

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

(1749-1834)

Works

Goetz von Berlichingen, 1773
The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1774
Iphigenia in Tauris, 1787
Egmont, 1788
Torquato Tasso, 1790
Roman Elegies, 1790
Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, 1795
Faust, Part One, 1808
The Elective Affinities, 1809
Poetry and Truth, 1811-1833
My Italian Journey, 1817
Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years, 1821
Faust, Part Two, 1832

Biography

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born in Frankfurt, in 1749. As a student, we learn from his massive autobiography *Poetry and Truth* (1811) he was skilled in Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Hebrew; plus painting and music. (Multicompetence was to be Goethe's lifetime trademark.) After a fashion common to the higher European classes at his time, Goethe went on from Frankfurt to study jurisprudence; though in his case this was not a subject of passion, and he fiddled away his time—taking training classes in etching and wood cutting techniques.

Goethe fell in love for the first time when he was seventeen years old—a susceptibility that would track him through his life, and make its way into some of his finest writing, from *The Sorrows of Werther* to *Faust*. In 1768, having split up with his then girlfriend, he returned to his family's house, where he threw himself into reading philosophical and mystical texts, as well as into writing poetry. He was nearing his first important grand-world encounter—his trip to Strassburg, in 1770. He there met and was enchanted with his contemporary thinker, Johann Herder, whose innovative anthropological world-view would prove influential for Goethe's entire career. Though in 1771 Goethe returned to Frankfurt, and took up a law career, it was in fact more nearly a literary than a legal turn to his life. Goethe did continue to practice law for some time, fairly successfully, but a decisive personal event was about to face him—a new love affair—which was to convert itself, in this transformative creative mind, into the makings of his first successful novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).

Werther became a bestseller overnight, and made Goethe—in his mid-twenties-- a popular national figure. (Romance, deep *Weltschmerz*, and above all suicide were ingredients of the startling fascination with this book of letters from a despondent lover, who loses his love to another man—and cannot survive it.) Goethe was engaged again in 1775, but, once again, a change in position led to a review of his love life, and upon assuming an administrative position with the Duke of Weimar, he broke off his new engagement, and decided to become truly serious with Charlotte von Stein. There followed a decade long period of intense work in Weimar—the writing of such masterpieces as *Iphigenie in Tauris*; appointment to the time-consuming role of privy counselor; management of the locally important War and Highway Commission—which left Goethe exhausted and in need of a rest.

His answer to this exhaustion was to spend two years in Italy, a source of fresh inspiration and of some of his finest descriptive and landscape writing. In 1788, when he returned to Germany, he had lost his relationship to Charlotte, and promptly fell in love again, with Christiane Vulpius. They gave birth to a son, in August 1789. He also gave birth, at just this time, to the first version of his epic work, *Faust Part 1* (1789).

In 1797 Goethe married Christiane, but it was not until 1806 that he completed the first part of *Faust*. In 1809 he completed his vast novel, *The Elective Affinities*. Then, in 1831, near the end of his life, he completed his life's work, *Faust Part 2*. Goethe stipulated that the work should not be published before his death. He died in 1832, at the age of eighty-three.

Achievements

Versatile. Goethe was a verbal creator in many genres, drama, poetry, novels, autobiography, history, science (botany and meteorology); he was also a very significant painter and drawer. He excelled in all these realms, sharing out to his expression an unself-conscious overflow of attitudes, understandings, and conceptual grasps.

Global. By nature, Goethe was a globalist. He writes of Chinese literature, and he both critiques and translates mediaeval Arabic poetry in his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), inspired by the poet Hafiz. He thinks of the human being as a meaningful component of nature, and even of the galaxy, for he long devoted himself to the new astronomical learning of his time. He was deeply interested in evolution, especially of the plant kingdom.

Poetic. Goethe's ear and mind were tightly interwoven, so that he could write emotion-filled poetry which at the same time developed arguments about the nature of reality. (One might compare the mind of Lucretius, in *On the Nature of Things*: the Roman poet mastered the Latin hexameter so fully, that he could flexibly discourse about cosmology in that tricky poetic form.)

Humane. While not religious, except in the way of 'natural religion,' like Thomas Jefferson and many enlightenment thinkers, Goethe remains 'spiritual,' friendly to the spirits of science and discovery, but open to the emergent disclosures latent in the unfolding universe. Man, at the crossroads of nature and the ancient gods, is the center of the meaning of the universe.

THEMES

Steadiness. At the end of his life Goethe wrote that the goal of it all is 'im ganzen gut und wahr und resolut zu leben,' 'on the whole to live well and truly and resolutely.' One finds this persistence and steadiness throughout the whole course of Goethe's life work. He is endlessly interested in the given world, drawn by the pathos—and dignity—of the human condition, and fascinated by quests, like Faust's, to surpass the limitations imposed by the mortal state.

Self-awareness. Goethe remains self-aware, even while he explores the dimensions of human tragedy, and the discoveries made possible by science. In his projections of characters like Werther or Wilhelm Meister, or in his almost allegorical creation, Dr. Faustus, he is throwing light on his understanding of himself, for he appears, complexly disguised, at the center of each his major narratives.

Classicism. The Greco Roman tradition is always compelling for Goethe. His greatest play *Iphigenie*, his greatest poem *Faust*, and some of his finest poetry, like *The Roman Elegies*, are deeply pervaded with themes drawn from classical mythology and thought. In a wider sense, too, he embraced the classical perspective onto life. He lived fully, actively, as a busy statesman in the world, as an active lover and friend, and as a firm believer in rules and discipline.

Eroticism. A strand in Goethe's classical sensibility makes eroticism thematic in his work. *The Roman Elegies* are full of invitations to sexual experimentation. *Faust*, in any of its stages, must be seen as a

middle aged scholar's collusion with the Devil, to get into the bed of a teen ager. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, while chaste, makes the eros of jealousy bite straight through into young Werther's trousers.

Characters

Goethe led a long and steadily creative life, forever learning and interpreting. Given the consistent personal stamp, which he imposed on all his work, it is no surprise that among three of his finest characters—**Faust**, **Mephistopheles**, and **Werther**—and despite the fact that one of them (Werther) is totally unconnected with the other two, there runs a single steady conceptual thread. This thread is part of the total fabric of creations Goethe is working on throughout his life.

Werther, of course, is the romantic, love-smitten young man, whose wild and disastrous passion dominates Goethe's early novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), while Faust and Mephistopheles are the dynamically intertwined forces that dominate Goethe's *Faust* (1818). What is Faust in search of, when he makes his fatal pact with the devil? Isn't it youth, innocence and romance? And aren't those the ruling characteristics of Werther, who is all open to the world, with no defenses against the setbacks the world insists on? And isn't Mephistopheles, the Devil, essentially the tragic brake on the rolling freight train of desires and hopes, the train which carries the old Faust and the young Werther to the same end station, harm to others, personal disaster, and death?

Goethe's vast humanism, which marks his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*; 1811-1833), keeps us from thinking that his view of life—as our three characters might suggest—is all dark, or is simply tragic. From the top of the mountain of his mind Goethe, even in his earliest writings, seems capable of looking at the world as both tragic, and, *because it is*, astonishingly interesting.