

# GOETHE THE POET

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THE centenary of a poet's death is a convenient moment for enquiring into the extent of his popularity. Granted that Goethe is among the most important of European poets, whose concern is it? Must he be commemorated only by the few to whom he is a treasured possession and an endless source of delight and wisdom? Or does he, like Shakespeare before him, reach everyone?

On the face of it, the answer must be that he does not, and never desired to, and even rejected the opportunity. As the author of *Götz von Berlichingen* and *Werther*, he once had the contemporary world at his feet. Master of the twin fields of romance and sensibility, there was nothing to stop him from making himself the darling of Europe, the poet play-boy of the Western world—in a yellow waistcoat. And it was not just a literary opportunity; though when we remember that Napoleon read *Werther* seven times, we can agree that the literary opportunity was immense. The person of this miraculously successful young author was as fascinating as his work. Radiant health, boundless promise, the young poet standing on the top of golden hours in all the naked freedom of the human spirit—where else in the history of literature shall we find this ideal so perfectly realized as in Goethe from the time, roughly, when he bumped into Herder in a hotel lobby in Strassburg in 1770, to his agitated stage-coach ride to Weimar some five years later?

This was the Goethe who showed himself to us unforgettably as the lover galloping breathlessly through the night—*Es schlug mein Herz, geschwind zu Pferde*—or as the wanderer shouting for joy as he trudged into the driving hailstorm; or as Ganymede, lying on his back in the spring grass making the very clouds bow to his yearning love and bear him aloft; or as Prometheus, shaking his fist at the gods in his exultant humanity—*Ich kenne nichts Aermers Unter der Sonn' als euch, Götter*—or, not less characteristic, as the natural man sitting at luncheon between two disputing theologians, consuming a chicken—*Prophete rechts, Prophete links, das Weltkind in der Mitten*. This again was the Goethe of whom his friend Schlosser wrote:—"If he is happy in the world, he will make thousands happy. And if not, he will always be a meteor at which men of to-day will stare and children warm themselves." Or of whom Wieland said, meeting him at the close of this radiant

time—"Never was there such a man, so compounded of all energy and all beneficence."

*So hat sich nie in Gottes Welt  
Ein Menschensohn uns dargestellt,  
Der alle Güte und alle Gewalt  
Der Menschheit so in sich vereinigt.*

If ever a poet had the world before him, it was Goethe in 1775. Yet ten or fifteen years later he is—chiefly by his own choice and act—a man isolated and aloof, the author of works which at that time none desired and few understood, estranged or half-estranged even from his nearest and dearest friends. From being the idol of the hour, ready to take the European capitals by storm, he has become the poet who turns away from his fellowmen, guarding his privacy, following his own devices, compromising with none—the poet who cries—"O tell me not of the motley throng, the very sight of which robs me of my inspiration:"

*O sprich mir nicht von jener bunten Menge,  
Bei deren Anblick uns der Geist entflieht.*

The popularity which he had thus rejected he never courted again, save perhaps half-heartedly with *Hermann und Dorothea*, a poem which for all its idyllic charm is not among those works of his by which we rank him with the great masters. Such fame and eminence as he lived to see—and at his death he was the acknowledged Grand Old Man of European letters—he can be said to have won in the teeth of public opinion and even of his fellow-poets. He conceded little or nothing to the literary fashions of his day. He never formed a school. He remained single-handed to the last, insisting, it will be remembered, that the Second Part of his *Faust* be not published in his life-time, because, as he rightly saw, there was no immediate hope of its being understood.

In view of this uncompromising volte-face, executed in his twenty-sixth year and persisted in almost unblenchingly for a full half-century, it is amazing to consider Goethe's contribution to that body of poetry and poetic imagery which may be said to be everybody's possession. Thanks chiefly, but not exclusively, to those uncritical early years in which he swam joyfully in the great current of the times, his strictly popular achievement in poetry is as secure as any we know. Remember first that it was Goethe and no other who started the vein of adventurous romance which Scott—his fellow centenarian in this year 1932—so generously followed, and which still lingers on in the Stevensons of yesterday and to-day. It was *Götz von Berlichingen* which set the

ball rolling, a tale—for it is more a tale than anything—in which after 160 years of exploitation the saddle-girths creak and the tankards foam as merrily as ever. If anyone to-day wishes to savour the romance of medievalism quick and sure, and without a wasted word or a long paragraph, let him go to *Götz* and drink of its perennial spring.

