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Gregory Maertz

## Carlyle's Critique of Goethe: Literature and the Cult of Personality

In a letter dated 20 July 1827 Goethe responds to a new English biography of Schiller sent to him by the young Thomas Carlyle:

Whoever understands and studies German finds himself in the market, where all nations offer their wares; he plays the interpreter, while he enriches himself. And thus every translator is to be regarded as a middle-man in this universal spiritual commerce, and as making it his business to promote this exchange: for say what we may of the insufficiency of translation, yet the work is and will always be one of the weightiest and worthiest affairs in the general concerns of the world. The Koran says: "God has given to each people a prophet in his own tongue!" Thus each translator is a prophet to his people.<sup>1</sup>

In this memorable tribute to Carlyle, who had "learned from the Germans to represent literature as the new liturgy," Goethe offers an assessment of the privileged status of cultural intermediaries in the age of *Weltliteratur*.<sup>2</sup> Until Goethe's death five years later Carlyle played the combined roles of *Dolmetscher* (interpreter), *Übersetzer* (translator), and *Vermittler* (mediator) of German culture in Britain with unflagging zeal. Recognized by Goethe as Scott's

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<sup>1</sup>*Correspondence between Goethe and Carlyle*, ed. and trans. Charles Eliot Norton (New York, 1970), pp. 25-6.

<sup>2</sup>Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Columbus, OH, 1991), p. 29.

successor in this endeavor, he introduced a critical approach, under the influence of Goethe's strong personality, that made a lasting impression on the intellectual life of mid- and late nineteenth-century British literary culture. The main vehicle for this effect was a diverse body of writing, including critical essays, translations, and prefaces on Goethe that appeared over the most formative decade in Carlyle's career, 1822-32.

Klaus Doderer has made the point that Carlyle's cumulative critique of Goethe led to a "Vertiefung und eine neue Wendung" [an intensification and a new departure] in the reception of German thought and literature in Britain. "Obwohl gerade Carlyle die *German Romance* schrieb und Novalis sehr liebte" [although Carlyle published *German Romance* and very much admired Novalis] he nonetheless put Goethe squarely in the foreground of his meditations on literature, not merely as Germany's but also as Europe's leading poet and critic of comprehensive cultural authority. Accompanying the resulting tendency to consider literature, in Doderer's phrase, "als moralisches Erziehungsmittel" [as a medium of ethical education], is a new emphasis on the "Dichterperson" [the person of the poet] rather than "Dichtung" [poetry].<sup>3</sup> In focusing on the personality of the poet to a greater degree than the work or text, Carlyle builds upon Germaine de Staël's suggestive approach in *De l'Allemagne* [*On Germany*] (1813) and he anticipates Heinrich Heine's portrayal of Goethe's imperial persona in *Die Romantische Schule* [*The Romantic School*] (1836). As much as their assessments of Goethe might differ in emphasis and specific detail, all three critics identify his work and his presence as the dominant cultural phenomenon of the time. Moreover, the technique employed by all three critics is fashioned by a fusion of biography and practical criticism. De Staël's and Carlyle's interest in Goethe reveal the impact of interpreting Goethe on the formation of national cultural identity in France and Britain. The naming of a foreign writer as the cultural hero in two national literary traditions more mature and advanced than Germany's reflects the astonishing permeability of national and cultural boundaries in the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Carlyle also anticipates Wilhelm Dilthey's method in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* [*Experience and Poetry*] (1905), one of the foundation texts of modern literary hermeneutics. As with de Staël and Heine, both Carlyle and Dilthey derive their concepts of the imagination, literariness, authorship, and the function of criticism from an examination of Goethe's life and works; both critics reach the conclusion the Goethe, perhaps alone of all classic European writers, led a life so soaked with meaning that his lived experiences demand to be inter-

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<sup>3</sup>Klaus Doderer, "Das englische und französische Bild von der deutschen Romantik" (1955) in *Begriffstimmung der Romantik*, ed. Helmut Prang (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 397.

