

## *The Man in the Statue*

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**W**ITHOUT the reminder that 200 years have elapsed since Goethe's birth, would we today be turning to his work, would we be rereading "Werther" or "Faust" or the great poems of the "Divan"? Possibly not, for the reputation of the poet of Weimar for some time now has been quite dim: if we follow the literary fashions we may repeat T. S. Eliot's haughty strictures upon Goethe; if we are scientists we are apt to think it unlikely that a man whose attacks upon Newton were so clearly absurd could be reliable and promising in other respects; and if we know his poetic manner only through Bayard Taylor's translation of "Faust" we may well despair of recognizing greatness behind this sound but all too Victorian translation.

Yet there are indications in many quarters that Goethe has again aroused the enthusiasm of lively and distinguished critics. This is so not only in Germany, where Goethe's personality has never ceased to stir the imagination and where "Faust" and "Wilhelm Meister" have become prototypes for a special kind of philosophical drama and fiction; French, English, and Russian writers alike are once again turning their attention to Goethe. The list of recently released studies is long and impressive; several American publications deserve the interest not only of the specialist but of the general reader. In many of our universities Goethe celebrations are being held this year; the Library of Congress will soon open an incomparably rich exhibition of Goetheana; and, two days after this is published, the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation at Aspen will bring together scholars from all parts of the world to concern themselves with the significance of Goethe's achievement for our time.

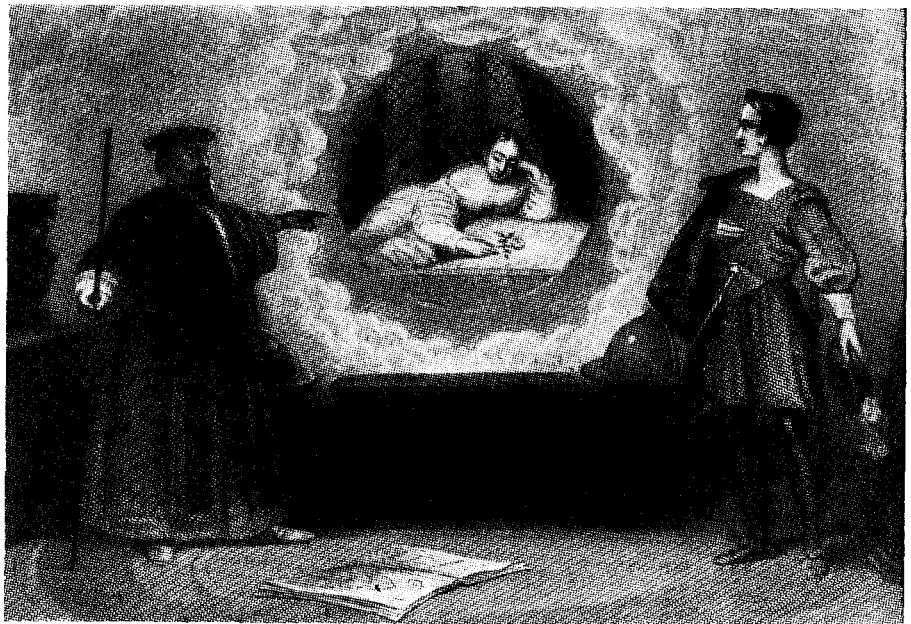
What nearly all these efforts have in common is the feeling that for one reason or another the valid

essence of Goethe—the "Permanent Goethe" as Thomas Mann rather grandly chooses to call it—deserves to be rediscovered, and that the first thing to do is to move him out of the deceptively decorative light in which the Victorians were wont to see him. It is difficult to agree on how much or how little we have in common with the beliefs of the nineteenth century; we are certainly closer to the attitudes of the eighteenth century, of which Goethe was altogether the most impressive representative. The worshipful and uncritical respect with which many today are inclined to approach Goethe rests to a large extent upon the fatal assumption so characteristic of the European (and American) society of the last century that the poet was the guardian of truth and beauty among men who were too energetically preoccupied elsewhere to pay more than lip service to matters of the spirit. To Carlyle, to Matthew Arnold, and to

the American critics from Emerson to Calvin Thomas, Goethe served as the conspicuous representative of the "poetic" temperament in an anti-poetical world—a world in which pragmatic success and transcendental idealism had entered into a respectable though infertile union.