This alone is enough to secure Goethe among the really popular contributors to European literature. But there is far more. It was not for nothing that Heine—the most widely enjoyed of all lyrical poets—frankly admitted that Goethe's lyrics were the finest in existence. For in the field of his most peculiar and distinctive success—that of the lyrical ballad achieving the anonymity of folk-song—Goethe rivalled and possibly excelled him. If Heine has the Grenadiers and the Lorelei to his credit, Goethe has the Heidenröslein, the roselet rudely plucked by the wanton youth—if you will grant his authorship in this disputable case—the König in Thule throwing his golden goblet into the grey sea, and—best of all and best of all ballads anywhere—the Erlking snatching the dying boy's soul from his father's arms as he gallops in anguish through the night-mist. There is only a handful of such poems in the modern world—poems written, as it were, in our midst, yet affecting us as if they came by long inheritance—and Goethe has given us three of them, if not more.

Here again Goethe is everybody's poet. And again this is not all. Of the supremely great long poems known to us, the First Part of *Faust* is by far the most popular, if not in esteem, then in character, and above all in the character of its language. Whereas all the other great long poems that come to mind are written in a sophisticated language, sometimes intricate, sometimes elevated, usually both, *Faust* is written with one foot in the vernacular. In this, *Faust*—I am speaking wholly or chiefly of Part One—is unique. For if there is the vernacular, the common speech, in Shakespeare—in *Hamlet*, say—it is only for moments. The prevailing idiom is the specifically Shakespearean, which in respect of its vocabulary and its metaphors is the most complex, the least elementary we know. Not so with *Faust*, Part One. Here the common speech rings plain on almost every page. A noble edifice of poetry. Yes, but all the dialects and street-accent of Germany seem to be crowding its threshold, mingling their voices with the organ-tones that swell from time to time within. This may be why the English *Faust* translations are so unsatisfactory. They all, or nearly all, come down to their task from poetry, instead of coming up to it from the language of the street. Perhaps it will

always be necessary to read *Faust* in the original in order to catch that raciness of speech, now sinking to the colloquial, now rising to the highest poetry, which makes it everyone's poem. Listen to a few snatches from it. "You haven't got the professor out of your system yet," says Mephistopheles to Faust;

*Dir steckt der Doktor noch im Leibe.*

"Leave God out of the game", says Valentin in his blind anger;

*Lass unsern Herrgott aus dem Spass.*

Gretchen says to her lover, "I have done so much for you already, there isn't much more I can do":

*Ich habe schon so viel für dich getan,  
Dass mir zu tun fast nichts mehr übrig bleibt.*

Faust says to the angels—"Why seek me in the dust, you heavenly song, so strong, so gentle. Go ring yonder, where there are soft-hearted men. I hear the message, but I lack the faith;"

*Was sucht ihr, mächtig und gelind,  
Ihr Himmelsstöne, mich am Staube?  
Klingt dort umher, wo weiche Menschen sind.  
Die Botschaft hör ich wohl; allein mir fehlt der Glaube.*

Thus without choosing our steps carefully we can move up and down *Faust's* ladder of language, and find to our delight that even at its supremest moments—whether in the opening monologue or in the prison-scene—the speech of this poem is never far from the kind of speech we all use when we forget ourselves and let the words come. No other great poem has so many straight body-blows of language. All the characters share in this, but the special glories are reserved, I think, for Mephistopheles and Gretchen, the cynic and the child. Ironical as it sounds, when we remember their story and, no doubt, their mutual antipathy, in their marvellous command of simple speech for their respective purposes they are as brother and sister.