<sup>4</sup>Such border-crossing cosmopolitanism seems a characteristic feature of Romanticism. See *Cultural Interaction in the Romantic Age*, ed. Gregory Maertz, forthcoming.

preted for their symbolic value. It is as if the writer's life and work formed a palimpsestic unity. The following passage from the second chapter of Dilthey's book, "Goethe und die dichterische Phantasie" [Goethe and the Poetic Imagination], suggests intriguing parallels with Carlyle's approach in his reverential essays of 1832, "Goethe" and "Goethe's Works":

Poetry is the representation and expression of life. It expresses lived experience and represents the external reality of life . . . . What a lyric poem or a story shows us—and what it fails to show us—can be explained on this basis. But life-values are related on the basis of the totality of life itself, and these relations give meaning to persons, things, situations, and events. Thus the poet addresses himself to what is significant. Surely the primary and most decisive feature of Goethe's work is that it grows out of an extraordinary energy of lived experience . . . . His moods transform everything real, his passions intensify the meaning and form of situations and things beyond the realm of the usual, and his restless creative drive changes everything around him into form and image.<sup>5</sup>

Upon closer examination the comparison with Dilthey seems especially fitting. Indeed, according to Rudolf A. Makreel, Dilthey's view of literature is biographical "not in the sense of manifesting personal mannerisms, but of revealing a unity of style which derives from the total being of the poet—a being that comprehends more than private states of mind."<sup>6</sup>

Biography as an expression of the organic fusion of style and personality also underlies Carlyle's hermeneutic. In his words "Goethe's poetry is no separate faculty, no mental handicraft; but the voice of the whole harmonious manhood; nay, it is the very harmony, the living and life-giving harmony of that rich manhood which forms his poetry."<sup>7</sup> It is a curious feature of the history of the transmission of foreign cultures in Britain that, from the outset of Goethe's reception there, his reputation was not, in contrast to the scene in Russia or France, formed by appropriating or resisting such major texts as *Werther*, *Faust*, and *Tasso*; rather his reputation in Britain grew out of the controversy surrounding Goethe's personality, his ethics and character. From the publication of the first English translation of *Werther* in 1780 to the appearance of Carlyle's translation of *Wilhelm Meister* in 1824, the whole thrust of the criticism of the time consists of a series of conflicting interpretations focused not on readings of these and other texts—at least not in the sense indicated by Coleridge's "practical criticism"—but, quite differently, on what George

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<sup>5</sup>Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, Vol. V, *Poetry and Experience*, ed. and trans. Rudolf A. Makreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, 1986), pp. 237-8.

<sup>6</sup>Rudolf A. Makreel, *Dilthey* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 152-3.

<sup>7</sup>*The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. H. D. Traill (London, 1898), XXVI, 208. All citations that follow are to this edition.

Saintsbury, in his reappraisal of Goethe's impact on Victorian Britain, derided as merely "anthropological" interpretations. Carlyle's predecessors offer what one might describe as pre-Freudian probings of the authorial psyche which were inferred from the text and then projected back onto the author, a process which, as Saintsbury complains, had the effect of overshadowing the textual features of the literary artifact.<sup>8</sup>

The biographical impulse in Carlyle's criticism was in fact assimilated from Goethe's own reflections on literature. In *Gespräche mit Goethe*, for example, Eckermann quotes his assertion that

Personality is everything in art and poetry, yet there are many weak personages among the modern critics who do not admit this, but look upon a great personality in a work of poetry or art merely as a kind of trifling appendage. However, to feel and respect a great personality one must be something oneself. All who denied the sublime to Euripides were either poor wretches incapable of comprehending such sublimity, or shameless charlatans who by their presumption wished to make more of themselves—and really did make more of themselves than they were.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, Goethe's remarks on literature almost invariably lead to speculations on the psychology or personality traits of leading authors. An example of this approach, a memorable characterization of Dante, is recorded by Eckermann:

He spoke of Dante with extreme reverence; and I observed that he was not satisfied with the work *Talent*, but called him a *Nature*, as if thus wishing to express something more comprehensive, more full of prescience, of deeper insight, and wider scope.<sup>10</sup>

Among contemporary poets Goethe admired Byron more than any other and, in all recorded discussions of his prodigious talent, Goethe's emphasis is rarely if ever on the special qualities of his works but on the force and distinctiveness of his personality. On one occasion Goethe cited Byron's importance as the major argument in favor of learning English: ". . . a character of such eminence had never existed before, and probably would never come again."<sup>11</sup> A meticulous reading of the *Gespräche mit Goethe*, Goethe's criticism, and the voluminous *Briefe* confirms that Goethe only rarely discusses a specific text or specific

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<sup>8</sup>*A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1900-04), III, 495.