**T**HE term "poetic" is here used in the loosest sense, for in reality it is not the poet but the sage that has been admired in Goethe, and in the ever-shifting traffic of minds it is the peculiar fate of sages to be respectfully removed from the main thoroughfare and to be elevated to the inoffensive neutrality of a statue in the park. If Goethe's personality has seemed to some pompous and incredibly serene, it may be that they have taken the statue for the man.

The central qualities which are usually found in Goethe's work—the variety of his interests, skills, and insights, and the judicious balance of



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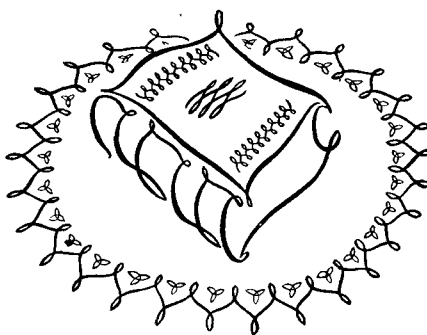
Goethe's television set—Faust sees "Helena, the most beautiful woman on earth," in a magic mirror.

his thinking—have assured him a certain obvious and lasting distinction. Yet, this “universality” and this “harmony” were not easily won. If we regard his personality and his work in their inextricable relationship closely, we may marvel not so much at the unified end-product that emerges, for instance, from Eckermann’s “Conversations,” as at the diversity of its component parts. And as we discover the elements of his long life with its countless human associations, its tremendous productivity, its enormous range of personal and historical experiences, we must ask what it was that could possibly have held it all together.

Goethe is not, when we compare him with Dante, Cervantes, Racine, or Shakespeare, either as a man or an artist, a clearly profiled figure. The young man, the middle-aged, and the old; the author of the most moving German poetry, of romantic and classical plays and novels, of significant philosophical and scientific writings; the tireless correspondent and the talker—it is nearly impossible to survey all these in one sweep or to find a measure of coherence that is immediately plausible. Perhaps we would be unjust not only to Goethe but to ourselves if we were to attempt it. The most attractive virtue of the modern critic is, after all, his selectivity of focus; it would be best for us to inquire into those aspects of Goethe which, in the light of our own intellectual needs, seem particularly relevant. We must not dwell on the commonplace that Goethe is a poet of universal scope; by using this phrase we shall not remove him from that vaguely defined no-man’s-land of respectability in which he has for so long remained.

**T**O GERMAN readers Goethe continues, of course, to offer national and historical meanings of considerable importance. For them he has been the great emancipator. By assimilating in his person and work the diverse intellectual tendencies of his age, and by establishing a poetic idiom which was both native and vigorously original, he strengthened the energies of national self-definition and confirmed at the same time that competitive individualism which became so characteristic of the age of German idealism. He is, as Arnold said, the “manifest center” of German literature, even though—depending upon the predominance of nationalistic or cosmopolitan tendencies in his critics—his exuberance or his discipline, his *Sturm und Drang* or his classicism were alternately emphasized. German Goethe scholarship is today far less parochial than it has been for a long

time; it is also less inclined towards accepting without serious scrutiny the view of the universal Goethe. Karl Jaspers has dared in a widely debated speech to question the per-



tinence of many of Goethe’s values, and the usefulness of turning to him for guidance in the dilemma of our own age, an age which in so many respects cannot be compared to his. No doubt this skeptical view, whether acceptable or not in detail, reflects the critical mood of a generation which has been compelled by the tragic accidents of history to demand the password from all who may approach to offer help.

