Introduction

Charlotte Lee

Goethe is best known for his literary works. His novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), which he wrote in 1794 at the age of twenty-four, made him a sensation across Europe. His poems are adored both on their own terms and in the song settings by Schubert, Schumann and others that continue to bring them to new audiences. His *Faust* combines vivid characters and compelling themes with a rare degree of formal experimentation and rhythmic variety; it has been a point of reference for composers from Charles Gounod (*Faust*, 1859) to Randy Newman (*Randy Newman's Faust*, 1995), and for writers from Louisa May Alcott (*A Modern Mephistopheles*, published anonymously in 1877, and of a rather different flavour from *Little Women*) to Mikhail Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*, written between 1929 and 1940) to Václav Havel (*Temptation*, 1985). Indeed, the reach of *Faust* extends beyond Europe and America: the scholar Guo Moruo translated it into Chinese in 1928 (following his 1922 translation of *Werther*). Moreover, since 2015, some eighty academics in China have been working on the first research edition of Goethe's complete works in Chinese translation.

For Goethe himself, however, his literary work was but one part of a much greater creative and intellectual endeavour, which encompassed art, philosophy and natural science. To his mind, his most significant contribution of all was his *Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colours*) of 1810. The reception of this work was mixed, to say the least. It is best known for its attack on Newton's theory of the refraction of light, which was vehement and in turn came in for much criticism. Yet, in philosophical terms, it is an important piece, notable in particular for its subtle handling of processes of perception, and for its reflections on the role of human subjectivity and physicality in our experience of the world (see Chapter 23 of this volume).

In his preface to the *Theory of Colours*, Goethe comments:

> No matter how diverse, enigmatic and intricate [nature's] language often seems, its elements remain forever the same. With gentle weight and counterweight nature balances the scales as they swing …
>
> We perceive these elements of movement and structure in a variety of ways: as simple attraction and repulsion, as the waxing and waning of light, as the motion of air, as vibration of solid bodies, as oxidation and reduction. All these, however, have the effect of dividing or uniting, of setting existence in motion and lending support to some form of life. (FA 23.1:13 / CW 12:158)

This quotation is characteristic of Goethe's thought in several respects. First, there is the central position of nature. In all his activity, from his poetry to his scientific study to his work as minister of state, nature is a vital force. Throughout his life, Goethe approached nature with a combination of love, wonder and respect for its enigmas. Mastery of the natural world was never an aim for him: indeed, as argued in Chapter 35 of this volume, *Faust* is in no small part an exploration of the perils of the desire to conquer and control nature. The quotation from *Theory of Colours* also conveys something of Goethe's sense of the integrity of nature, his fascination with the rhythmic alternations (attraction and repulsion, waxing and waning) which are life's structuring force. That confidence in the interconnectedness of things also finds expression in his essay, 'Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt' ('The Experiment as Mediator Between Object and Subject'): 'Nothing happens in nature that does not bear some relation to the whole' (FA 25:33 / CW12:15). This is not to say that Goethe was blind to the fragmentation and disintegration which is also part of life: note, in the last sentence of the quotation from *Theory of Colours*, that 'dividing' comes before 'uniting'. Yet, for him, 'nature's balance' was paramount.

The pattern of Goethe's own existence was not always one of 'gentle weight and counterweight'. He saw battle in the French Revolutionary Wars, and all his children predeceased him: four in infancy, and the first-born, August, at the age of forty, two years before Goethe's own death in 1832. He was also no stranger to scandal: he lived with Christiane Vulpius, the mother of his children, for eighteen years before marrying her. Needless to say, the social stigma of this arrangement was more damaging for her than it was for him. Moreover, even the period when he appeared most concerned to promote 'balance' as an aesthetic and ethical norm, the so-called 'classical' period which overlapped with his collaboration with Friedrich Schiller, was also one of doubt and instability (see Chapter 13). Goethe's life, then, had plenty of darker moments, and traumatic and difficult events recur in his literary works.

Yet his life was also energetic and fulfilled, and animated by faith, albeit of an unorthodox kind, which had more to do with 'the human meaningfulness of Nature'[1] than it did with any institutionalised religion (see Chapter 7). His writing, for its part, is 'movement and structure' made manifest. Christopher Middleton has described Goethe as a 'sensuous, demonstrative, exploratory, divinatory poet' (CW1: xxiv). The impulse to sensuous structure, which contains but also enables radically innovative content, is particularly evident in the lyric poetry, but it can be detected throughout Goethe's oeuvre, from the literary to scientific. Each piece is distinct; moreover, there is, as one would expect, a gulf between his output as a young man and as an old man. Nonetheless, there are deep continuities between his works: each, we might say, in an allusion to the above-quoted essay 'The Experiment as Mediator', bears some relation to the whole.

