was a lucky poet. Apart from a few episodes of

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illness, he enjoyed good health and a long and active life, so that even in his last years, before his death at the age of eighty-two, he was producing works of a quality to match anything he had written earlier in his life, poetry of startling beauty and subtlety. His material circumstances were comfortable. He did not have to support himself by his writing; he was the master of his pen, not its slave. He lived in the manner of a gentleman, traveling to Italy on the Grand Tour, albeit somewhat late in life, and amassing expensive collections of art, books, majolica pottery, coins, and minerals. (It is reckoned that he possessed the largest private collection of minerals in the world at the time.) To the end he maintained a remarkable work ethic, complemented happily by a belief that “the whole man is to move together,” as Richard Steele put it in the *Spectator* in 1711. All the faculties of mind and body must be exercised in the service of the public good. Aside from his writing, Goethe worked as a lawyer, public intellectual, scientist, minister of state (with responsibility for all arms of government), diplomat, theater director, and university administrator. To say the times he lived through were interesting would be a gross understatement; many of the philosophical and political ideas we think of as distinctively modern were formulated and put into practice during his lifetime, in the years either side of the French Revolution. He was in close contact with some of the finest minds of his generation, men like Herder, Wieland, Schiller, Fichte, and Schelling, who, like Goethe, shaped the intellectual and cultural revolution that we now call Romanticism. But having grown to manhood under the ancien regime, Goethe was not formed by the French Revolution or Romanticism; rather he reacted to them as an engaged and critical observer.

He was born into a well-to-do family, to parents of contrasting character and stock. The money came from a wine merchant business that his paternal grandfather, originally a master tailor, had built up after he acquired the ownership of one of Frankfurt’s smartest hostelries through his second marriage. The family wealth enabled Goethe’s father, Johann Caspar Goethe, to study law and aspire to a career in the politics of the Holy Roman Empire, a path Goethe was destined to follow. The timing of Johann Caspar’s entry into politics was a mixed blessing. In 1740 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI died, leaving no adult male heir. The obvious Habsburg successor was Maria Theresa, but ancient Salic law forbade female succession. The Habsburgs had sought to circumvent the ban by means of the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713, but when the time came, the sanction proved ineffectual. The Bavarian Prince-Elector Charles Albert, supported by the French, renounced the sanction and invaded the Habsburg territories. In 1742 he was crowned king of Bohemia and unanimously elected Charles VII as Holy Roman emperor. The tide of war soon turned against Charles. An Austrian invasion of Bavaria forced him to abandon his dynastic lands and settle in Frankfurt, where during the following two years Goethe’s father seems to have made a good impression on the displaced emperor, and he was permitted to buy the honorary title of Imperial

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councilor. In 1744 Charles returned to Bavaria in poor health, and when he died the following year, the Imperial throne reverted to the Habsburgs. As supporter of the Bavarian usurper, Goethe's father's hopes for advancement in Imperial politics were dashed.

Instead, Johann Caspar turned to local Frankfurt politics and in 1748 married Catharina Elisabeth Textor, the gregarious, down-to-earth daughter of Frankfurt's chief administrator. Neither the Goethes nor the Textors were members of the local patriciate that dominated Frankfurt's oligarchical government. Despite this handicap, Catharina's father, Johann Wolfgang Textor, was appointed to the city council before he had even been granted citizenship of Frankfurt, and though he remained a controversial figure, he became a senator and senior city mayor, a position he occupied three times, and in 1747 was elected lifelong chair of the city's judicial bench. Yet while the Textors were assimilated into the city's ruling elite, Goethe's father was not—an abiding source of resentment. He devoted the remainder of his life to his collection of books and art and the education of his children.

Frankfurt was proud of its historic commercial success and political status—favorably situated on the River Main near its confluence with the Rhein in an ancient wine-growing region, and recognized since 1220 as a self-governing free Imperial city. By the middle of the century, both the commercial and political freedoms of Frankfurt were coming under threat. Frankfurt had traditionally hosted Germany's biggest book fair. Publishers and booksellers met each spring to exchange the products of the flourishing literary culture. By 1750 the book fair in Leipzig, in the territory of the much larger electoral duchy of Saxony, had overtaken Frankfurt's book fair. Germany was divided into over 350 separate polities, each with its own economic and fiscal governance, forming a patchwork of local trade and tariff arrangements. Small polities like Frankfurt were at the mercy of the protectionist economic policies of the bigger states.

They were equally at the mercy of larger political upheavals. The War of the Austrian Succession had an unforeseen consequence that would shape German politics for the next forty years: it initiated a period of rivalry and sometimes outright hostility between the two greatest German powers, Austria and Prussia, that would last until the French Revolution. Goethe was born in the years of peace between the end of the war in 1748 and the beginning of the Seven Years' War in 1756, when Prussian King Frederick the Great, seeing himself encircled by a new alliance of Austria, France, and Russia, invaded Saxony. As a free Imperial city, Frankfurt was obliged to side with the Austrian emperor who guaranteed the city's ancient but fragile freedoms, but Goethe's father, alienated within his home city and no friend of the Habsburgs, sided with Prussian Fritz. In a painful irony, when the French army occupied Frankfurt in 1759, the civilian commander of the French garrison, Comte de Thoranc, was billeted in the Goethe household, a double-edged recognition of Johann

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Caspar's ambiguous standing in Frankfurt and of the improvements he had made to the family home, which had turned the rambling and characterful half-timbered house of Goethe's early childhood into an elegant neo-classical establishment. The French occupation had its compensations. The troops garrisoned in the city brought their culture with them; a French theater was established, which the young Goethe visited with Thoranc's encouragement.

Aside from the French occupation and the inevitable tragedies of sibling childhood mortality, Goethe's upbringing was for the most part ordinary. He received private tutoring in the conventional subjects—the Bible, Latin, and French—and in accomplishments that might embellish a young man of high rank: dancing, music, drawing, and English. Goethe's father made use of his ample free time to teach the boy geography, law, and the history of the city of Frankfurt, as well as inflicting on him the turgid memoir of his travels in Italy. It may be that his abortive political career made Johann Caspar anxious to map his son's academic and professional path to a leading role in Frankfurt's government. On this point, as on several others, there was friction within the family. Goethe wanted to study classical philology at the new English-oriented University of Göttingen, where an enlightened and energetic classicist, Christian Gottlob Heyne, was modernizing the discipline. Goethe's father prevailed: Wolfgang was dispatched to study law at the University of Leipzig, "the Little Paris" of Saxony, with its broad avenues and tidy neo-classical facades. There followed several years of academic foot-dragging. Goethe enjoyed his time in Leipzig too much. Culturally rich, the city's literary scene had been dominated by two figures: the rhetorician, critic, and playwright Johann Christoph Gottsched, an arch systematizer and modernizer, and the more emollient Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, moral philosopher and author of popular verse fables and a fashionable sentimental novel. The influence of both men was, however, waning, and by his third semester, Goethe had instead attached himself to Adam Friedrich Oeser, the recently appointed director of the new Art Academy. It was Oeser who introduced Goethe to the writings of the newest and brightest star in German intellectual life, the great historian of ancient art Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who would exercise a profound influence on Goethe's thought.