To ask the great of the past for advice on the immediate decisions of the present is not often profitable; the practice of establishing historical parallels is usually only an entertaining and sometimes a downright dangerous game. That Goethe admired Napoleon does not make him a Fascist; that he recognized the advantages of a future Panama Canal does not make him a prophet of the technological age; that he held social views which were patriarchal and conservative need not invalidate him in the eyes of our progressives. What matters is that within a cultural context that differs in essential details from our own he recognized fundamental tensions and conflicts inherent in any human group. His view of the nature of man determined his conception of society. It is well to recognize that his assumption of a homogeneous culture, of a civilization essentially intact and rational in its operation, enabled him to entertain hopes for a creature whom he considered able to cope with life perhaps by persuasion but hardly by nature.

Goethe’s conception of man was not unduly optimistic, but his faith in the civilizing effect of culture was profound and unshakable. Every mature work of his—“Tasso,” “Iphigenia,” “Wilhelm Meister,” “Hermann and Dorothea,” “Elective Affinities,” even the second part of “Faust”—testifies to this. Perhaps a generation that has experienced the radical collapse of most traditional forms of living

cannot quite share Goethe’s trust in the stability of physical or spiritual institutions. Even those who agree with Goethe’s emphasis upon our obligation to prescriptive social values may miss in him the zeal of the reformer. Much of his life was, of course, devoted to practical political reform and the application of his resolute intelligence to the innumerable demands of his duties as administrator and adviser to the Duke of Weimar. But there was nothing speculative or utopian in his social philosophy; his efforts were always directed towards the articulation and not the modification of a pattern of culture which, though far from static, had nevertheless proved to be remarkably stable and coherent.

Yet we need only to read Goethe’s “Autobiography,” one of the wisest of all books, to recognize in that carefully assembled panorama of a significant life his respect for the interplay between the traditional institutions of culture and the enterprising individual—a delicate balance, to be sure, and one not to be confused either with the optimistic social philosophy of the earlier eighteenth century or the spirit of indubitable material progress in the nineteenth. Indeed, what gives Goethe’s social thought its dynamic quality is his sense of the precariousness of human life, and of the threat which man forever encounters from the elemental and easily overwhelming forces of nature.

**C**ERTAINLY among the major German poets, Goethe is the first to transcend the idyllic conception of nature and the first to recognize it as essentially demonic. From the “Sorrows of Werther” to the little-known but superb “Novelle,” this tension between the subversive forces of nature and the tentative effort of man to maintain his reflective and productive self is the central theme in Goethe’s work. I say tentative because neither reason nor feeling, neither power nor any of the other modes of salvation offered by his own or the subsequent century has seemed sufficient to Goethe to cope completely with the conflict between nature and culture. In Faust, Goethe’s Everyman, responsibility and eccentricity, self-love and universal love are intricately related, but they are never wholly reconciled. It is a superficial though common interpretation to suggest that Faust’s salvation is earned by that “perpetual striving” which seemed so plausible to the German temper of the romantic and post-romantic era and which supplied one of the main reasons for regarding “Faust” as a national poem. Faust does not “de-



serve" his elevation; indeed, in a sense, he dare not hope to be saved at all. What Goethe gives us at the end of that splendid second part of the drama is an imaginative representation of ultimate paradox: "das Unbeschriebliche, hier ist's getan." This conclusion has in it something of the supreme intellectual irony of which Goethe the poet was a consummate master. But however well considered it may be, it is too esoteric and speculative to serve us as a workable social philosophy. "Faust" will not teach us how to live; we can only recognize in its magnificent poetic figuration the fundamental conflicts which stir our lives.

On man and society Goethe is more explicit though not perhaps as impressive. In such anthropological and sociological writings as the "Italian Journey" and "Poetry and Truth" there is a carefully blended mixture of subjective and objective impulses that anticipates, in their precise and intelligently observed detail and their skilful, cautious generalization, an attitude which we shall find again among a later generation of intellectual historians—Lecky, Renan, Burckhardt. Above all in his pedagogical fiction, especially in the two novels dealing with Wilhelm Meister's career, Goethe elaborates an unambiguous humanistic philosophy that rests, among other things, on a characteristic trust in secular education. It was "Wilhelm Meister," which won Carlyle's wholehearted respect for Goethe and which, more than any other work of Goethe's, was responsible for the English and American Goethe cult of the mid-nineteenth century. For better or for worse, it has supplied the narrative pattern for a long succession of autobiographical novels of ideas.

