

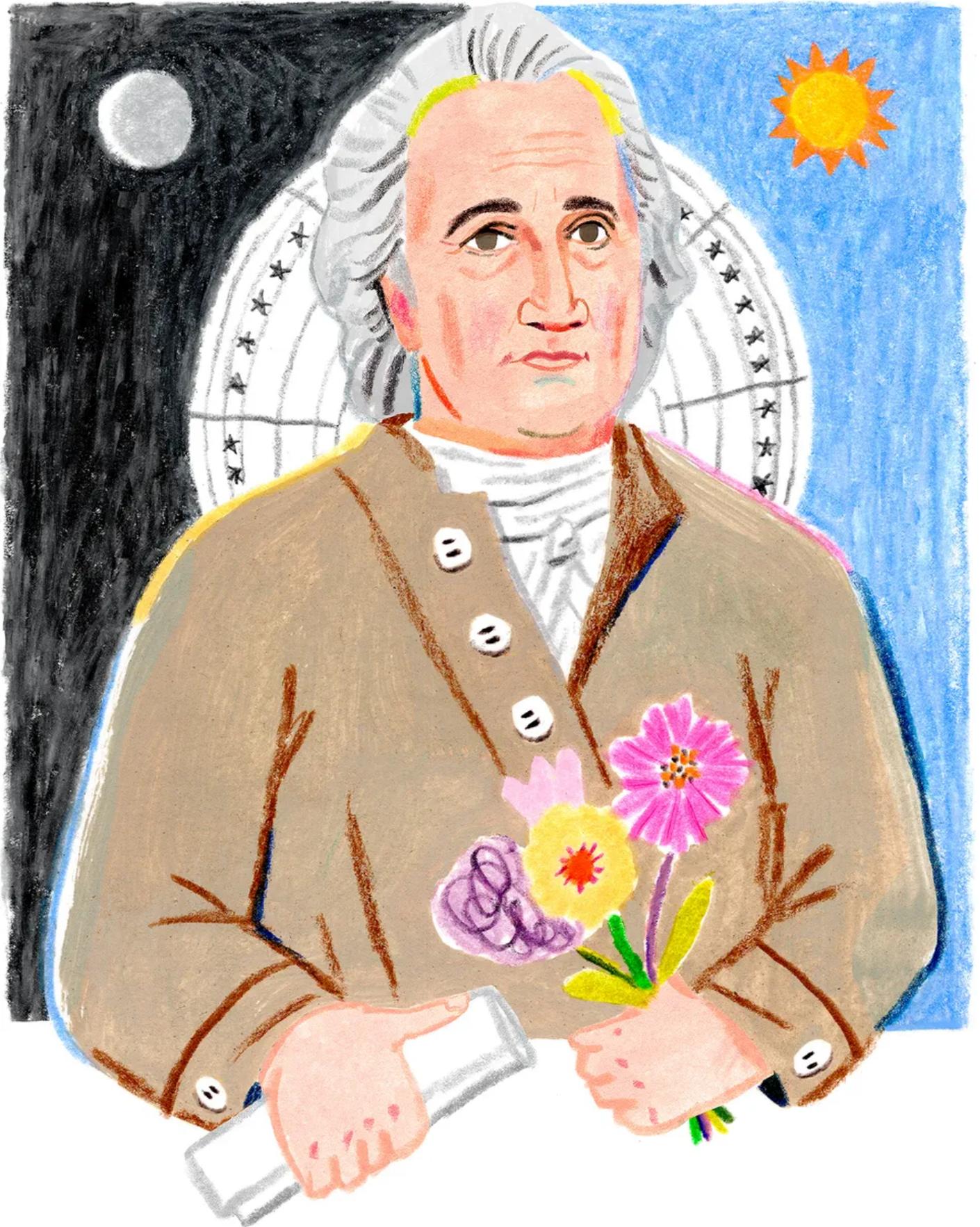
BOOKS

WHAT MAKES GOETHE SO SPECIAL?

The German poet's dauntingly eclectic accomplishments were founded on a tireless interrogation of how a life should be lived.