In July 1768, still with no degree to his name after three years' half-hearted study, Goethe suffered an acute illness of the lungs that left him bedridden for weeks. As soon as he was able, on his nineteenth birthday, he returned to Frankfurt to convalesce. During his recovery he briefly (and for the only time in his life) flirted with organized Christian religion, albeit in the not very organized form of the local Frankfurt brand of Pietism, a mystical enthusiastic faith that melded adoration of Christ's wounds with arcane alchemical beliefs. A second attempt to graduate as a lawyer began in Strasbourg in April 1770. Again cultural life proved more attractive than the law. Goethe's first significant essay on the arts, "On German Architecture" (pp. 867–872), was inspired

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by the Strasbourg minster. Probably written in stages from 1770 to 1772, the essay enunciates a striking new aesthetic. In keeping with the half-finished form of the Strasbourg minster—only one of the two spires was completed—Goethe rejects the standard eighteenth-century formal definitions of beauty. Instead beauty reveals the soul of the artist. Great art—he terms it “characteristic art”—is forged in the artist’s struggle for self-expression, in this case a struggle against the gloom of medieval Christianity. (Goethe had declared himself a non-Christian as early as 1768.) The more direct and the less self-reflective the creative drive, the more powerful will be the result. Part of this project, which echoes Rousseau’s celebration of a humanity uncorrupted by modern urban life, is to rescue the culture of nations and historical periods that the Enlightenment disdained, including “primitive” non-European cultures. Modern Europe’s inflated image of itself as the apogee of civilization is to be punctured.

Goethe would not have arrived at these ideas had he not become friends with Johann Gottfried Herder, one of the most flexible and fertile thinkers of the late eighteenth century. Herder and Goethe set out on horseback through the villages around Strasbourg to find evidence of the region’s authentic culture, in particular its popular song (*Volkslied*). The results were poems such as “Rosebud in the Heather” (p. 2), whose superficial simplicity recalled popular song, but whose sinister psychology—the poem brings to light the violence and guilt in male sexual desire—expresses Goethe’s aesthetics of “characteristic art” and its focus on deep psychology. The 1771 poem “Welcome and Farewell” (p. 1) portrays the feverish anticipation of a young lover riding through the night to meet his beloved, and his guilt on leaving her in the morning. (What happens between the “welcome” and the “farewell” is glossed over.) The guilt is in fact a product of Goethe’s rewriting of the poem in the mid-1780s (the version printed here); in the original version, it is the girl who leaves the boy struggling to rescue some sense from his short-lived bliss.

In summer 1771, Goethe at last submitted his doctoral dissertation, on the relation between church and state and the secular origins of church law. The Strasbourg theological faculty deemed it unfit to publish, which was a requirement for graduation. There was worrying talk of Goethe’s “insane mockery of religion.” Instead of rewriting the thesis and meeting the full requirements for the doctorate, Goethe elected to defend a series of theses in public examination and thereby attain the lesser qualification of the licentiate. Though the licentiate conventionally carried the title “doctor,” as it happened the title was not recognized in Frankfurt—a further source of friction between Goethe and his father. On his twenty-second birthday, he applied for permission to practice as an advocate in Frankfurt, though it was the city’s literary life that commanded his attention. From this period comes the first evidence of his intense and lifelong, though typically idiosyncratic, interest in Shakespeare. The rhapsodic

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“Shakespeare: A Tribute” (pp. 872–875) was written to celebrate Shakespeare’s name-day. Ungratefully repaying the cultural gifts of the French occupation of Frankfurt, Goethe contrasts the heroic Shakespeare with the pathetic efforts of French theater to emulate Greek tragedy. Shakespeare is no feeble imitator; he is a truly national poet who magically condenses his nation’s history into the narrow frame of the stage. He is the original “characteristic” artist. His strength of personality expresses itself in his heroic characters, great loners admirable more for their self-reliance than for their moral qualities—for the central insight of the “Tribute” is that the Shakespearian hero embodies good and evil inseparably. The role of the national poet—a role Goethe rightly saw as his own—was to render the ambiguity of human nature and its striving for independence amid the press of historical events.

Goethe’s return to Frankfurt saw a rush of creative energy. He sketched plans for a series of works on self-reliant loners: Julius Caesar, Prometheus, the rebel knight Götz von Berlichingen, Ahasverus the Wandering Jew, the Dutch freedom-fighter Egmont, and the sixteenth-century German magus Faust. Some were plotted in detail and included whole monologues that he would dazzlingly perform from memory for his friends. Of these embryonic works, only the Götz drama was completed in the early 1770s. Some of the projects came to nothing. The composition of others stretched over decades: Goethe continued to work on *Faust* until shortly before his death in 1832. Of the Prometheus project, all that survives is a poetic monologue (pp. 2–4). Superficially an outspoken rebellion against monotheistic religion, the poem conceals a more subtle reflection on the psychological harm caused by religious enthusiasm, indeed the very pietism Goethe had flirted with during his convalescence. The same theme of excessive enthusiasm pitching suddenly into bleak cynicism appears in the early parts of *Faust*.

The play *Egmont*, substantially written in the 1770s but only completed in the late 1780s, embodies Goethe’s most sustained reflection on politics. Through its portrayal of the revolt of the Low Countries against Spanish rule, it argues for the kind of local self-determination enjoyed by Frankfurt. Among the characters belonging to the play’s ruling elite, only its hero Egmont is not in some sense foreign, and only he enjoys a direct connection with the people of the Low Countries, not least through his affair with a bourgeois girl Clara. Even though Egmont catastrophically misjudges the cynical intentions of the Spanish occupiers, only he (and Clara) can motivate the Dutch to rebel against the Spaniards. His success as a symbol draws on another feature of his character: politics holds no interest for him, indeed he misjudges the Spaniards’ intentions because he resents the intrusion of *Realpolitik* into his life, unlike his Machiavellian ally the Duke of Orange—who plays Cassius to Egmont’s Brutus. (The play contains several allusions to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.) But his insouciance is also a source of Egmont’s charisma; his weakness as a politician is also his strength. What is more troubling is that Clara

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is bewitched by Egmont's charm into joining him as a martyr for the Dutch cause. (Inventing the character of Clara was Goethe's most egregious departure from the historical record: the real Egmont was married and had eleven children.) As the play reaches its climax, it moves into an increasingly stylized and artistic mode. Egmont and Clara become works of art—the hero and heroine as artistic and political symbols.

In Goethe's version, the Dutch were provoked to revolt by the Holy Roman Empire's failure to protect them. Aside from the (relatively benign) occupation of Frankfurt by the French, Goethe had his own reasons for skepticism about the empire's institutions. From May to September 1772, he attended the Imperial law courts in Wetzlar, a small medieval town not far from Frankfurt. The courts were notoriously inefficient, and there were stories of legal backlogs longer even than the Jarndyce case in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. The structure of the empire was partly to blame, for the majority of cases brought before the court involved either disputes between the member states of the empire or disputes between subjects and their rulers. In neither type of case was there much prospect of enforcing an agreeable settlement, not least because obstructive lobbying by the resident ambassadors of the territorial states on one side or the other led to almost interminable delays.