This volume seeks to bring some of those continuities to the fore. The various chapters resonate with one another in ways which are partly intentional, partly fortuitous – but not coincidental, for in the end they are all dealing with the same man, vast and diverse though his oeuvre may be. A further central aim of the book is to highlight the practical as well as the intellectual aspects of Goethe's life. Goethe was suspicious of abstraction, even though he was capable of it. Partly for this reason, and partly owing to his appointment early on in life to a role as a court official (see Chapter 4), there is very often a practical or applied pendant to his intellectual activity, from his work in the theatre (Chapters 3 and 9) to his involvement in the mine at Ilmenau (Chapter 24).

The book is divided into six parts. In Part I, *Life and Times*, the scale of exploration ranges from the intimate, such as Goethe's amorous relationships, to events which changed the course of European history. This section aims to give readers a picture of Goethe's world, and to convey something of where his work came from. The first two chapters offer, respectively, a full account of Goethe's life, and an examination of the historical significance of Frankfurt, his birthplace, and Weimar, where he lived from the age of twenty-six. Close attention is paid, here and at several points in Part I, to the complex social stratification of the two towns: both can be credited with having formed him, but each was very different from the other. The remaining chapters focus on particularly significant aspects of Goethe's environment (the court and society at Weimar), of his career (his work as a civil servant), and of his times (the French Revolution). Moreover, a chapter each is given over to elucidating the themes of class and religion, which play a crucial but idiosyncratic role in his writing.

Parts II and III focus on Goethe's literary and artistic contexts and output. Part II, *Literature*, proceeds by genre – poetry, drama, prose – with additional dedicated chapters on Goethe's largest literary projects, *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister*, before considering the details and significance of Goethe's 'classical' phase, and his oft-contested relationship with the Romantic movement. This section explains how Goethe inflects current literary trends and starts new ones, and it seeks to showcase his extraordinary versatility as a writer. Part III, *Art*, highlights the supreme importance of the visual arts for Goethe. The first chapter again considers important influences on Goethe, particularly the Greek and Roman art which played a significant role across the spectrum of his creative and intellectual output. Three chapters in this section are also concerned with his own artistic activity, from drawing to collecting to landscaping. Once again, the practical and sensory dimensions of Goethe's existence come to the fore, with our attention often trained in these chapters on the material and the haptic as well as the visual.

Questions of praxis and materiality also run through Part IV, *Philosophy and Science.* Science was not formally separate from philosophy until the 1840s and 1850s, with the establishment of institutes, although the process of specialisation and professionalisation accelerated in the late 1810s. This was inevitable because the field of expertise was becoming too broad for a single individual to grasp, which had still just about been possible at the end of the eighteenth century. For Goethe, philosophy and science are not the same thing, but they are part of the same spectrum of activity,[2] hence their juxtaposition in this section. The first three chapters in Part IV consider key philosophical relationships: to Spinoza, to Kant, and to post-Kantian Idealism. Attention is paid not only to *what* Goethe thought but to *how* he thought, and to his heterodox mode of working. The final three chapters in the section turn to major aspects of Goethe's scientific activity: to his diverse morphological theories, which were fundamental to his thought; to his work on optics and colour; and to geology, an important but hitherto rather underexplored area.

Parts V and VI move outwards in space and forwards in time. Part V, *World Cultures: Inspiration and Reception*, considers Goethe's relationship to places beyond Germany, moving as far afield from his home as America and China. Only the chapters on Italy and France deal with countries that he actually visited. His experience of the others featured in this section was indirect – even Britain, for all its relative proximity, although Goethe met any number of British tourists in Weimar, and indeed in Italy. Some chapters are weighted more towards the influence of the country in question on

Goethe, whilst others – above all the chapter on Iran – are concerned especially with his reception. The section closes with a thorough examination of Goethe's concept of 'Weltliteratur' ('world literature'), which is often invoked but poorly understood.

Finally, Part VI, *Goethe's Lasting Significance*, considers the long-term resonances of Goethe's work. The opening chapter explores his deep ambivalence towards modernity, especially as expressed in his *Faust*. Two chapters reflect on areas – love and the natural world, respectively – in which Goethe seems to anticipate concerns which are prominent in public discourse today. In addition, there is the question of Goethe's influence on subsequent generations of writers, artists and musicians. This would fill many books by itself (indeed, it already has). Priority has been given here to Goethe's impact on the musical world, not least because Lieder and opera have played a crucial role in disseminating his ideas, including to non-German-speaking audiences. The closing chapter in Part VI considers the effect of politics on reception and invites us to consider which 'Goethe' we think we are reading.