But the mention of Mephistopheles reminds me that the popularity of *Faust* is not restricted to its idiom. Everybody knows Goethe's *Faust* even if he has never read it, even if he has never read it in translation, even if he has never heard of Gounod. Or at least everybody knows Goethe's Mephistopheles. Now and then in the course of the centuries the poetic mind of man creates a figure which passes into universal currency, and is known the world over by literary and unliterary alike. I refer to those few figures which detach themselves from their plots, and from all the circumstances

of their literary life, and move into the world at large, ingredients of our humanity, necessary adjectives to the genus *homo*, inhabiting every clime and every country, nay every community, so that whenever two or three are gathered together in one place there will be a Mephistopheles among them, just as there will also be a Don Quixote. Here I have named the two that probably come first, and I am at a loss whom to put third, though Falstaff and Hamlet have obvious claims. Yet even Falstaffian is not quite as immediate and universal an adjective as Quixotic, Mephistophelean. In this achievement Cervantes and Goethe are at one. Each has created a figure which combines one of the most fundamental of human essences with the clearest of physical contours, so that Mephistopheles has only to put his head round the door for the fraction of a second to be recognised unhesitatingly by everyone.

Figures at once so sharply delineated and so universal in meaning do not come in shoals. I doubt whether any poet has been able to give us two. Shakespeare possibly, as I have suggested. But I am uncertain here. Shakespeare is more dramatist than philosopher and his characters, like Goethe's Gretchen and Klärchen, cling to their plots no matter how well we know them. There is one other figure of Goethe's, however, which may ultimately qualify for a place in this strange and select company, a figure which like Mephistopheles and Don Quixote rises before us like an emanation, independent of setting and origin, instantly recognisable—the figure of Mignon from *Wilhelm Meister*.

This is not a claim to press. Yet it is worth noting that Mignon, who is perhaps more completely Goethe's creation than even Mephistopheles, being a creature quite without forerunners, shares with Mephistopheles in combining distinctness of personal appearance with universality of meaning—the dark mute Southern face, the hidden woe, the exile,—*Kennst du das Land?* Here again Goethe has succeeded in isolating one of the very elements of our inner life in tangible visible form. Side by side with the healthy cynicism of Mephistopheles we can put the Sehnsucht, the nostalgia of Mignon. Who does not know them both? Who can repudiate either? Which is the more familiar to the inner self?

These, I think, are the chief points of contact between Goethe and the common man. At least they are among the chief points. And it might not be easy to extend the list much further. Turning now from these particulars to the poetic works as a whole, it is safe to say that they are among the most difficult to interpret that we know. Not perhaps individually. Individually, few important works of poetry are more straightforward than, say, *Götz von Ber-*

*lichingen*, *Werther*, and *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. A medieval chronicle-play of feuds and love-intrigue, briskly presented and ending on a not too tragic deathbed—*Götz von Berlichingen*; a sentimental novel in letters, leading up to a suicide—*Werther*; a re-telling of Euripides with a drastic simplification of the moral code—*Iphigenie*. There is nothing particularly enigmatic in any of these three works, taken separately. If anything, they err—two of them at least, *Götz* and *Iphigenie*—on the side of the obvious. For surely a boy can read *Götz*, missing little or nothing, and a fundamentalist can read *Iphigenie*, without losing sleep. The difficulty, the real problem of interpretation, arises when we try to integrate them and see them as works by one author, conceived and set down, as it happens, in all essentials in a single decade, the seventeenth-seventies.

If *Götz* and *Werther*—to take two of the three—had reached us anonymously, we should have no difficulty in satisfying ourselves that they were written by different authors. This, I think, would be as obvious to us—given the anonymity—as that Tennyson did not write *Pippa Passes* or Virginia Woolf *The Old Wives' Tale*. It is true that the two works have always been associated, and that they both bear the marks of the German Storm and Stress. Both uphold the simple life; both protest against the conventions. But the manner of the protest is so different that their common ground seems negligible. The shift in temperament from active to passive, from extrovert to introvert, from the baronial hall to the psychological clinic, seems to point to two personalities rather than to a change of mood in one. And so does the shift in style from the terse, racy practical idiom of *Götz* to the sinuous, cloudy introspective periods of *Werther*. Listen to the contrast as shown by a mere snatch from either.

*Götz*: "Never shall we live through jollier times than at the margrave's court where we two slept in one bed together and knocked about together. How I love to look back on those early days! Do you remember the fight I got into with the Polish fellow because I happened to rub my sleeve against his waxed and powdered hair?"  
*Weislingen*: Yes, it was at table, and he struck at you with his knife.

