

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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FROM MY LIFE: POETRY AND TRUTH

Goethe

Goethe takes us to the center of German Classicism/Humanism/*Sturm und Drang*. (Check out this last phrase, *Sturm und Drang*, in a *History of German Literature*.) As you read Goethe, and about him, you will find all these terms put to use, for this author is so great, his achievements so multiple and thoughtful, that he is not easily caught in a brief concept. Perhaps the notion of *Aufklaerung*, Enlightenment, belongs to Goethe in all his facets, for he brings the light of reason and imagination to his creations and researches. He creates dramatic epics like *Faust*, heart-rending short novels like *Werther* or long philosophical novels like *Wilhelm Meister*; he writes art and literary criticism; he rivals Herder in stimulating travel writing—as in his *Journal of a Trip to Italy*; he masters every form of lyric poetry at its highest level; he provides lasting models of dramatic art, and indeed, as though the foregoing were not enough, he conducts fruitful and still today relevant research into botany, geology, meteorology, and vulcanology. One of the questions you will be asking yourself, as you read this man, is: what goes into constituting a universal genius? You may search your memory for other examples. Leonardo da Vinci? Aristotle? Is this kind of comprehensive knowing and creating possible in our time? While it is true that Goethe draws vigorously on his predecessors, what he makes of them is uniquely his.

Poetry and Truth (Dichtung und Wahrheit) (1808-1831) is a huge autobiography carried out by Goethe over a period of twenty three years (1808-1831). (The years of Goethe's life covered in this autobiography are 1749-1775, up to the time when he went to Weimar.) The richness of portrayal of Goethe's world—personal encounters, travel memoirs, reports from the local kingdoms which were the administrative nodes of a Germany not yet a nation—is indescribably full. You will want to ask yourself how this kind of memoir, historical record, personal inspection, and gossip column turned inside out into world historical observations—how this huge canvas fits with the other 'autobiographies' we are reading. The answer may have to be that this work is unique, for besides the fullness of detail, which makes it a portrait of twenty five years of social and personal history, this book is a consistently carried out thematic unity, in which Goethe's natural addiction to the poetic (*Dichtung* means *poetry* and also *fiction*) is brought into 'harmony' with the truth which the 'real world is.' In that sense the argument of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* resembles the argument of *Werther*—and for that matter of Goethe's epic *Faust*—which is that the passionate/ romantic essence of human nature will destroy itself against the rough coasts of daily reality, unless maturing care is taken.

Questions;

In *Werther*, as we said, Goethe seems to be working through 'personal issues,' those which he avoided but which were ultimately fatal to Werther himself. Do you see Goethe carrying out the same kind of personal search in *Poetry and Truth*? If not, to what do you attribute this kind of personal testimony to his life?

What part does romantic love play in the life Goethe portrays as his? How does he view his own susceptibilities and behaviors under the spell of romantic love? Can we see the Romantic and the Realist in conflict in Goethe's self-portrait?

How does Goethe relate to the nobility, and especially to his own patrons, who play an important role in the narrative of *Poetry and Truth*? Do you see Goethe shaping his own described personality in a fashion to ingratiate those persons?

What do you think of the relation between Goethe's *Werther* and his *Poetry and Truth*, which was published from thirty to fifty years later than *Werther*? Both of those works are autobiographies—the latter

explicitly, the former more indirectly, as we have seen—but how do they differ in their strategies for representing the person of Goethe himself?

Both of Goethe's autobiographies—see question 5, above—deal with youth—*Poetry and Truth* covers Goethe's life til age twenty six, when he left for Weimar—as does Moritz' autobiography, *Anton Reiser*. Are there special writing problems connected with writing of one's youth? How do Goethe and Moritz differ in meeting the challenge of writing about their youths?