In line with the vision behind the series, *Literature in Context*, of which it is a part, this book seeks to combine range and accessibility: range through the large number of essays, and accessibility through their succinct format. Yet no single volume on Goethe can be comprehensive. He had an unusually long and productive life: he lived until he was eighty-two and, as will by now be clear, he was active on any number of fronts. In this book, too, there will inevitably be questions left unanswered. Happily, there is a wealth of outstanding material available. Five particularly significant English-language contributions are listed at the beginning of the 'Further Reading' section at the end of this volume. Two of them describe themselves as introductions, but they go far beyond that. The hope is that readers will see this book as working in concert with these pre-existing studies. The purpose of this new volume is to revisit Goethe's life and work in the third decade of the twenty-first century, as we celebrate the 275th anniversary of Goethe's birth (1749–2024), and to reflect current developments in scholarship in the various countries from which its contributors hail.

Notes

1 See Nicholas Boyle, 'Embodied Cognition: Goethe's *Farbenlehre* as Phenomenology', *German Life and Letters* 70.4 (2017), 478–90 (at 479).
2 I am grateful to Joachim Whaley for this formulation.

PART I

Life and Times

CHAPTER I

The Life

Nicholas Boyle

Johann Wolfgang Goethe was born in Frankfurt am Main on 28 August 1749. His father, Johann Caspar Goethe, son of a wealthy tailor turned innkeeper, was a man of leisure who lived on his inherited fortune and devoted himself to the education of his children. His mother, Catharina Elisabeth Textor, was one of the daughters of Frankfurt's most senior official, a lively woman closer in age to her son than to her husband. Wolfgang was the eldest of seven children, but he and his sister Cornelia, with whom he had an intense relationship, of whose potentially incestuous nature he seems to have been aware, were the only two to survive beyond the age of six.

Educated at home by tutors with Cornelia until 1765, Goethe then went to study law in Leipzig. There he spent less time on the law than on various distractions. He was a decent amateur artist but always hoped to be better than he was, and in Leipzig's old castle he attended the drawing academy of Adam Friedrich Oeser, friend and teacher of the art historian J. J. Winckelmann. In this indirect way Winckelmann, then living in Rome, began an influence on Goethe which lasted a lifetime. Leipzig also offered literary temptations, having been the centre of Germany's literary revival over the previous forty years. Goethe had had a moralistic play and a novel almost finished when he came up to university, but he ostentatiously burnt them – after reading them to his friends – and started to write would-be sophisticated erotic verse. Having fallen in love with the daughter of an innkeeper, Käthchen Schönkopf, who preferred a solider character who eventually became burgomaster of Leipzig, he took revenge by starting his first mature play, *Die Mitschuldigen* (*Partners in Guilt*), a comedy showing a woman's regrets after a year of marriage to the wrong man. His emotional state became hectic and his health gave way – he may have suffered an attack of tuberculosis – and in September 1768 he returned to Frankfurt without a degree. During the next year and a half, spent at home, Goethe had another bout of illness, which brought him apparently to death's

door, and in the aftermath underwent a brief conversion to evangelical Christianity. This was also a time when he seriously studied alchemy, and when he may have formed the idea of writing a play about the alchemist and magician, Dr Faust.

In April 1770 Goethe had recovered enough to embark on study for the doctorate at Strasbourg. However, he had now emerged from his Christian period and he deliberately chose to write on a potentially shocking subject from ecclesiastical law, concerning the nature of ancient Jewish religion: the dissertation proved too scandalous to be accepted and he proceeded instead to the licentiate in law by another route. In the winter of 1770–1 the Riga clergyman, J. G. Herder, already a well-known literary figure, was staying in Strasbourg for an eye operation, and Goethe spent much time with him, learning to look at language and literature as the expression of a national culture, which might get concentrated in the genius of a single individual, as had happened in England with Shakespeare, as had already happened once in Germany with Martin Luther, and as might happen again in the eighteenth century. Fired by Herder's enthusiasm, Goethe rode out round Alsace, growing sensitive to the emotional appeal of landscape, collecting a dozen German folk songs from old women in the villages, and trying his hand at writing some himself.

He also fell in love again. In the village of Sessenheim, not far from the Rhine, he found a rustic paradise that seemed like an embodiment of all that Herder had inspired him to think of as the German way of life. The Lutheran pastor kept a smallholding where Goethe spent some idyllic weeks and got to know one of the pastor's daughters, Friederike Brion, probably rather too well. He was, however, already averse to the fixity of commitment marriage seemed to involve; when he had got his licentiate he terminated the relationship rather abruptly; and in August 1771 he left Strasbourg for Frankfurt. Friederike suffered some kind of breakdown, and the theme of the woman betrayed runs through all Goethe's writing of the next eight years and more.