By Merve Emre

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"We are always recreating our whole life," Goethe wrote in his memoir. Illustration by Rebecca Clarke

The biographer of a truly world-historical writer finds his work weighted with a double burden. He must trace how his subject's private passions and follies gave rise to original art, and he must show this art to be the purest expression of the age, a register of its political and cultural upheavals. At his most artful, the biographer is like a professional juggler, tossing one ball into the air—up go the poet's earliest lyrics—and waiting for the right moment in its arc to toss a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth—the imperious father, the punishing lover, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the decline of religion, the final illness—while cleanly catching the first. The motion is hard to master. Every year brings fat biographies that are collections of dropped balls. But, when the correct rhythm is achieved, the balls merge into a fluid arc: a single life contains a whole era of history.

Of all major writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe offers his biographers the most promising chance to unite the life of the artist with the spirit of his time. They have insisted on the idea of the *Goethezeit* (Age of Goethe), to describe the period from 1770, when Goethe published his first collection of poems, to 1830, when he was completing his frantic, hallucinatory tragedy, "Faust," and the last volume of his stately autobiography, "Poetry and Truth." In those sixty years, he published three of the most significant novels in the history of literature ("The Sorrows of Young Werther," "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship," "Elective Affinities"), dramas, epics, elegies, lyric poems, and treatises on geology, morphology, and color. The poet Gottfried August Bürger liked to proclaim that Goethe was the "German Shakespeare." Perversely, the compliment downplayed the variety of his achievements. He was the German Shakespeare, the German Cervantes, and the German Racine, and perhaps even the German Franklin and the German Huxley, compressed into one endlessly energetic and kaleidoscopic figure.

Then, there was the day job. For fifty years, Goethe served as an adviser to Karl August, Grand Duke of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, the sovereign of one of the many tiny polities that made up Germany. Together, they stabilized the ducal budget, opened silver mines outside Erfurt, staffed the University of Jena, drank, and chased women. Goethe's achievements may have been Olympian, but his personality was all too human. Magnetic, moody, arrogant, and frequently lovesick in his youth, he aged into conservatism. Late-eighteenth-century visitors to the court of Weimar could have listened to Goethe lament the French Revolution in Alexandrines or watched him dissect moth wings under a microscope. They could have saluted him as he tried to assemble a coalition against the French revolutionaries, and, after Bonaparte came to power, could have gossiped about Goethe's audience with the Emperor, who claimed to have read "Werther" seven times and beseeched Goethe to become his propagandist. By 1875, it was possible for Goethe's first English biographer, George Henry Lewes, to declare that Goethe's "influence on his nation has been greater than that of any man since Luther."

Lewes's biography was written in a passionate, high-Victorian style, facts quaking under descriptions of Goethe's Romantic character: "We shall see him wild, restless, aimless, erring, and extravagant enough to satisfy the most ardent admirer of the vagabond nature of genius." More than a century later, a British scholar, Nicholas Boyle, opened the first volume of his biography, "Goethe: The Poet and the Age" (1991), by praising Lewes and denigrating the factions that followed: the National Socialists, who claimed Goethe as the emblem of German cultural purity, and the Marxists, who celebrated him as the original bourgeois revolutionary. Against the ideologues, Boyle portrayed Goethe as a changeable creature, beholden to historical shifts in power but able to turn them to his advantage with daring and dignity. "We are always recreating our whole life," Goethe wrote in "Poetry and Truth." "Occupations, inclinations, favorite pursuits, whims, we try them all out only to exclaim at last that all is vanity."

Boyle's biography is a masterpiece of the genre and may even prove definitive—if it gets finished. The second volume, of a projected three, appeared twenty-five years ago, with nearly thirty years of Goethe's life left to relate. Since then, several one-volume efforts have entered the field, including "Goethe: Life as a Work of Art" (2013), by the German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski; the *Daily Mail* columnist A. N. Wilson's "Goethe: His Faustian Life" (2024); and now "Goethe: A Life in Ideas" (Princeton), by another British scholar, Matthew Bell.

Bell's biography argues that Goethe brokered a truce between the secular world of politics and the spiritual world of art. He yielded to the theatrical artifice of the duchy, but yearned for untamable wonders. The result was "an unusual form of compromise," Bell writes, with Goethe accepting "the reality of political power" but pursuing a "full and disinterested appreciation" of everything that appeared to lie beyond that power's reach: plants, animals, minerals, light, desire, death, Heaven, and Hell. He fashioned a religion of nature and, with a considerable sense of irony, preached it to the aristocrats of the Weimar court. From this religion emerged an art that did not imitate the chaos of nature, but created "in a manner *analogous* to nature." Human yet demonic, modern yet mythic, Goethe's vast body of work came, in his words, from the "efforts of the individual to preserve itself in the face of the destructive force of the universe."