Goethe seems to have left Wetzlar even more disaffected with the empire. In the spring before his departure to Wetzlar, he had joined his Frankfurt literary friends in taking over the editorship of a local review journal. During their short tenure, they turned the journal into an organ of Enlightenment thought. Goethe was particularly fascinated by the philosophy of Spinoza, one of the instigators of the Enlightenment and another heroically self-reliant figure who had been expelled from his local synagogue as an atheist. After Wetzlar Goethe continued to practice half-heartedly as an advocate in Frankfurt while pursuing his literary interests. His life lacked any kind of stability. He was developing an unfortunate gift for entering into complicated emotional attachments that left him with feelings of guilt and a countervailing need to protect himself, by flight if necessary. In Wetzlar he became infatuated with a young woman, Lotte Buff, who was already betrothed—his hasty departure from Wetzlar seems to have been an attempt to avoid causing further damage, though paradoxically he later fictionalized the relationship in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Another botched relationship, with the Frankfurt banker's daughter Anne Elisabeth ("Lili") Schönemann, was broken off in 1775. Escape from his turbulent life in Frankfurt was beckoning, perhaps to Italy, though an altogether different opportunity soon presented itself. While staying in Karlsruhe, Goethe encountered the young Duke Karl August of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach. An invitation from Weimar followed, and in the face of his father's opposition, Goethe moved to Weimar in November 1775.

Weimar enticed Goethe with a role entirely different from legal practice in Frankfurt and a more direct route to political influence. As companion and

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favorite of the recently married eighteen-year-old duke, Goethe was entrusted with mentoring the ruler of a sovereign territory, even if an insignificant and indebted one. The town of Weimar, dominated by the ducal residence, was a mere village compared to Frankfurt. Soon after arriving in Weimar, Goethe wrote to his friend Merck:

My situation is favourable enough, and the Duchies of Weimar and Eisenach are in any case a stage on which I can find out whether a role in the political world suits me. I'm not in any rush, and freedom and comfort will be the main conditions of my new situation, even if I'm more than ever in a position to see the thoroughly shitty state of this our temporal majesty.

Unpromising though the outlook might have been, a territorial state promised greater dynamism than stodgy, tradition-bound Frankfurt, as well as more independence from Imperial law. During the next decade, Goethe shouldered more responsibilities in Weimar: first the reopening of the disused silver mines at Ilmenau (ill fated, as it turned out) and later forestry, highways, and war. By the early 1780s, he was running most of the ducal government, and in 1782 he took over the presidency of the ducal chamber. In the same year, thanks to his grateful employer, he was ennobled by the emperor and could move into a smart premises in the center of town.

There was a high price attached to the freedoms of Weimar, for no matter how culturally or intellectually enlightened it was, the ducal court was still a court, with all the petty formalities demanded of minor royalty in the eighteenth century. In light of these circumstances, it should not surprise that Goethe clutched at any opportunities for private human warmth. Within weeks of arriving in Weimar, he struck up a close friendship with the evidently fascinating Charlotte von Stein, seven years his elder and married to the duke's chief equerry. The nature of their relationship has been the subject of endless and probably empty speculation. Goethe certainly found it bewildering. The poem "Why confer on us the piercing vision" ("To Charlotte von Stein," pp. 6–8), which he sent to Charlotte in a letter of April 1776, suggests that there was some profound spiritual connection between them that tantalizingly eluded rational analysis: "You're the wife, the sister I forgot." The confident conjecture belies a telling ambiguity: for she cannot have been both wife and sister, and it surely matters which she was. Beneath its urgent and seemingly formless surface, the poem presents a mind disoriented by the dissonance of appearance and reality and teetering on the brink of disintegration. This sense of an enticing but threatening mystery reappears in other poems of the period, such as the brilliantly haunting ballad "Erlkönig" (pp. 16–17) or the equally perfect "The Fisherman" (pp. 12–13). Few poets have distilled the conflicts of reason and desire into more powerful and finely balanced forms.

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Amid the tedious formalities and private desires of his first decade in Weimar, Goethe remained conscious of his national mission as a poet. The literary project that preoccupied him was the semiautobiographical novel *Wilhelm Meister*, which, like most of his longer works, had to wait over a decade for completion. Its working title was “Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Mission,” but after a change in direction in the 1790s, it was published under the title *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. A novel of the theater morphed into a novel of education. The early chapters charmingly portray domestic life in a German city during the Seven Years’ War. Haphazardly and reluctantly, Wilhelm’s childhood passion for the theater develops into a budding career as a writer and actor. The dilemma of the modern artist that Flaubert would later identify—“to live like a bourgeois and think like a demi-god”—finds perhaps its earliest expression in the novel’s portrayal of the hand-to-mouth existence of traveling theater troupes. The undertone is unmistakably skeptical. In his “Tribute,” Goethe acclaimed Shakespeare’s stage as the crucible of national identity. *Wilhelm Meister* examines the stage’s more ambitious aspiration to educate the nation and finds it wanting, for the novel concurs with the cynical conclusion of Rousseau’s “Letter to Monsieur D’Alembert” (1758) that the theater is mired in vanity. The more Wilhelm recognizes this, the less satisfaction he takes from his theatrical successes and the more he retreats into his private relationships, in particular with the mysterious androgynous child Mignon.

Writing to Charlotte von Stein in 1782, Goethe announced that he was revising *Egmont’s* “all too unbuttoned and studenty language, which contradicts the dignity of the subject matter.” He did the same to *Wilhelm Meister* when he rewrote it in the 1790s, imposing a higher stylistic register and a more detached irony. Two verse plays conceived in the late 1770s and finished ten or more years later, *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Torquato Tasso*, traced a similar arc, albeit from less demotic beginnings. When they were finally published, in polished blank verse and a neo-classical register, Goethe’s readers were shocked. The popular playwright Iffland found in *Iphigenia* “a supposed Hellenic simplicity that often degenerates into triviality—bizarre syntax, strange vocabulary, and instead of sublimity the coldness of a minister’s speech at the mines in Ilmenau.” Both are in fact deeply personal plays grounded in Goethe’s perplexing experience of the Weimar court. In both there is a reckoning with the ambition of society—a society dominated by men in *Iphigenia* and by aristocrats in *Tasso*—to possess and control the individual. The language is part of the problematic. Iphigenia and Tasso both speak openly and freely when it is impolitic to do so.

In Euripides’ *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the matricide Orestes rescues his sister from the barbarian King Thoas. Orestes receives an oracle of Apollo that directs him to cure his inherited curse by stealing the holy statue of Apollo’s sister Artemis. Thanks to Iphigenia’s cunning plan, the Greeks are on the verge of absconding with the statue, a symbol of Taurian national identity. Thoas

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is prevented from pursuing them by the sudden appearance of the goddess Athena, who rebukes him with a stern reminder of Greek cultural superiority. Goethe's adaptation of Euripides' play contains a stroke of genius. Instead of having Orestes steal the statue and humiliate the Taurians, the play turns the oracle of Apollo—the command to “steal the sister”—into a riddle that can only be interpreted by someone capable of renouncing the old religion and making a dangerous leap into enlightened humanity. The “sister” of the oracle is not the statue of Apollo's sister Artemis—a mere religious symbol—but Orestes' sister Iphigenia, a human, indeed a humane being. So the Taurians keep their holy statue, and the Greeks part from them as equals. No *deus ex machina* appears to impose Greek supremacy. Instead the play renounces all the dogmas of the old religion (and Greek imperialism) in a thoroughly Spinozist spirit. Through her own agency Iphigenia lifts the curse of the Tantalids (read: Christian original sin). Instead of conniving with Orestes and his cousin Pylades to deceive the Taurians and steal the statue, she performs an “unheard-of deed” by revealing the Greek plan to Thoas. In her humane openness, Iphigenia proves herself not only equal but superior to her Greek and Taurian male counterparts, whose first instinct is always deceit or force. The play is both a vivid enactment of Spinozist Enlightenment humanism and arguably one of the most insightful accounts of the social plight of women by any male writer before the nineteenth century.