*Götz*: Yes, and while I was giving him a good thrashing, you tackled his companion. We always stuck together. We were great fellows, and everyone knew it".

This surely is the flavour, the holiday flavour of *Götz*. And now *Werther*:

“It is wonderful. When I came here and looked from the hilltop into the lovely valley, everything round about me drew me to it. The coppice yonder. Oh, if I could mingle in its shadows! The mountain-top. Oh to survey the wide landscape from there! The branching hills and the intimate valleys. Oh, if only I could lose myself in them! I hastened to them, and came back, and had not found what I hoped for. Oh, it is with distance as with the future. A twilight immensity confronts us. We see and feel it as in a mist. We long to give ourselves to it, and be filled with the rapture of a single great emotion. And alas, when we go there and the yonder becomes the here, everything is as it was before, and there we are again in our poverty and our confinement, and the heart yearns for the solace that has escaped it.”

Even in a poor translation the contrast is astonishing. I repeat that if we did not know that one man was the author of both these works, we should scarcely conjecture it. And *Werther* came only two years after *Götz*.

If now we throw *Iphigenie* into the frying-pan—the third of Goethe’s major works to be spiritually completed before his thirtieth year was out, I am abstracting from the unfinished *Faust*, and I am remembering that *Iphigenie* received its metrical form at a somewhat later date—the confusion is complete. No critic to my knowledge has managed to integrate this poem with the rest of Goethe. No one, I mean, has made us feel that it was one and the same man who created *Iphigenie*, a work so feminine in its texture, so puritanical in its morals, and, above all, so chaste and exclusive in spirit, and who also created *Faust* which throws exclusiveness to the winds and buries its nose in all the dirt it finds. “*In jeden Quark begräbt er seine Nase*”. We know that Goethe is the author of these two works, but do we really know it? Is it not rather a matter of information than of spiritual experience? Again I would submit that if this poem had been put before us anonymously, we could easily demonstraté that it was not a work of Goethe’s, that, versatile as Goethe was, certain types of feeling were of necessity foreign to him, and that the peculiar emphasis of *Iphigenie* on a morality so quixotic and so elementary could never have come honestly from him at any stage of his life. Even *Tasso*, the work which is nearest to it, does little to explain it morally. Yet Goethe wrote it. It ranks with his greatest works, and we have to do our best with it.

Wherever we look in Goethe’s poetry, we shall encounter the same problem. In the strictly lyrical field we have to square his Roman poems, for example, with his Oriental, making strange bed-

fellows of Hafiz and Lucretius. Or, to shift our ground slightly, we have to square his folk-poems with his sophistications. Almost within a twelve-month we find him writing his share of the *Xenien*—those barbed arrows of coterie warfare—and his *Blümlein Wunderschön*,—as tender and unworldly a dream as any in Novalis. And so on everywhere. Everywhere we find works not as a rule insuperably difficult—though there are difficulties enough in *Faust* and in *Pandora*—everywhere we find works that at least we know how to deal with, one by one. And everywhere works that perplex us when we set about relating them or, as I put it, integrating them. The majority of critics shirk the task altogether.

This need not surprise us. There is perhaps no more strenuous problem in all poetry. Certainly there is none quite like it. For if Shakespeare ranges not less widely than Goethe, it is in a quite different sense. However widely Shakespeare ranges, there is always a unity of style to hold his work together. We have no difficulty, a schoolboy has no difficulty, in feeling as well as knowing that *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Tempest* spring from the one mind. But who can say that he knows instinctively the basic style, the common denominator for Goethe?