For Goethe, creation and destruction were entwined from the moment of his birth—at noon on August 28, 1749, in Frankfurt am Main. On arrival, he appeared dead. He was saved, he believed, by the fortunate position of the planets. "My horoscope was propitious," he began "Poetry and Truth." "The sun stood in the sign of the Virgin, and had culminated for the day; Jupiter and Venus looked on him with a friendly eye." His childhood seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence. Frankfurt was a proud, prosperous, free city. Goethe was descended from a line of

distinguished lawyers and councilmen on one side and a family of wealthy tailors and wine merchants on the other. His mother was vivacious, lovely. His father was “didactic,” a harsh, eccentric lawyer who distrusted Frankfurt’s public schools and devoted himself to the education of Goethe and his younger sister, Cornelia. The boy had an army of private tutors, for Latin, Italian, French, Yiddish, Hebrew, English, ancient philosophy, history, geography, drawing, penmanship, and music. He was bred to be a lawyer, like his father. At the age of sixteen, he arrived at Leipzig University, pale and thin, with dark hair, a hooked nose, and an extravagant wardrobe. His suitcase contained drafts of half-written plays based on stories from the Old Testament.

He despised the law, and later speculated that those born under the sign of Virgo were fated to write. He developed a reputation as a shallow, cocky student, “a fop,” according to his classmates, “uncommonly puffed up.” After three years, a pulmonary hemorrhage ended his studies and sent him slinking back to Frankfurt—like “a wretched little fox,” he chided himself. Confined to the house, Goethe read Rousseau and “Schäckespear,” whose histories of corruptible kings and emperors revealed to him the “secret point,” he wrote, “at which the particularity of our self, the pretended freedom of our will, collides with the inevitable course of the universe.” From his sickbed, he scribbled occasional poems, erotic ballads, and an accomplished verse comedy, “Partners in Guilt.” In 1770, at the age of twenty, he cast it all, save for the play, into the fire. “A grand auto-da-fé,” he sighed to his sister.

When he recovered his strength, he resumed his legal studies, this time in Strasbourg. The medieval city and the surrounding Rhineland landscape stirred his patriotic feeling. After he met the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, a champion of vernacular culture, Goethe started to collect folk poetry. “Germanness emerging,” he noted in his diary. He wanted to find a dramatic subject appropriate to his new national ambition, nothing “corsetted or prettified.”

On his return to Frankfurt, he found it: the life of Götz von Berlichingen, an early-sixteenth-century knight with a prosthetic iron hand, whose autobiography Goethe had stumbled upon in the city library. In six weeks, he drafted his first major work: “Götz von Berlichingen,” a sprawling history play in five acts, which staged its hero’s shifting military and sexual alliances in the disintegrating Holy Roman Empire. Amid kidnappings, poisonings, suicides, affairs, and the Peasants’ War—“the plot spirals into utter chaos,” Bell observes—Götz attempts to hold fast to his honor and his freedom to fight for whom he pleases. Loyal to the Emperor, scornful of the aristocracy, and sympathetic to the peasants’ desire for liberation, if not their bloodlust, he is torn between medieval chivalry and modern self-preservation. He incarnates a distinctly Goethean type: the exceptional individual who, as Goethe worried, “encounters the crude world” and must “surrender his high qualities and finally renounce them altogether.”

The play, published in 1773 and first performed in Berlin the following year, was “the most beautiful, the most captivating monstrosity,” a critic declared. Its mingling of high and low characters, settings, and dialects trampled on the rules of classical drama and inaugurated a German dramatic tradition. Success brought Goethe relief but also anxiety. “I think it will be some time before I again do something that will find a public,” he wrote.

Not so. “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” published in 1774, was his most influential work. It is now as famous for the cult that allegedly sprang from it—young men emulating its protagonist’s yellow waistcoat and his suicide—as for its odd epistolary form and even odder story. An ardent young man, Werther, falls in love with Lotte, a simple village girl engaged to a dependable but dull man named Albert. Love transforms Werther. He grows exquisitely and obsessively aware of the natural world around Lotte—the details of the mountains, the valleys, the walnut and linden trees under which she stands. In his letters, he imagines Lotte as a naturally occurring phenomenon, an innate and ineffable presence: “When I close my eyes, here, in my forehead, at the focus of my inner vision, her dark eyes remain.”