*Torquato Tasso* deals more directly with Goethe's troubles as a court poet, and it is remarkable that Goethe wrote it at all, particularly in the face of Duke Karl August's understandable opposition. Tasso's circumstances bore obvious similarities to Goethe's in Weimar: both were court poets dependent on a noble patron. In traditional accounts of his life, Tasso went mad and was incarcerated. The play presents a moment shortly before his incarceration. Given the tragic arc of Tasso's biography, it is hard not to read the play for signs of his future madness or, more controversially, its causes in courtly life. Tasso is on the verge of finishing his epic poem *La Gerusalemme liberata*. (Goethe's inability to finish his own longer works was another painful parallel.) Tasso hopes that by leaving Ferrara for the wider world he will learn what an epic poet needs to know, but the duke fears that in letting Tasso take the manuscript away, he will lose the poem he has been subsidizing. The main agents of Tasso's descent into madness are in fact two women, the duke's sister and Leonore Sanvitale: the former dotes platonically and unhealthily on him, the latter hopes to poach him for her own court. Both are also in their own way victims, especially of their own vanity, which loves to see itself mirrored in Tasso's verse. The play is full of sinister psychological manipulation. In seeking to control him, the court infantilizes him. A poet needs freedom to invent and speak the truth, but the manipulation of Tasso causes his poetic inventiveness to bleed into delusion and paranoia. This becomes clear in the contrast between Tasso and the diplomat Antonio—a recapitulation of the contrast of Egmont and

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Orange. Both are bourgeois in an aristocratic world. Tasso demands absolute poetic freedom at the cost of his liberty; Antonio subordinates his liberty to the game of politics. The play ends ambivalently with their reconciliation but without any hope of a future for Tasso at court.

The first sign of a change in Goethe's sense of his poetic mission comes in a Pindaric ode, "Winter Journey in the Harz" (pp. 9–11), written in 1777, three years before he began to write *Tasso*. In oracular mode it presents a journey away from the poet's past (the young poet of *Werther*) and his present (the court poet). The destination is obscure: the clouded summit of the mysterious Brocken mountain, traditionally the site of witches' gatherings. The poet's aim and the revelation he receives, like Moses on the mountaintop, is to replace folklore with science. The mountain is to yield up its geological secrets, the veins of silver running through it that enrich the surrounding territories. The poet has become a scientist. The poem was prompted by the decision to reopen the disused silver mines in Ilmenau, which Goethe was to supervise. He took his responsibilities earnestly and embarked on reading the latest scholarly treatises on geological stratigraphy. The idea that humans were simply the latest products of an immensely slow process of creation, far slower than a literal reading of scripture would allow, appealed to Goethe, as is evident in the essay "On Granite" (pp. 913–915). The essay may belong to a larger project for a "Novel on the Universe" that Goethe began to plan in 1781. In the same year he turned his thoughts to anatomy, where he found more evidence of nature's evolving forms and of the thought that "we were once plants and animals," as Charlotte von Stein summarized the thrust of a new book that Herder was writing. Goethe was jubilant when in 1784 he thought he had discovered evidence of the intermaxillary bone in humans—the absence of which was the slender thread on which some orthodox-minded anatomists hoped to hang a distinction between man and the other primates. Goethe followed the great Swedish naturalist Linnaeus in holding that no such distinction existed. On a smaller scale, he spent long hours observing microscopic organisms cultured in water. These were the cause of much excitement at the time: did they prove that there was no absolute boundary between plants and animals? Again Goethe was interested in breaking down boundaries and seeing how natural forms bled into one another.

Goethe's interest in science was grounded in two beliefs. First, nature was characterized by constant and steady change: "nature makes no leaps," as Linnaeus put it. Second, underlying these changes were law-like principles intrinsic to nature itself and requiring no external (divine) hand to shape them. There is no role for God in science. In 1784 he returned to the study of Spinoza (pp. 916–917), though the infamous Dutch philosopher had in fact never been far from his thoughts. Egmont is a good Spinozist: he disavows free will to follow his own fate. Also in the spirit of Spinoza, Iphigenia rejects human sacrifice in favor of humanity. Also pervaded by Spinozism are the poems of

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the late 1770s and early 1780s, such as the complex and deceptive “The God-like” (pp. 13–15), which ostensibly presents the orthodox view that humans are made in the image of God, but in fact argues the reverse: the gods are how we make them, the products of our moral imagination. Spinoza’s significance to Goethe has been much debated and often underestimated. In the 1780s, discomfited by his turbulent and troubled life in Weimar, Goethe developed a settled picture of the world and his place in it. Nature offers compensation for human inconstancy. The highest we can hope for is insight into natural regularities, and this is where we find God, if anywhere. Art provides the best evidence of this truth, for great art reflects natural regularities in its own structures (pp. 875–878). The scientist and the artist are (or should be) brothers in arms. Goethe would continue to develop variations on this idea through the 1790s and beyond.

To put these ideas into practice required time and energy, which Goethe lacked, while he continued to run the impoverished duchy. Eventually he felt he had done enough. On September 3, 1786, just one week after his thirty-seventh birthday, Goethe suddenly vanished. He had been staying at the spa town of Carlsbad (Karlovy Vary) and stole away at night by coach toward Bavaria. Within three days, he was in Munich and on September 8, traveling under the assumed identity of Phillip Miller, German painter, he crossed the Brenner Pass into Italy. Like his father, he kept a meticulous travel journal, which he would later rework and publish as his *Italian Journey* (pp. 751–866). It is full of detail, sometimes mundane but always conveying genuine inquisitiveness and wonder, not only at the great art and architecture of Italy, but also at Italian manners and social life, the climate, vegetation, geology, and weather. If to some extent he was his father’s son, he also followed in the footsteps of Winckelmann, who had left Germany to make his name in Rome. Winckelmann’s understanding of ancient art far outstripped that of any modern before him, though it was not free of paradoxes. On the one hand, he was the first to set out, in laboriously detailed accounts of the representation of fingers and toes, the subtle shifts in style between the different periods of ancient art, sculpture in particular. The greatest art, which Winckelmann saw was produced in fifth-century BC Athens, was a product of its place and time. The Athenians inhabited a mild climate, lived their lives outdoors, were devoted to the cultivation of the body in (naked) athletics and of the mind in philosophy, and were fortunate to live in a democratic polity. The best ancient sculpture reflects this unconstrained physical and mental freedom. However, classical Greek art does not merely reflect nature. It idealizes; it aspires to reflect the Platonic forms of which all bodies are (so Plato) mere imitations, and it is motivated by desire, as was obvious to readers of Winckelmann’s homoerotic descriptions of classical statues. In Italy Goethe felt liberated; he was able to devote himself to objects—an exotic and ancient palm fern in the botanical gardens of Padua (which still stands today), the Roman amphitheatre at

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Verona, the coolly beautiful villas of Palladio, and of course the sculptures in the great Roman collections. Whether or not the story of an affair with a Roman widow is true, the poetry Goethe wrote after his return to Weimar in 1788, especially the extraordinary sequence of *Roman Elegies* (pp. 17–21), make the Winckelmannian connection between art and sexual desire, and they do so, as Winckelmann argued, as great art must: through an enthusiastic, personal emulation of ancient culture, in this case the love poetry of first-century BC Rome.