There are two fairly easy ways out—both wrong. One—not an uncommon way—is to take Goethe as the poet of *Faust* and to let the rest take care of itself. Goethe began *Faust* almost in his cradle, and he finished it almost on his deathbed. It accompanied him through his long life, and it draws on nearly every phase of it. The unity which it is so hard to arrive at in the total body of his poetry is supplied here by the Faust legend. The figures of Faust, Mephistopheles, Gretchen, the angels; the strong chiaroscuro; the Gothic verticality; the recurring Faustian motifs of despair, desire, conquest, rejuvenation—these hold the bulging poem together and give it a name. After all, we let *Paradise Lost* stand for Milton, the *Divine Comedy* for Dante, the *Aeneid* for Vergil, and are not misled. Then why not take *Faust* for Goethe? It is what the great majority do, including some of those who ought to know better. In English the most distinguished culprit of the lot is George Santayana, who in his volume *Three Philosophical Poets* aligns Dante, Lucretius, and—not Goethe, but Goethe's *Faust*. The result is an essay which, while showing considerable insight into *Faust*, does not represent Goethe, and in an avowedly philosophical volume misrepresents him. And even without Mr. Santayana's warning example, we have only to say the word Goethe and let the feeling of Goethe lie in the mind for the moment, and then say *Faust* to experience a change of key, a change of temper as sudden

and surprising as if we changed from *The Magic Flute* to *Tannhäuser* or from a Georgian façade to a New York sky-scraper. It may be inconvenient, but we have to admit it. *Faust* is so far from being Goethe's representative poem that if we knew only the rest of his poetry, and the *Faust* poem were described to us, we should have to agree that it was not the sort of poem—either in theme or in extent—which Goethe could be expected to write. *Faust* may be Goethe's greatest single effort—if we can call it a single effort; it may be the greatest and most representative poem of the modern era, the post-Renaissance era; but it is not without more ado a sufficient or satisfactory key to Goethe's poetic mind. It unlocks only part of it. Goethe would be a great and not at all a Faustian poet if he had never written *Faust*. There is no help for it. We have to read the whole of his poetry, if we wish to understand it.

The other easy way out is equally fallacious. It is also not uncommon, I suspect, especially among English and other foreign readers. It consists in seeing Goethe as an instance, a massive instance, of the scholar-poet, the poet who with the accents of all previous poetry at his beck and call can ring the changes on them at will, writing now like Ossian, now like Sophocles, now like Wieland, now like the village idiot; a writer whose poetry is rooted in his erudition; a writer with no inevitable style of his own; an eclectic, a virtuoso, an academic poet like Thomas Gray or Matthew Arnold or T. S. Eliot. This is probably the opinion of those who know their *Eckermann* better than their *Tasso*; who prefer to see Goethe as a great critic who also wrote poetry, rather than as a great poet who also wrote criticism; who regard him in short as a sort of poetical Dr. Johnson, or a German Sainte-Beuve. This is a tempting solution, because it removes all the difficulties, relegates Goethe to a position somewhere behind the front-rank of poets, and allows us to lay him aside when the burden of interpretation becomes too heavy.

This again is a view which is superficially quite plausible. I have no doubt that Goethe's knowledge of other men's poetry exceeded Milton's. He knew the Classical poets—not in Milton's way, but in his own way, which was better. He knew the folk-poetry of many lands, thanks chiefly to his greatest teacher, Herder. At one time or other, he read something—not hastily—of all the poetry there was, from English to Chinese. And he reflected it all—sometimes learnedly—in his own verses. How easy, then, to see him as a book-poet—a poet nearer to Milton than to Shakespeare, a poet who needed only to read other poets to become one himself.

Alas for our comfort! Nothing could be further from the truth. So incapable was Goethe of mere bookishness that there were times when it seemed that poetry would die in him for want of the something else that would force it into expression. Unlike those apparently more fortunate poets who needed only leisure and a library to bring forth all that was in them—Spenser, perhaps, and Tennyson—or those others—still more fortunate, it would seem—who can extract the utmost from themselves, while working for commissions or for practical ends—Shakespeare, presumably—Goethe had to wait on emotional crises in his daily life. He could do nothing well in poetry that was not either the fruit of the maturing years or the precipitate of some sudden catastrophe. That is why he took sixty years to write *Faust*. He had no intention of taking sixty years. More than once he pulled himself together and tried to force a conclusion, but his genius, stronger always than his will, resisted the pressure and made him delay till riper thought had flowered in him, so that even in this, the most volitional of his poems, inspiration waited on experience, new adventures of Faust's waited on new adventures in himself. To write of the union of Faust with Helena he had—unlike Marlowe—to wait twenty odd years—or should I say fifty?—he had to sojourn in the Mediterranean; he had to sacrifice old intimacies and discover new ones; he had to remake himself. To write of the end of Faust's long partnership with Mephistopheles he had to come to the end of his own long partnership with earthly life.