Falling in love was an early and harmless pleasure for Goethe. He wrote love letters that mingled lush images of nature with innocent theories of emotion—a true “Rousseauian child of nature,” as Bell describes him. “When I say love, I mean the oscillatory sensation in which our heart floats, moving always to and fro on the same spot,” Goethe mused in one draft. “We are like children on a rocking-horse, always in motion, always at work, and rooted to the spot.” The events in “Werther” were inspired by two abutting love triangles: Goethe’s infatuation with his friend Johann Christian Kestner’s wife, Charlotte, and the suicide of a neurotic lawyer, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, who shot himself with a pistol borrowed from Kestner.

But the novella is not merely about one man’s unrequited love. The critic György Lukács insisted that it is “one of the greatest love stories in world literature” because Goethe succeeded in generalizing his experience, and “concentrated into this love-tragedy the whole life of his time.” The prevailing Romantic view was that passion disrupted the social order, and so had to be denied. “What dreadful people there are, whose minds are completely absorbed in matters of etiquette,” Werther exclaims, when he takes a position at court to try to forget Lotte. Each episode in the book—Werther’s retreat from his home, his failure at court, his despair over Lotte’s marriage—arises from his inability to impress his desires onto an artificial and indifferent world. The more powerful his feeling, the greater his isolation. He can imagine no escape but to borrow two pistols from Albert and shoot himself in the head.

Whereas “Götz” had given German readers a glimpse of their past, “Werther” showed them their present. It was Goethe’s first attempt at what Lukács called the “educative novel,” in which man learns a “practical understanding of reality.” In “Werther,” this education concerns the true nature of desire. “That children do not know the reason of their desires, all the learned teachers and instructors agree,” Werther writes. Yet he fails to see that his desire to express the full force of his personality, and his despair when he cannot, are far from unique. Just as Lotte’s rejection feels scripted to

him—“All that should be printed,” he tells her, “and we could recommend it to educators”—so, too, to us, do the passionate effusions of Werther’s letters, which mimic the verse that an educated man of his times could be expected to have absorbed. Werther, in his self-delusion, embodies another Goethean type, the longing man—ordinary, but convinced of the extraordinariness of his feelings. “*Werther* became a fashion because it was about a fashion,” Boyle observes. When the book was published, both those who swooned over it and those who censured it failed to catch its satiric edge. It was a good thing they hadn’t. “Götz” had made Goethe’s name in Germany, but “Werther” vaulted him to international renown. He was twenty-five years old.

Weimar came calling for Goethe’s services in 1774, weeks after “Werther,” and he answered with enthusiasm. It was a match of convenience. The Dowager Duchess believed that Goethe would help her teen-age son, the Duke, mature into a benevolent despot. Goethe believed that a small polity would be better than a large one for testing his political acumen. “The Duchies of Weimar and Eisenach will be a stage on which one can try out whether a role in worldly affairs suits one or not,” he wrote. He was not cheap, but he was a good catch—according to his valet, “lean, nimble, and dainty.” He thought he had the strength of mind to withstand the tedium and the pettiness of court: “I’m better positioned to recognize the thorough shittiness of this our secular majesty.”

But, as any administrator knows, shittiness can be hard to overcome. Much of Goethe’s time was spent putting out fires—literally, in the villages, and figuratively in the overspent treasury, the understaffed university, and the collapsing mines. At court, he was perceived as “minister-like and cold.” He valued “order, precision, speed,” and “self-denial.” With the Duke, matters were different. The rumored adventures of the twenty-six-year-old poet and his eighteen-year-old prince were crass and likely exaggerated. “They dug potatoes from the earth, cooked them with kindling in the forest, slept with girls in the forest, carved inscriptions on the trees,” a friend reported. Goethe, in his first decade at Weimar, lived half as a child of nature, half as a

bureaucrat. He produced shorter poems and plays, essays on minerals and anatomy, and more than a thousand letters to a lady at court, Charlotte von Stein, with whom he had a chaste and confused liaison. But he struggled to finish the ambitious projects that he had started before his arrival—the play “Egmont” and his first full-length novel, “Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Mission.” By 1785, his friends noted his gloominess and his protracted illnesses. He asked the Duke for a reprieve to recover in the spa city of Karlsbad, and then secretly set off to Italy.