If Goethe's friends were upset by his sudden and unannounced flight to Italy, what he did on his return to Weimar was downright scandalous. In July 1788 he was approached by a young woman, Christiane Vulpius, with a request for help on behalf of her brother, a struggling author of popular novels. Goethe and Christiane became lovers. In December 1789 she bore their first son, August. The Vulpius family had fallen on hard times. The father had been dismissed from his post in the duchy's archives, and Christiane was obliged to take a sinecure position with a local manufacturer. In any case, the family was not aristocratic, so there was no question of Goethe and Christiane marrying. From this point on, Goethe led a happy domestic existence quite disconnected from his life at court. By escaping to Italy, he had erected a wall between himself and the Weimar court; on his return to Weimar, the wall was renewed and buttressed, and Christiane was firmly on its Italian side.

During his Italian furlough Goethe finished *Egmont* and *Iphigenia* and made progress with *Tasso* and *Faust*. In doing so, he reengaged with the literary world from which he had partially withdrawn during his first ten years in Weimar. However, it was a reengagement on his terms. He no longer had any interest in pandering to the sentimental tastes of the German reading public. As he wrote to Schiller in 1795, "I know the charade that is authorship in Germany inside and out; one must simply play the game, there's nothing more to be said on the subject." There was a rich supply of things to disagree with. His new neo-classical view of the arts was at odds with the sentimentalism of much German culture, and worse was to follow when the Romantic movement began in the late 1790s and then made a turn toward Catholicism. Goethe got on well with some of the young Romantics for a while, as he did with the radical young idealist philosophers Fichte and Schelling. His interest was short lived, not for any lack of patience on his part. Matters of fundamental importance alienated him from the new trends. He was committed to his own rather idiosyncratic version of scientific realism, and he soon came to the view that idealism had little to offer him as a scientist. What alienated him most was the French Revolution. Goethe had devoted his early Weimar years to making the ancien regime work for the good of society as a whole, or so he thought. The later books of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, written after the revolution, are concerned with these questions: of what use is the aristocracy? How can it benefit and integrate with the rest of society? Goethe's politics are

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hard to define. He believed in Enlightened progress; he tried to reduce the expenditure of the Weimar court and to develop the local economy. But he also subscribed to the overriding aim of all ancien regime governments, which was to maintain public order, even if that required unpalatable measures. The revolution initiated a period of disorder that was anathema to him, and this was his chief objection to it. Having said that, his stance was a more nuanced view than he is usually given credit for. Two of his *Venetian Epigrams* express these conflicts. One bemoans the revolutionary “apostles of freedom” who have no understanding of the responsibilities of government. The other acknowledges that although what they say might be insane, the revolutionaries are at least free, whereas slaves are merely silent. For all that he abhorred chaos, he knew it could be creative. For an opponent of the revolution, he invested a remarkable amount of creative energy into trying to come to terms with it. What alienated Goethe most from his fellow Germans was the advent of Napoleon, whom Goethe admired and the young generation of German nationalists demonized. But Goethe had long since abandoned any thoughts of German nationhood or even a unified national culture. After Italy, Europe and the wider world mattered more to him.

Goethe was interested in philosophy in a broad sense, but not in the academic debates about epistemology and moral agency that dominated the early years of post-Kantian idealism. Kant had argued that in the realm of observable phenomena, science was the only authoritative source of knowledge. Kant’s scientific realism appealed strongly to Goethe; it confirmed his devotion to Spinoza and reinforced his view of himself as a “child of the world” (*Weltkind*). In the essay “The Experiment as Mediator between Object and Subject” (pp. 940–947), Goethe tried to square his own empiricist science with the Kantian framework. The other side of Kant’s philosophy—the attempt to ground ethics in rigorous and self-denying duty—affronted Goethe’s Rousseauian belief in the intrinsic goodness of human nature. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant tried to build a bridge between the realm of phenomena and the realm of ethical ends by means of an investigation of art and biological forms. Goethe found this much more to his liking, though as the later essay “The Influence of Modern Philosophy” (pp. 983–986) makes clear, he found it congenial to remain at a distance.

In any case, in the summer of 1794 a far more congenial presence interposed itself between Goethe and the young Kantian philosophers. Some fourteen years previously, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) had exploded onto the literary scene with his chaotic “Storm and Stress” drama *The Robbers*, which was not at all to Goethe’s taste. By 1794 the career of Germany’s most exciting young dramatist had run into the sand. He had struggled for years with a vast verse drama *Don Carlos*. Thanks to Goethe’s recommendation, he was appointed to a chair in history at the University of Jena, and he enjoyed great success as a lecturer, though the financial rewards were meager and the study

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of history was only ever a means to an artistic end. In the early 1790s, he took a sabbatical and spent two years studying Kant. He approached Goethe in 1794 with an invitation to contribute to a new literary journal. A close friendship and creative partnership rapidly developed, indeed one of the most intimate working relationships between two great poets in literary history. Goethe and Schiller found that they shared fundamental beliefs about the nature of literature, about the ways writers are molded by tradition and their political and social circumstances, in particular the national context, which in Germany's case meant political fragmentation, the lack of a cultural center such as Paris or London, and a consequent tendency for taste to seek out the lowest level ("Response to a Literary Rabble-Rouser," pp. 878–881). In a conscious act of resistance to the national misery, Goethe and Schiller encouraged, inspired, and competed with each other. In 1795 they collaborated on a controversial collection of epigrams, and in 1797 they wrote a series of ballads (e.g., "The Bride of Corinth," pp. 21–26). It was Schiller who insisted Goethe publish the *Roman Elegies*; he pushed Goethe to complete *Faust* and looked over Goethe's shoulder during the completion of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. In Italy Goethe had hoped to complete his major unfinished works and be reborn as a writer. It was thanks to Schiller that the promise of Italian rebirth was fully realized in the 1790s. When Schiller died in 1805, Goethe wrote to his friend Zelter that he felt he had lost half of his own existence.

Goethe had begun work on the *Meister* novel in the winter of 1775–76, and in fits and starts the novel had slowly taken shape. By 1786 he had written a total of 90 chapters in six books narrating Wilhelm's development from childhood to his engagement by a professional theatrical company managed by his friend Serlo. The novel's tortuous, punctuated genesis had resulted in a certain unevenness of style and compositional method. The direction of the novel was not at all clear: at the end of Book VI, Wilhelm joined Serlo's company, but with serious misgivings about his own aptitude and the very possibility of making a success of a theatrical company in the current German climate. Goethe hesitated to resume work on the novel. In 1791 he wrote some plans for its completion. In 1793 he had a fresh copy made of the manuscript. Only in 1794 did he take the decisive step of agreeing to a contract with the publisher Unger in Berlin. Still he needed the help of a critical and judicious reader to guide him toward his goal. He asked Herder to help, but the sexual content of Book I elicited a caustic response from his acerbic old friend. Then the friendship with Schiller blossomed unexpectedly, and with Schiller's critical encouragement, Goethe was able to complete the novel in 1796.