<sup>9</sup>*Conversations with Goethe*, ed. Havelock Ellis and trans. John Oxenford (London, 1930), pp. 381-82 (13 February 1831). Subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>10</sup>P. 75 (3 December 1824).

<sup>11</sup>PP. 11-12 (19 October 1823).

characteristics of a text; instead, his interest in the writer's personality nearly always supersedes textual interpretation.

Thus not only does Goethe validate a critical method or hermeneutic based on reading authorial personality, deciphering his personality emerges as one of the chief organizing principles in the cultural life of nineteenth-century Europe. The critical response to Goethe in de Staël and Taine in France, Heine and other writers associated with the *Jungdeutschland* movement, and Carlyle and his disciples in Britain, suggests Goethe's broad European appeal. But it is Carlyle whose career is more closely associated with Goethe than any writer before G. H. Lewes, and Goethe, who is credited with opening "a new world to him,"<sup>12</sup> is the subject of Carlyle's first significant appearance in print in April 1822, an article on *Faust* for the *New Edinburgh Review*. While this modest little piece was excluded from the first edition of Carlyle's complete works, it did in fact mark the beginning of his involvement with Goethe and it suggests that at the outset of his career Carlyle had tied his literary fortunes to the mediation of German culture in the English-speaking world. Moreover, on this same foundation Carlyle staked his first claim to speak with broad cultural authority and, on closer inspection, it is clear that his mature views on art, society, economics, and politics were formed in the crucible of his critique of Goethe and German literature. The process of substituting an emphasis on biography for practical criticism of the artifact culminates in Carlyle's five major statements on Goethe—the "Translator's Preface to the First Edition of *Meister's Apprenticeship*" (1824), "Goethe's Helena" (1828), "Goethe" (1828), "Death of Goethe" (1832) and "Goethe's Works" (1832). In this body of writing textual exegesis plays an unexpectedly minor role in Carlyle's assessment of Goethe; in its place we find the outline of a full-blown cult of personality and a blueprint for the ideology of hero-worship that is more fully mapped out in such later major works as *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841), *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845), and *The History of Frederick the Great* (1858, 1862, 1864, 1865).

As the recipient of a strict Calvinist upbringing Carlyle was initially repelled by what critics before him had depicted as Goethe's tendency to condone licentious behavior in his writings. Even his close identification with Goethe from 1822-32 was initially qualified by feelings of ambivalence, even of disgust.<sup>13</sup> Resistance to Goethe in 1822-23 was replaced by sympathy in 1828-32 only after Carlyle had interpolated his own idiosyncratic, self-reflexive interpretation

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<sup>12</sup>James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795-1835* (London, 1882), I, 132-3. Hereafter cited as *Life of Carlyle, 1795-1835*.

<sup>13</sup>Carlyle expressed his displeasure with the task of translating *Wilhelm Meister* in letters to Jane Welsh on 18 September 1823 and to James Johnson on 21 September 1823. See *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. C. R. Sanders and K. J. Fielding (Durham, NC, 1970), II, 434, 437.

of Goethe's works, according to which Goethe's writings embody the drama of "a mind working itself into clearer and clearer freedom; gaining a more and more perfect domination of its world. The pestilential fever of Skepticism runs through its stages; but happily it ends . . . in clearer, henceforth invulnerable health" (XXVI, 430). Once Goethe's biography had been configured according to Carlyle's plot of redemption his presence in the text initiated a rapturous conversion experience: "The sight of such a man" was to Carlyle "a Gospel of Gospels," which "literally" preserved him "from destruction outward and inward." Goethe, he averred, was the first who had "travelled the steep rocky road" of self-discovery which he, too, had known, and Goethe thenceforth was to be known as "the first of the moderns."<sup>14</sup> Formerly, as Carlyle confessed in a letter to Goethe, he too had been "an Unbeliever . . . storm-tossed in my imagination; a man divided from men; exasperated, wretched, driven almost to despair." But Goethe had restored his faith in "the Mercy and Beauty of which it is the Symbol" and helped him attain "to new thoughts, and a composure which I should once have considered as impossible."<sup>15</sup> Thus Goethe played a key role in the development of what W. H. Bruford calls Carlyle's "humanistic religion" and laid the foundation for the cult of personality surrounding Goethe.<sup>16</sup>