It is the same everywhere, though sometimes the full evidence is lacking. When he wrote of the suicide of Werther, he had experienced the promptings of suicide; a second *Werther* was not to be thought of. When he composed his erotic Roman Elegies, it was not enough to have studied Propertius; he had to have Rome and a mistress as well.

For all this there seems to be no parallel in the field of great poetry, of poetry on Goethe's scale and with Goethe's depth. The parallel is rather in the field of minor poetry. The reader will agree that we usually conceive of a great poet as one who simply has his poetry in him and must dig it out of himself, assisted incidentally by his particular experiences, but not dependent on them; and that it is usually the minor poets who must have poetry injected into them or forced on them by the vicissitudes of life. It is not usually the mark of greatness in a poet if he must wait upon toothache before he can squeak out a lyric, and then wait upon more toothache to squeak out a second. Yet here nevertheless is a major poet who, with exceptions which help to prove the rule, writes at

his best only when he writes in this empirical way, and who is capable of degenerating into insipidity when he forces the inspirational way.

But no more of major and minor. It is enough to recognise that whenever a poet writes on this personal basis his poetry has a peculiar value, that there is something inestimably precious in Wordsworth's *Prelude* which we shall not find in Keats's Odes, something of supreme significance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and his *Hamlet* which we shall not readily find in *Macbeth* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, and that when poems so vast and various as Goethe's best—his titanic *Faust*, his palpitating *Werther*—one has to think of it with the poems proper—his noble *Iphigenie*, his aristocratic *Tasso*, his amazing fragments, and above all his infinitely varied galaxies of short lyrics—when such poems come into existence in this most human and experienced way, the world is enriched by a unique poetic treasure, second—if I may anticipate the verdict of the centuries—second to none in illumination and meaning.

At last, then, we arrive at a real source of unity in Goethe's poetry—the unity of his life. This is the point of view generally accepted by students of Goethe, the point of view reached about the turn of the century and not yet superseded. Indeed there is no reason why it should be entirely superseded. It is an interesting and instructive view. It is good enough as far as it goes. We know the details of Goethe's life better, I daresay, than those of any other man. We can follow him almost day by day in letters, diaries, contemporary records; for nearly everything that he wrote we can put our finger on biographical data. At all periods of his life the biography, rightly used, is enlightening; at certain periods—the Charlotte period, for example—it seems almost indispensable. From first to last it is a fascinating study—the sort that does not leave one suddenly in the lurch, but can be guaranteed to last for a lifetime.

Yet the question arises: Is this, can this be an ultimately satisfactory view of Goethe or of any poet? What student of Goethe is there who has not sooner or later looked enviously at the student of Shakespeare and—better still for my purpose—the student of Homer, not only because their approach is simpler—they are compelled to stick to the works because the biography is deficient—but also because it is possibly truer, because the final reading of any work of art—poem, painting, or sonata—must be a reading of what it says for itself, irrespective of all documentation?

We know a great deal about the biographical origins of Goethe's *Werther*. We know of Goethe's triangular affair with Kestner and Lotte at Wetzlar; we know of marital unhappiness in the

Brentano household; we know of a young jurist who went the length of *Werther* and shot himself. We have intimate letters of the period; even the most inquisitive of pedants must experience a certain sense of repletion. If the life is the key to the works, then *Werther* lacks nothing; its commentary is complete and ideal.

Yet I would question whether this personal baggage has been anything but a drag on *Werther*. Read by itself, *Werther* proves to be a prose-poem, lyrical, metaphysical, with a faint admixture of fiction. What commentary it needs it can derive from companion works by the same author, from *Faust*, from the lyrics. All the biography can do is to distort this true view of it, force a more novelistic interpretation on the reader than the text warrants, and reduce it from the poetic marvel which it is—rivalling again and again the best of Goethe in sheer lyrical felicity and effortlessness—to a piece of provincial gossip which set some little town talking. *Werther* has gained nothing from the facts; the only way to know it is to forget the facts while reading it. Yet once you know the facts, it is difficult not to be influenced by them. I sometimes wonder whether in this case we should not have done better without them altogether.