The six books of the *Theatrical Mission* were distilled into the first four books of the new novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The narrative became more ironic and distanced, while the account of Wilhelm's childhood, which in the original drafts was presented by a third-person narrator, was now recast as a retrospective narrative by Wilhelm himself. The effect of all this is to

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intensify the difficulties already evident in Wilhelm's theatrical misadventures. In Book V Wilhelm begins the thankless task of turning Serlo's company into a vehicle for national renewal, with mixed results. A haphazardly prepared performance of *Hamlet* enjoys a rapturous first-night reception, but catastrophe follows when the theater burns down. Wilhelm is also troubled by Serlo's sister, the suicidal Aurelie. When she dies, he sets off to find the man he holds responsible for ruining her life. Book VI, the seemingly irrelevant "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul," forms an intermezzo between the theatrical part of the novel and its concluding two books. The Beautiful Soul is in reality a troubled soul; she passes through a series of emotional and religious stations, never quite reaching contentment until she finally withdraws from social life. The book is based on the lost autobiography of a Frankfurt family friend of the Goethes, the Pietist Susanne von Klettenberg, and it reminds us of the national religious context, one of the main obstacles to Germany's renewal. The other chief obstacle is the social divide. In Books VII and VIII, Wilhelm turns his back on the theater and becomes part of a group of reform-minded aristocrats, with whom he has an obscure connection via his grandfather's art collection—an allusion to Goethe's own and his father's compulsive art collecting, both worthy attempts at bourgeois self-education of taste. Against this amateurism is set the more educated Palladian taste of the Beautiful Soul's uncle. The seemingly self-indulgent discussions of art are in fact germane to the novel's political concerns, in the same way as Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1795) uses art as a way of thinking about politics. It is unclear how a bourgeois, whose natural milieu is our modern statistical world, can be an artist: in the bourgeois world, money is king. It is equally unclear how a leisured aristocrat, though he may have the disposition of an artist, can be useful to society. Cultural renewal, so Goethe's argument runs, can only come from an alliance between a culturally aware bourgeoisie and a reformist aristocracy, and that is what Book VIII hesitantly and with evident misgivings sketches out. Finally Wilhelm is betrothed to the aristocratic Natalie, though there is something purposely contrived about the *mésalliance*, and the need for a sequel is clearly signaled.

Having helped Goethe to finish the *Meister* novel, Schiller now pressed him to solve the enigma that was *Faust*. The composition of this massively rich and barely performable poetic drama spanned Goethe's entire adult life. Part One was written between the early 1770s and 1800. Its genesis was convoluted, and the shifts in direction that each new layer of material brought have given rise to much scholarly debate. The text was composed in three phases. The Faust of the first phase, before Goethe's move to Weimar, is a self-reliant hero, as delineated in the Shakespeare "Tribute": a titan composed equally of good and evil. Faust sets himself against small-minded academia and the triviality of what commonly passes as knowledge. Instead of tradition, Faust will rely on his own resources. His pedantic assistant Wagner cannot accept Faust's skepticism

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about university learning and begs him to acknowledge that at least we can understand the human mind. Faust's answer is melodramatic and unsettling:

WAGNER. Yes—but the world! The human heart and mind!

We all seek knowledge, surely, in this sphere?

FAUST. Why, yes, however knowledge is defined.

But who will dare to speak the truth out clear?

The few who anything of truth have learned,

And foolishly did not keep truth concealed,

Their thoughts and visions to the common herd revealed,

Since time began we've crucified and burned. (pp. 263–264, lines 586ff)

There are profound truths, but the visionaries who have seen them have ever been branded as heretics: Socrates, Christ, the Protestant reformer Jan Hus, and of course Spinoza, who was excommunicated by his synagogue. Faust's attitude to knowledge is not always so bleak. From the very beginning of the *Urfaust*, he is skeptical, but also grimly proud of his own skepticism, his ability to unmask the vanity of ordinary knowledge. In the first scene, "Night" (pp. 258–259), he alternates between a melancholic acceptance of our limitations and a euphoric quest for deeper knowledge. The latter drives him into the arms of magic. Just before the scene with Wagner, Faust summons a mysterious Earth Spirit, hoping to hear from it the very reassurance Wagner will demand of Faust. The Earth Spirit spurns Faust with the perplexing response: "You match the spirit that you comprehend, / Not me!" (p. 262, lines 512–513). Following the Wagner scene, the tragedy of the scholar breaks off, with the tension between vaulting ambition and desperate melancholia unresolved.

We next meet Faust in the company of Mephistopheles; presumably this is who the mysterious Earth Spirit had in mind. However, the summoning of the devil and the traditional pact scene are missing. This is the so-called "great lacuna" in the original version, the *Urfaust*; Faust is pitched from his study directly into the bourgeois world where he meets a young girl Margarete (Gretchen). With Mephistopheles' fiendish help he wins her affection, but it is a *mésalliance*. A young petit-bourgeois girl is beguiled by a charismatic and socially superior man, and just as in *Egmont*, it can come to no good. Goethe's portrayal of Gretchen going half-knowingly to her fate, innocent and insightful in equal measure, is one of his great achievements. Gretchen's monologue at the spinning wheel and her song of the King of Thule, set as songs by Schubert, have become canonical. As for Faust, he is too much a slave to his own desire to be able to act on his scruples. The fragment ends with the trauma of Gretchen in prison, maddened by guilt, like Ophelia. Faust makes a tardy bid to rescue her, but this only serves to wake her out of her delirium into the clarity of guilt. She now sees that execution is the proper penance for her infanticide and the murder of her mother. Uncomprehending, Faust is whisked away by Mephistopheles. For Anglophone readers coming to

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Goethe's play from Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, which contains nothing remotely like it, the Gretchen plot is an unforgettable dramatic shock.

Goethe returned to *Faust* in Rome in 1787. Among the material he added to the Gretchen tragedy is a striking passage in which, contrary to the rebuff he receives from the Earth Spirit, Faust seems to have learned from the Spirit about the interrelatedness of biological species:

You gave me, sublime Spirit, gave me all  
I asked of you; and it was not in vain  
You turned your face upon me in the fire.  
You gave me glorious nature as my kingdom,  
The power to feel it and delight in it.  
No cold encounter, no mere spectacle  
You granted me, for nature's very heart  
Is like the bosom of a friend revealed.  
Creation's ordered scale of life you've shown me;  
I learn to know my brother creatures here  
In quiet woods, in streams and in the air. (pp. 331–332, lines 3217ff)

No longer the disaffected professor of the early scenes, Faust is now a modern scientist. The talk of “brother creatures” sounds remarkably like the protoevolutionary view of species that we know Goethe and Herder held in the 1780s. Goethe projects his own scientific interests onto Faust, and it now becomes clear why Goethe had found the pact scene impossible to write. Although in the early 1770s Goethe could be outspokenly skeptical about university scholarship, he was bookish like his father, and he maintained a fascination with science and the natural world throughout his life. How then could he write about a scholar and scientist whose very lust for knowledge drove him into a pact with the devil?