Goethe had longed to visit Italy since he was a child—to see the finest works of art and hoard his memories of them as “a source of private pleasure.” The “Italian Journey,” which he wrote more than two decades after his flight south, is a reminiscence of these pleasures: the statues of Rome, the temples of Sicily, the sensual life of Naples, the satisfaction of completing unfinished works and making progress on a new drama, “Faust.” And for the first time, his biographers conjecture, Goethe experienced the thrill of sex, with a young widow he met in Rome. “Goethe had discovered bodies,” Boyle writes, “and for a while there seemed to be nothing else.” It was a scandal when Goethe returned to Weimar, two years later, and put his new discovery to use. He took as a lover a woman sixteen years younger than him who was working as a maker of artificial flowers, Christiane Vulpius. The gossips at court described her as “a corpulent little female” and “a common whore.” But their union was long and loving, producing five children (only one of whom, August, survived to adulthood) and the twenty-four erotic poems of “Roman Elegies.” Their frank lustiness makes them more rewarding to read in English translation than Goethe’s *Volkslieder*:

Also, am I not learning when at the shape of her bosom,

Graceful lines, I can glance, guide a light hand down her hips?

Only thus I appreciate marble; reflecting, comparing,
See with an eye that can feel, feel with a hand that can see. . . .
Often too in her arms I've lain composing a poem,
Gently with fingering hand count the hexameter's beat
Out on her back.

If “Werther” was an educative novel, then the “Elegies” were educative poems. They imagined how the lover’s encounter with the beloved could teach a passionate appreciation for art. The eye and the hand could gain in sensual versatility. The body could be the material, and sex the medium, of aesthetic judgment and creation. “He uses her body to mark time; she meanwhile exhales her warm breath into his mouth,” Bell writes. “She inspires him.” The poem that emerged was the couple’s shared creation.

In Italy, Goethe may have gone on a holiday from reality, but the world had not. Days before he returned to Weimar, French revolutionaries stormed the Bastille. Karl August feared contagion. When anti-revolutionary Prussian troops crossed into France, in 1792, he rode to the front, with Goethe in tow, and watched the newly constituted French Revolutionary Army unexpectedly stop the Prussian advance. Goethe, as he later recalled, told the defeated troops, “From here and now begins a new era of the world’s history.”

Karl August’s strategy for resisting the forward movement of history was to dust off the courtly practices of the ancien régime. Goethe was tasked with revitalizing the Weimar theatre and the University of Jena and dismantling all secret student societies. With his friend the playwright Friedrich Schiller, he edited *The Horae*, a journal in which they argued for contracting the literary marketplace so that fewer stupid, self-regarding people published books. Neither literary nor political democracy held much appeal for him. “It is simply in my nature,” he explained. “I prefer to commit an injustice than to

endure disorder.”

Order and injustice descended on Weimar in 1806 in the form of Napoleon’s army, which had already overrun Austria and Prussia. Goethe and Napoleon were often envisioned as doubles. One had conquered Europe’s imagination, the other its territories. “*Two great men sent among us,*” Thomas Carlyle later reflected. Bonaparte, “like an all-devouring earthquake . . . hurling kingdom over kingdom; Goethe was as the mild-shining, inaudible Light, which, notwithstanding, can again make that Chaos into a creation.” Goethe was torn between admiring Napoleon—observing that people “have a morbid desire to carp at anything great”—and fearing what might happen if the new Emperor were to dissolve the duchy. When French troops entered Weimar, Goethe proposed marriage to Christiane, either because he was grateful that she stopped their house from being looted or because the Napoleonic Code would not recognize their illegitimate child. He believed in accommodating Napoleon in the name not of peace but of order and authority.

“Tragedy,” Napoleon told Goethe when they met, in 1808, “is the highest a poet can achieve.” Goethe’s great tragedy, “Faust: The First Part,” was published that year. Faust, a thwarted scholar, is desperate to know “what it is that holds the world together” and to personally experience “all that is given to humanity, total humanity, to experience.” The demonic Mephistopheles appears in the absurd form of a yapping black poodle and grants Faust his wish. But, before he does, he pretends to show him another way to discover the secrets of the world. Why not write poetry?

Take my advice. Engage a poet. Let him turn on his imagination and load you with all the virtues and distinction—the courage of the lion, the speed of the stag, the hot blood of Italy, the endurance of the North. Let him solve the problem of combining generosity with cunning, and plan a young man’s impulsive love-affair for you. I’d like to know the gentleman. I’d call him Mr. Microcosm.