This is an extreme case. Those who cling to the opposite and more orthodox view, and insist that the life of Goethe is the indispensable clue to his poetry, may counter with *Tasso*, that teasing masterpiece, in which Tasso, the poet, and Antonio, the statesman, finding themselves under official orders to become bosom-friends, make the attempt and neither fail nor succeed. Here it is fair to ask whether we should ever have arrived at a clear view of this work without some knowledge of Goethe's spiritual union—I had almost said spiritual identity—with Charlotte von Stein, and of the sharp cleavage at that stage of his life between the artist in him and the man of affairs. Yet even here my answer would be that while the life offers a short-cut to the play's meaning, sooner or later the critic of genius, feeling his way through Goethe's writings, listening to the overtones, picking up here a clue and there a clue, would have brought us to the same point and discovered the lyrical source, which ruins the play as drama, yet makes it great and unique as something else, half drama, half monologue. And I would maintain, further, that the critic who had arrived at this reading of the play from within would be surer of his ground, surer in his grasp of his author as a whole, than we who come at the work with the tools of biography.

There is no alternative. We cannot be content for all time with the biographical unity of Goethe's poetry; we have to seek

out the inner unity of it, the spiritual and philosophical unity, the real coherence of it as a poetic universe, self-contained and self-explanatory. Here we are in deep waters. Yet they have to be plumbed. For, remember, until we reach the deeper unity of Goethe's poetry, there is no inner unity at all. There is not the preliminary unity of style and temperament which we readily discern in Shakespeare, and which sets us free not to press him for his philosophical unity, if he has any. In Goethe's poetry we have to go on to the philosophical unity or confess defeat.

The great task is facilitated somewhat by the encouraging discovery which every reader of Goethe makes for himself—far more easily than in Shakespeare—that there is everywhere in Goethe the palpable evidence of belief, faith, reliance on fundamentals—in short, of some underlying and positive philosophy. The task, on the other hand, is lengthened indefinitely by the further and more gradual discovery that if the philosophy is real and positive, it is also quite undogmatic, never explicitly and methodically formulated, a thing less of structure than of growth, a philosophy more in terms of poetic statement than of logical. It is only by knowing Goethe's poetry through and through that we can know its philosophy; and it is only with the help of this philosophy that we can make the poetry hang together.

It is a far cry from this arduous and esoteric view of Goethe to the popular one I began with. Goethe, who is spasmodically among the truly popular poets, is in the main difficult and unpopular. Yet even in this fuller and truer light his appeal to mankind, or at least to the thoughtful among mankind, is wide, wider perhaps than that of other poets. For while Goethe must necessarily appeal to all lovers of poetry, he appeals also to all lovers of the truth. Let me explain.

The initial function of poetry is to delight, to entertain with words and the associations of words. Some would add that it may also instruct by transmitting wisdom in agreeable rhythms. There is the poetry of Homer, the poetry of Lucretius. Goethe's poetry, if we live with it long enough, forces us to contemplate a third function, not yet clearly seen, certainly not yet fully exploited. It is that of poetry, not as the vehicle of wisdom, but as the instrument of wisdom, the means to wisdom.

This is a use of poetry which—unless it can be traced in some of the early poet-philosophers of the type of Empedocles—becomes apparent only in Shakespeare, the first great undogmatic poet in the modern world, as Goethe is the second. For if there is not the deliberate pursuit of wisdom by means of poetry in Shakespeare,

there is—clearly shown—the opportunity for the pursuit. Whatever our view of Shakespeare, it will be agreed that his wisdom, coherent or incoherent, does not precede his poetry and then slide over into it, but comes with it and through it. Shakespeare's insight into the universe, we feel, is indistinguishable from his tragic vision. Deprived of his tragic vision, he would never have reached the wisdom. His reading of things, in other words, is passionate, imaginative, instantaneous. This employment of the creative vision upon the problem of human wisdom may be discernible now and then in older poets, but in them it is always confused or impeded by their subservience to or espousal of a dogma, a myth, a system. Not until the undogmatic Shakespeare do we come face to face with the great opportunity.