It may be that "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship" is not the kind of work that appeals to our time. It assumes a world that is intact, and it presupposes an active and possibly excessive faith in the ultimate efficacy of individual effort. In terms of our own somewhat more problematical convictions we will find the later novels, "Elective Affinities" and "Wilhelm Meister's Travels," more congenial, and when they again become available in readable translations we shall discover their poetic and intellectual freshness. They are so remarkably modern that it is scarcely surprising that the nineteenth century was made uncomfortable by their mixture of decorum and supernatural allegory, of deliberate design and, as it seemed, unforgivable intrusions of narrative whims and discursive reflections. Today,  
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**Belles-Lettres.** *It is traditional in academic circles to declare that there is scarcely a university in the land that does not have a member of its German department writing on "Goethe und—" and someone in its English department examining the works of Shakespeare in a new light. Several of this week's new books suggest that the observation is more than facetious. The three Goethe volumes reviewed by Professor Claude Hill are, of course, part of the large body of work being issued this year to commemorate the bicentennial of the great poet; but they manifest also the perennial devotion to the Sage of Weimar. In the Shakespearean field, too, fresh approaches are profitably applied: viz., T. M. Parrott's search for comedy in the Bard and J. I. M. Stewart's consideration of the psychological motivation of his characters.*

## What Life Can Be

**GOETHE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY:** *Poetry and Truth—From My Own Life.* By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Translated by R. O. Moon. Washington: Public Affairs Press. 700 pp. \$5.

**GOETHE:** *Wisdom and Experience.* Selections by Ludwig Curtius. Translated and edited by Hermann J. Weigand. New York: Pantheon Books. 299 pp. \$3.75.

**GOETHE:** *The Story of a Man.* By Ludwig Lewisohn. New York: Farrar, Straus & Co. Vol. I, 456 pp. Vol. II, 473 pp. \$10.

By CLAUDE HILL

**H**OW much America's culture has come of age is being revealed by the impressive preparations for Goethe's bicentennial this year. When these lines appear in print some of the most illustrious men of our time will

be assembling in the Colorado mountains at Aspen to pay tribute to one of the most magnificent minds of the Western World. The greatest humanitarian of our generation, Albert Schweitzer, of French-Africa, philosophers like Ortega y Gasset, of Spain, and writers like Thornton Wilder, of the United States, are scheduled to join in the discussions. Only Thomas Mann, Goethe's legitimate literary heir, will be missing while he is representing the country of his adoption in several lectures on "Goethe and Democracy" before European audiences this summer. There are few colleges and universities which have not held or are not planning to hold a Goethe celebration this year. And there are many among the publishers who are bringing out at least one volume by or about the immortal German poet. Mann's noble and useful "Permanent Goethe" (Dial Press) of last year was followed by Biermann's loving and careful "Goethe's World" (New Directions). The latest batch of valuable Goetheana, issued during the past few weeks, includes a new translation of the autobiographical "Poetry and Truth," an anthology of prose maxims and words of wisdom, and a huge two-volume compilation of biographical material.

Ablly translated by R. O. Moon, Goethe's "Poetry and Truth—From My Own Life" covers 700 pages. The book, which ranks with Rousseau's "Confessions," offers a minute description of the gradual unfolding of the mind of an amazing genius. Written—or rather dictated—when Goethe was in his sixties, the autobiography covers the first twenty-six years of the youthful poet and lover: his childhood in Frankfort-on-the-Main, his student years in Leipzig and Strasbourg, convalescence at home, travels to the Rhine valley and Switz-



—The Bettmann Archive.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—"touching little notes to his uneducated wife."