

## Introduction

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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'<sup>1</sup> 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' (CWI: 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.