Faust raves that he will soar to the heights of “pleasures that hurt,” and

swoop to the depths of “torments that enliven.” In dizzying changes of scene, he leaps from a tavern to a witch’s kitchen and from a forest cavern to a mountaintop, where the whole range of living things will pass before his eyes. But, to gain a total understanding of human experience, he must sacrifice his humanity, his moral sensibility. The victim of his sacrifice is Gretchen, a virgin whom Faust seduces and abandons in his devilish reverie, and who kills their illegitimate child. The Faustian-bargain hunter, a third Goethean type, strikes a deal whose cost is all-consuming. His antithesis is “Mr. Microcosm,” a poet of imagination and virtue, generosity and cunning, hot-blooded, coolheaded—a portrait of the artist as a mature man, the creator of a little world unto himself.

In the final decade of his life, Goethe was befriended by Johann Peter Eckermann, a young literary critic, who visited Weimar regularly and transcribed his conversations with the older man. “Conversations with Goethe” is an astonishingly intimate chronicle of what, for Goethe, was a long stretch of illness and grief, marked by the sudden deaths of Christiane and August and by his struggle to finish both “Faust: The Second Part” and his autobiography before he died, in 1832. Goethe was reluctant to continue the latter beyond his youth. In middle age, he told Eckermann, “we begin to find ourselves at odds with the world, and that is only interesting if something worthwhile comes out of it.” In the case of his own life, he felt, “whatever may be good about it cannot be shared with others, and what *can* be shared is not worth the effort.”

A man who reflects on his life, near the end, tends to treat his experiences as private pains and pleasures. The biographer’s task is to plunge them, once more, into the stream of history. Among Goethe’s aspiring biographers was the great Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin. In 1922, Benjamin completed a difficult, dazzling essay on Goethe’s last novel, “Elective Affinities,” whose tale of love affairs among careless aristocrats imitating noble lovers is veiled in an intricate form that includes epigrammatic diary entries, long disquisitions on chemistry, and a novella within the novel. In

1926, Benjamin was invited by the editors of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia to write an entry “on Goethe from the standpoint of Marxist doctrine.” But Benjamin soured on the assignment when the editors read his draft and complained that its Marxist exegesis went no further than repeating the phrase “class conflict” ten times on every page. Benjamin’s lover, Asja Lācis, agreed, sending Benjamin into a rage. When he calmed down, he “spoke with her about what constituted, for me, the interesting thing in the theme of ‘Goethe’: how a man who had existed so thoroughly in compromises could nevertheless have accomplished something so extraordinary.” Only a man who had yielded to power could have dreamed up such extravagant flights of freedom: suicide, self-sacrifice, a pact with the Devil.

Benjamin never completed the entry, but fragments of his draft, collected and translated by Susan Bernstein, Peter Fenves, and Kevin McLaughlin in a new volume, “On Goethe” (Stanford), reveal a sophisticated theory of life as a compromise between the individual and his age. In an outline titled “Life Built Up from the Elements,” Benjamin speculated that life emerged from the dialectical dance between our innermost nature and its outward expressions—our writing, our work, our friendships, our loves. For most people, inner nature was not forceful enough to influence outward expressions in any determinable form. Hardly anyone reinvents the novel. Fewer still reinvent marriage. But Goethe’s nature seemed to overpower everything. His poetry, his prose, his plays, his position at court, and his relationship with Christiane had each assumed a completely unique shape. A “banal biography,” Benjamin wrote, would accept that a man’s nature invariably decided his fate and would infuse the story of his life with the “conjuring character of mythic poetry.” A materialist biography, by contrast, would measure both the freedom evinced by a great man’s creations and their determination by external forces.

The biography Benjamin envisaged would have explained Goethe’s political nihilism and his escape into nature as equally the products of his will and of the intricate machinery of the world. The fragments assembled in “On

Goethe” let us glimpse how carefully Benjamin heeded Goethe’s own ambitions for interpreting his life. “For this seems to be the main object of Biography,” Goethe wrote in his forward to “Poetry and Truth.” “To exhibit the man in relation to the features of his time; and to show to what extent they have opposed or favored his progress; what view of mankind and the world he has formed from them, and how far he himself, if an artist, poet, or author, may externally reflect them.” He knew that, in the course of his existence, inner nature and history had gripped each other with ferocity. The result was a strangely spellbound life. ♦

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