Another concern was the gap between the tragedy of the scholar and the tragedy of Gretchen: how does a crabbed and jaded scholar end up falling in love with a simple bourgeois girl? Also in Rome he wrote the scene in the witches' kitchen. Here the weary Faust is offered a potion that is supposed to rejuvenate him, but in fact will make him fall in love with the next woman he sees: Gretchen. It is a mechanical device and fails to resolve the underlying problem, which continued to exercise Goethe when, under friendly pressure from Schiller, he resumed work on *Faust* in 1797. Three pieces of prefatory material were now added, all standing outside Part One proper (pp. 249–257). The poem “Dedication” presents a very personal rationale for the play. The other two pieces are more substantial. A scene in the theater invites us to imagine a poet, a theater manager, and a comic actor debating the play that is about to be written—again a form of rationale, this time matching the play to the needs and demands of the late eighteenth-century German theater and its audiences. What emerges is full of irony and compromise,

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above all a sense that this may in fact *not* be a play that Germans will want to see. The last prelude is the “Prologue in Heaven,” which pits God against Mephistopheles in a debate about human nature and leads to what appears to be a wager between them.

In 1797 Goethe resolved the problem of the pact. The resumption of work on *Faust* coincided with his producing Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* for the Weimar court theater. In Da Ponte’s libretto, translated for the production by Christiane’s brother, Ferrando and Guglielmo agree to a wager with the mysterious Don Alfonso to test the fidelity of their lovers Fiordiligi and Dorabella. Faust’s deal with Mephistopheles is also a test and a wager. What is at stake is Faust’s conviction that nothing the devil can offer him will give satisfaction. The wager expresses Faust’s melancholy sense that the world is worthless. But what may seem like a fit of melancholia in Faust is also a test for humanity, and modern humanity in particular. Faust commits himself to ceaseless striving and so to one of the great ideas of Enlightenment Europe: never-ending progress. The scholar’s tragedy and the Gretchen tragedy now fit together. For Gretchen is to be a counter in the great game and eventually a martyr to the ambivalent dynamic of modernity. While on one level the wager tests Faust’s ability to live up to his own self-image, on another level it raises a moral question: is progress for its own sake morally acceptable? The form of the wager adds a further degree of complexity. Mephistopheles evidently thinks that he has come away with the traditional prize of such contracts, a human’s immortal soul, and yet Faust gives quite a different impression:

FAUST. If I should ever choose a life of sloth or leisure,  
Then let that moment be my end!  
Or if you can beguile or flatter me  
Into a state of self-contented ease,  
Delude me with delight or luxury—  
That day shall be my last. These  
Are my terms.

MEPHISTOPHELES. It’s done!

FAUST. So let it be:  
If I should bid the moment stay, or try  
To hold its fleeting beauty, then you may  
Cast me in chains and carry me away,  
For in that instant I will gladly die. (pp. 290–291, lines 1692ff)

Faust seems to think that losing the wager will mean losing his life. There is no mention here of his soul. Mephistopheles asks for a contract signed in blood, which Faust energetically rebuts, and we do not see such a document or learn of its contents. Faust and Mephistopheles are clearly at cross purposes, and the wager arises out of a debate that contains more heat than light. Goethe was enough of a lawyer to know how problematic contracts can be.

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Completed in 1801, Part One of *Faust* is a huge rambling lyrical drama, forbiddingly diverse in its forms and moods and containing some of Goethe's most outrageous experimentation. Around 1800 he started work on Part Two, which would occupy him up to 1806 and then again from 1825. It was published posthumously in 1832, a baffling and outrageous bequest to his countrymen. Part One was finally published in 1808, delayed by illness and war. From the invasion of France by the armies of the First Coalition in 1792 to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, war was a near-constant threat, even if Weimar itself was only once affected directly. In October 1806 Napoleon's armies delivered a humiliating defeat to the Prussians on Weimar's very doorstep at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt. Orders were given for Goethe's house to be spared by the marauding French troops, but the orders arrived late, and Christiane is said to have kept the soldiers at bay for a time. She and Goethe hurriedly married a few days later.

The first years of the new century were a precarious turning point in Goethe's life. He suffered a near-fatal bout of shingles in January 1801, and in the following years what must have seemed like a generation of German writers passed away: Herder and Klopstock (1803), Kant (1804), and then Schiller (1805). There could be no more painful reminder of the need to secure his legacy, and this explains his turn to reflective autobiography, a mode that had hitherto made him uneasy. Goethe is a remarkable case of a creative figure who experiences a distinct "late" phase of creativity, only with Goethe the late phase began nearly thirty years before his death, and though undoubtedly overshadowed by death and the need to preserve the past, it was tremendously vigorous and productive. He continued to insist on the perfection and humanity of classical art. In the year of Schiller's death, he published a collection of letters from Winckelmann to his friend Berendis. The short accompanying homage to Winckelmann (*Winckelmann and His Age*, pp. 881–903) defends pagan humanism against Romantic religiosity and includes a remarkably open acknowledgment of Winckelmann's homosexuality. In 1813 he wrote a short essay that attempts to reconstruct a lost work by the Greek sculptor Myron of Eleutheræ ("Myron's Cow," pp. 903–908), still guided by the Platonic spirit of Winckelmann: "the Greeks' goal is to deify man, not humanize Gods." But the next year he was reading Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's new German translation of the *Divan* of the medieval Persian poet Hafiz, which inspired him to embark on his own collection of poems in the Persian style, the *West-Eastern Divan*. In later life he became interested in Chinese literature. He also coined the influential term *Weltliteratur* ("world literature"): "National literature is no longer of importance; it is the time for world literature, and all must aid in bringing it about" (p. 908).

Another legacy Goethe was anxious to secure in these troubled times was his contribution to science. Since the early 1790s he had been engrossed in the study of colored light. In the same way as he believed the leaf to be the

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building block of all plant life, its *Urphänomen* (“primal phenomenon”), he thought white light was the source of all color effects. This brought him into conflict with Newton’s discovery that white light is composed of the rainbow spectrum. Goethe believed that colors were instead the product of the interaction of light and its absence. In terms of physics, this was a dead end. Other aspects of the project did bear fruit. Goethe was among the first to explore the physiology of color vision, in particular the ways in which our vision deals with contrasts between light and dark, and in this field his intuition about the generation of color led to productive hypotheses. He also investigated the emotional effects and artistic uses of color; indeed, his interest in color originated under the azure skies of Italy and among the radiant paintings of the Venetian school. The resulting work, the *Theory of Colour* published in 1810, reveals Goethe’s strengths and weaknesses as a scientist. He was committed to empirical observation, but he disliked the mental and physical apparatus that accompanied science: contrived experimental conditions, doctrinaire theoretical models, and arid mathematical methods, as he saw them. His allergy to the formal scientific method limited his progress but also inspired some of his more interesting ideas.