Back in Frankfurt, where he started a legal practice, Goethe's uneasy conscience combined with the inspiration provided by the memoirs of a sixteenth-century robber-baron to furnish him with the material of a play in the manner of which he thought Herder would approve, Shakespearean and Germanic, and written down in first draft in six weeks. *Götz von Berlichingen* has a historical basis, and Walter Scott was inspired by Goethe's example to think of using his own local history as the material for his novels; but the play also has a timeless love intrigue, focusing on the weak-willed man, Weislingen, who is unable to remain faithful to

a worthy woman and betrays his class origins for the sake of a brilliant career. *Götz* was not published immediately, but became known to a few friends in manuscript and its author was asked to start reviewing for a new Frankfurt journal. With that Goethe became effectively part of the literary movement subsequently known as *Sturm und Drang* (*Storm and Stress*), which attempted to introduce into German literature the middle-class themes and values of the contemporary English novel.

In the spring of 1772 Goethe went to acquire some practical legal experience at the highest level at the Reichskammergericht (Imperial Chamber of Justice) in Wetzlar and once again he fell in love with a spirit of ideal Germanic domesticity, Charlotte Buff, who, however, was already engaged. After an emotional summer with Lotte and her fiancé, spent largely in the Buffs' kitchen, Goethe in September tore himself away and returned rather miserably to Frankfurt. Shortly afterwards he heard that K. W. Jerusalem, another young Wetzlar lawyer, had shot himself – there were rumours of a hopeless love for a married woman.

Law took up some of Goethe's time in 1773, but most of it went on literature, and preparing for the private publication of *Götz* in the late summer. His name was then made overnight, even though the publication was a financial disaster. In 1774 an even greater literary success brought him a European reputation: he fused the two elements in his Wetzlar experiences, his relationship with Lotte Buff, and the later suicide, into a novel. In *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), the only fully realistic German novel of the eighteenth century, the cultural ambitions of *Storm and Stress* are forced into self-destruction by a hostile social and political environment. Much moral outrage was generated by a novel which appeared to condone both adultery and suicide but for thirty-five years Goethe was known in the first instance as the author of *Werther*. He attracted visitors from all over the Empire, among them, in December 1774, the seventeen-year-old future duke of Weimar, who was bowled over by the electric personality of the poet. It was the most creative period in Goethe's life: poems and other works, mainly fragments, poured out, and about this time we first hear of privileged acquaintances getting a sight of the developing manuscript of his *Faust*.

In 1775 Goethe made an attempt to settle into Frankfurt life by becoming engaged to 'Lili' Schönemann, the daughter of a Frankfurt banking family, who was in many ways a suitable and attractive partner. But he was still afraid of being pinned down, and in May, without a word to Lili, and with some admiring visitors whom he had never met before, he suddenly left for South Germany, ostensibly to visit Cornelia, who was now married.

Dressed up in the costume Werther had made famous – blue tail-coat and buff waistcoat and trousers – the party went on to Zurich and into the mountains as far as the Gotthard pass, where Goethe sketched the road down to Italy but turned away towards Lili and home. Unsurprisingly, though, his engagement to Lili was very soon at an end. His home town had come to seem suffocatingly provincial, and its horizons too narrow for anyone interested in a truly national German literature. Maybe the Germany of the autocratic principalities, whose ethos he was at the time denouncing in a new play, *Egmont*, might offer a better theatre for his talents. On the advice of his father, no friend to princes, he set out again for Italy, but he turned aside to follow an invitation to Weimar, where he arrived on 7 November.

It was soon clear that Duke Carl August wanted more of his guest than passing entertainment from a fashionable personality. He bought and restored for Goethe a tumbledown cottage and garden just outside the city walls where he could pretend to be living a rustic existence like Werther or Rousseau. Six months after his arrival Goethe was made a member of the duchy's ruling Privy Council – there were two other members, beside himself and the duke – and Herder was summoned to become the primate of the duchy's Lutheran Church. The Weimar court was not amused to have a resident genius: it was petty, backbiting and snobbish, and Goethe's middle-class origins counted against him. In the wife of the duke's equerry, Charlotte von Stein, however, Goethe saw the representative of his ideal court: a society of noble, self-disciplined people devoting themselves to their own culture and the improvement of the world. He felt 'destiny' had meant him for her even before he met her, and for ten years, during which they were lovers in everything except a physical sense, he allowed her to exercise over him an extraordinary fascination.

After a second journey to the Gotthard in 1779, and to his sister's grave (she had died in 1777), Goethe convinced himself that for the present 'destiny' had sent him not to Italy, but to Weimar, where he gradually accumulated the prosaic duties of an administrator, taking on the defence ministry in addition to mines and highways. In 1782, when the chancellor of the duchy's Exchequer left under a cloud and he agreed to act in his place, these responsibilities made it essential for him to be ennobled and become 'von Goethe'. He might seem to have reached the pinnacle of his career, but his literary output had begun to suffer and for a decade he published virtually nothing. Until 1780 he continued to produce original and substantial work, including a semi-autobiographical novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung* (*Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*), and