Goethe makes us suspect that Shakespeare was not fully aware of it, and perhaps did not understand it. In saying this I am thinking of the famous and almost classical passage in Keats's letters—obviously and admittedly indebted to his reading of Shakespeare—concerning the chameleon poet. "The poetical character" says Keats, "is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing." And he says further: "When I am in a room with people, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated."

Now if there were any soundness in this, the poet would be the ideal instrument of the truth, and there would be no need of philosophers at all. If the self could be thus suddenly annihilated, it would be things, the truth of things, which speaks through the poet's utterance. But the fallacy can soon be shown. If Keats and Shakespeare were in the same room at the same time and both suffered this so-called annihilation, would the poetic record of the experience be the same in each case, as it ought to be, if neither has any self? No. Shakespeare would write Shakespeare and Keats would write Keats. Where then would be the loss of self? Where would be the objectivity? Where would be the truth?

On reflection, it cannot be things and others that displace the self in Keats's experience; it is his imaginative self displacing his practical. The passage is intensely interesting as a hint of what it may feel like to be John Keats, but it takes us no further towards the discovery of truth through poetry than the old rhapsodic and oracular notion which made Cassandra a prophetess and took the foam on the poet's lips as an earnest of his philosophical reliability. We know better now. We know that a poet's

imaginative faculty is as personal to him as his voice or his face, and that words spoken in the heat of passion have as good a chance of being wrong as words spoken in cold blood.

Shakespeare, like all the imaginative poets, would perhaps have questioned this. Goethe, I think, would have recognised it. There is a little-regarded passage in *Faust* which throws a light. It is in the great scene of the compact with Mephistopheles. Faust has been asserting that he will experience everything that man can experience. "All that is allotted to mankind I will savour for myself; I will touch the heights and the depths; heap on myself humanity's weal and woe; expand myself into humanity's self and, like it, go smash in the end":

*Und was der ganzen Menschheit zugeteilt ist,  
Will ich in meinem innern Selbst geniessen,  
Mit meinem Geist das Höchste und Tiefste greiten,  
Ihr Wohl und Weh auf meinen Busen häufen,  
Und so mein eigen Selbst zu ihrem Selbst erweitern,  
Und, wie sie selbst, am End' auch ich zerscheitern.*

This, if we look behind the dramatic despair at the deeper impulse, is in order to satisfy his desire for the absolute by what seems to him the only remaining course. But Mephistopheles has an alternative. It is that Faust should associate himself with a poet, and let the poet's imagination heap on him "the courage of the lion, the swiftness of the stag, the passion of an Italian, and the endurance of the North." "I should like to know such a person", he says; "I would call him Mr. Microcosm."

*Assoziiert euch mit einem Poeten,  
Lasst den Herrn in Gedanken schweifen,  
Und alle edlen Qualitäten  
Auf Euren Ehrenscheitel häufen,  
Des Löwen Mut,  
Des Hirsches Schnelligkeit,  
Des Italieners feurig Blut,  
Des Nordens Dau'rbarkeit.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Möchte selbst solch einen, Herren kennen,  
Würd' ihn Herrn Mikrokosmos nennen.*

This is a proposal which Faust does not deign even to discuss. For Faust, who desires to know and experience the ultimate, there can be no unconditioned reliance on the imagination. And the same is true of Goethe. He is not, he does not choose to be an imaginative poet in Shakespeare's and Keats's sense. For him the imagination is valueless as an independent faculty. It is indispensable. Yes, for without it there would be no poetry at all.

But autonomous? No. A good servant, he would probably say, but a bad master.

This at least can be claimed—that if it is possible to make poetry a method and an instrument of truth, it must be in Goethe's way, not in Keats's. Not by any supposed annihilation of the self, letting in the universe, but by enlarging, developing, and standardising the self, whilst remaining a poet. It will be time enough to assign Goethe his place among great poets when this most important aspect of his work has been more fully elucidated and made known. And the time is not yet.

A word more in conclusion. It is part of this same truth-seeking impulse in Goethe's poetic mind when he says in one of his early conversations that while he was still at the stage of expressing things figuratively—*uneigentlich*—he hoped later to express them just as they were—*eigentlich*. The modernist tendency in poetry, we are told, strives to substitute the poetry of statement for the poetry of metaphor. If that is so, the modernists will find their great exemplar in Goethe, the poet whom of all great poets they study least.