The initial reaction of scientists to the *Theory of Colour* was negative. Goethe’s physics looked like the work of an amateur and was guilty of the same errors as the speculative post-Kantian *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling and others. His ideas about the physiology of color perception did find some resonance, but this was slow in developing. Had Goethe only worked in the life sciences, where mathematical methods were not yet widely used, and had he published his work on the life sciences when it was still fresh—the only substantial piece he published before 1817 was the essay on the “Metamorphosis of Plants”—his stock might have been higher among contemporary scientists. As it was, much of his most interesting work, including his general statements about plant and animal morphology, was published only after 1817 and then in the context of autobiographical retrospect (see pp. 977–983). His reticence was not borne of a lack of confidence. He did send the short essay of 1784 on the intermaxillary bone to the great Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper in Groningen, but Camper, who held precisely the view Goethe was opposing, advised against publication, even though he did accept some of Goethe findings. For these reasons—his ill-judged campaign against Newton’s physics, which obscured the value of his work on the physiology of color; his apparent closeness to *Naturphilosophie*; his failure to publish his ideas on morphology—Goethe’s stature as a scientist was not recognized until very late in his life, when some of his ideas had already been formulated by more established scientists. Still, his influence was felt and his contribution recognized. For instance, his friend Carl Gustav Carus took up Goethe’s ideas about the morphology of mammal bone structure; Richard Owen adopted Carus’s theory, and Charles Darwin then developed the Carus-Owen model. Darwin recognized Goethe’s place in

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the history of evolutionary theory in the preface to the third edition of *The Origin of Species* (1861):

It is rather a singular instance of the manner in which similar views arise at about the same period, that Goethe in Germany, Dr. [Erasmus] Darwin in England, and Geoffroy Saint Hilaire . . . in France, came to the same conclusion on the origin of species, in the years 1794–5. (p. xiv)

In the 1810s Goethe realized that his ideas risked becoming obsolete, if they were not already so. Hence he decided to publish some of his earlier work with an autobiographical commentary. He also continued to make his own observations and to follow the work of others. He was particularly excited about Luke Howard's classification of cloud formations, a subject on which Goethe had written extensively though unsystematically since the 1780s (pp. 988–993). He was one of the first to take regular measurements of changes in atmospheric pressure (or "elasticity," as he termed it) using a simple teapot-shaped vessel, the Goethe Glass as it is now known.

From 1809 he began to plan a full-length autobiography, and the first parts of *From My Life: Poetry and Truth* appeared in 1811. Between 1813 and 1817, he adapted his Italian journals. The autobiographical turn is evident in his poetry too; some of the later lyrics are highly self-conscious and self-referential, with a remarkable gentleness and lightness of touch (e.g. "Found," pp. 36–37). There is also exceptional vigor. On the threshold of his later work is a poem, "The Diary," which was too obscene and blasphemous to be published in his lifetime. (We print here the suitably outrageous, if overly free version by John Frederick Nims that first appeared in *Playboy* magazine in 1968, pp. 31–36.) In this richly crafted and ironic narrative of a failed adultery, the traveling narrator is prevented from reaching home by a broken carriage—a metaphor for impotence, as it turns out—and spends the night at an inn, where he catches the eye of the waitress. She visits his room, but he is momentarily impotent. Lying ashamed in bed next to the now sleeping girl, he recalls his wedding—the blasphemy is his erection standing in church before Christ on the cross: the healthy pagan phallus confronts the Christian god of pain—and the lusty sex life of his earlier married years. And as he reminisces, so his potency returns, but he leaves the girl to sleep undisturbed and remains (technically) faithful to his wife. The poem makes a playful allusion to Kant's ethics of renunciation, to which it opposes a more naturalistic morality: illness cures itself. The poem is typical in some ways: it ironically blends philosophical ambition with earthiness and lust for life. To the end Goethe remained a son of the Enlightenment, a pagan intellectual (see "The Stork's Profession," p. 40).

In securing his legacy Goethe was concerned to show his readers that his writings were anchored in his life. As well as looking back at his own progression, he surveyed the present state of Germany and the world and extrapolated

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into the future. The long-planned *Wilhelm Meister* sequel appeared in 1821, with an expanded version following in 1829. Goethe referred to *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years, or the Renunciants* as a novel, though it breaks the conventional bounds of the novel form. Wilhelm embarks on a journey with his young son under two strict conditions: that they will never stay more than three nights under one roof, and that they will not travel with a third companion for long. The journey serves principally as a means to frame a number of shorter elements: stories, collections of aphorisms, and plans for social and educational reform. It is part novel, part framed narrative à la Boccaccio, part literary archive.

The continuation of *Faust* shares similar features and themes: episodic structure, a broad survey of the intellectual and social world of the early nineteenth century, and grand projects for the benefit of human welfare. During the completion of *Faust: Part One*, Goethe made plans for Part Two and composed the scenes in which Faust returns to ancient Greece to meet Helen of Troy. After Part One was finished, he put the material aside, only resuming work in 1825—in the same year as a group of U.S. businessmen announced a plan for constructing a canal through Panama, which Goethe followed with interest. In February 1827 he discussed the canal with Eckermann:

So much . . . is certain, that, if they succeed in cutting such a canal that ships of any burden and size can be navigated through it from the Mexican Gulf to the Pacific Ocean, innumerable benefits would result to the whole human race, civilized and uncivilized. But I should wonder if the United States were to let an opportunity escape of getting such work into their own hands. It may be foreseen that this young state, with its decided predilection to the West, will, in thirty or forty years, have occupied and peopled the large tract of land beyond the Rocky Mountains. It may, furthermore, be foreseen that along the whole coast of the Pacific Ocean, where nature has already formed the most capacious and secure harbours, important commercial towns will gradually arise, for the furtherance of a great intercourse between China and the East Indies and the United States. In such a case, it would not only be desirable, but almost necessary, that a more rapid communication should be maintained between the eastern and western shores of North America, both by merchant-ships and men-of-war, than has hitherto been possible with the tedious, disagreeable, and expensive voyage round Cape Horn. I therefore repeat, that it is absolutely indispensable for the United States to effect a passage from the Mexican Gulf to the Pacific Ocean; and I am certain that they will do it.

Would that I might live to see it!—but I shall not. I should like to see another thing—a junction of the Danube and the Rhine. But this undertaking is so gigantic that I have doubts of its completion,

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particularly when I consider our German resources. And thirdly, and lastly, I should wish to see England in possession of a canal through the Isthmus of Suez. Would I could live to see these three great works! It would be well worth the trouble to last some fifty years more for the very purpose. (21 February 1827)<sup>1</sup>

The completed *Faust: Part Two*, in five acts, was published several months after his death, a deeply ironic bequest to his fellow Germans. Faust lives to a ripe old age, frustrating Mephistopheles' attempts to satisfy him. In Act IV he is able to win victory for the emperor's army, with Mephistopheles' magical help. In gratitude the emperor grants Faust an area of low-lying coastal swamp, where Faust can establish a new colony free from the inhibiting social and religious legacies of the old regime—Faust's own America. What Faust does not know is that the archbishop, exploiting Faust's ill repute as a magus, has persuaded the emperor to grant the church tithes in perpetuity from Faust's land. The future will after all be shackled to the past. He finally dies expressing his satisfaction at the completed draining of the land, though in another bitter irony the blind old Faust cannot see that Mephistopheles' magical labor force is in fact digging his grave (*Grab*), not the drainage ditches (*Graben*). A struggle ensues over Faust's (vaguely named) "immortal part" (*Unsterbliches*), and Mephistopheles' demons are defeated by a host of amorous seraphs, who carry Faust's remains up to heaven. There the penitent spirit of Gretchen resides with the loving mother of God, though Faust's role—or the role of whatever survives of him, for perhaps only a trace of our mental activity remains in the world, as Spinoza suggested—will be to educate the spirits of children who died in infancy. Not the least of Part Two's surprises is that, again in the spirit of Spinoza, there will be no punishment in the afterlife for Faust, only more work. In an ironic mixture of florid pseudo-Christian imagery and materialist philosophy, the close of the drama self-consciously performs the passing of Goethe's ambiguous legacy into the future.

<sup>1</sup> *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, trans. by John Oxenford, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1850), vol. I, pp. 364–365.