There were, of course, contemporary precedents and parallels for Carlyle's valorization of Goethe's cultural authority in Britain. Obviously none was more important than de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*. Her identification of Goethe as a "living classic" seemed to confirm that a "modern" could indeed be the equal of the "ancients." Despite bad country roads and a shortage of decent inns, de Staël joined the procession of foreign visitors flocking to Weimar, which featured perhaps the most remarkable concentration of literary celebrities in Europe at that or any other time.<sup>17</sup> But even after a long journey her personal interviews with Goethe and Schiller could not alter her ideological interpretation of German culture.<sup>18</sup> Having been subjected to strict censorship in Paris,

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<sup>14</sup>*Life of Carlyle, 1795-1835*, I, 300-301.

<sup>15</sup>Letter of 20 August 1827 in *Correspondence between Goethe and Carlyle*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup>W. H. Bruford, "Goethe and Some Victorian Humanists," *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, N.S., XVIII (1949), 36.

<sup>17</sup>The contemporaries whom Goethe persuaded to join him in the service of Herzog Carl August included Schiller, Herder, Hamann, and Wieland.

<sup>18</sup>The dispute over the supposed and real impact of de Staël's propaganda work on behalf of German literature in Britain and America has a long history. The most authoritative discussion of de Staël's problematic mediation of German literature is found in Lilian R. Furst's "Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*: A Misleading Intermediary," in *The Contours of European Romanticism* (London, 1979), pp. 56-73. For a more generous and I feel slightly over-

*De l'Allemagne* was first published in London in 1813 and it has been credited for revealing Germany for the first time to "die ganze Welt" [the entire world].<sup>19</sup> Carlyle found in de Staël's idealized vision of German culture a readily available alternative to the Enlightenment culture of France and England from which he felt alienated. And Carlyle was not alone in coming under the spell of de Staël's portrayal of Germany as the land of poets and thinkers; this picture of German culture dominated British perspectives throughout the nineteenth century and gave impetus to the transformation of Goethe from reprobate to cultural hero.<sup>20</sup> At a time when Goethe's writings fell short of the popularity enjoyed by Kotzebue, Schiller, and Wieland, de Staël made the bold claim that he, and not his more popular contemporaries, "réunit tout ce qui distingué l'esprit allemand" [unites all that distinguishes the German mind] and possessed "les traits principaux du genie allemand" [the chief characteristics of the German genius].<sup>21</sup>

Described by Heine as a "coterie book" and "a kind of salon," in which a cacophony of voices may be heard crying out from its pages, *De l'Allemagne* is, indeed a new kind of criticism. René Wellek has argued that "the book cannot be judged as primarily a work of literary criticism. It is the picture of a whole nation, a sketch of national psychology and society, and also something of a personal travel book." Wellek compares *De l'Allemagne* to Tacitus's *Germania* in its propagandistic intent: "The French were shown the picture of a good, since pious nation of thinkers and poets with few political ambitions and little national feeling: an idyll which already had been refuted by the history of the years between the writing [in 1810] and publication [in France in 1814 during the occupation of Paris by the Allies]." Wellek notes that this idealized image of Germany "lingered on in France till" the Franco-Prussian War, despite the attacks mounted by Heine and others.<sup>22</sup> No doubt de Staël's admirers in England, Germany, and America sustained her authority as a cultural guide. Divided over two issues of *Fraser's Magazine*, Nos. 1 and 4 (1830), is Carlyle's translation of Jean Paul's review of *De l'Allemagne*. As he notes in the translator's Preface: "Students of German literature will be curious to see such a critic as Mme de Staël adequately criticized . . . and what worth the best of

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stated assessment of de Staël's influence, see Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's "Staël's *Germany* and the Beginnings of an American National Literature," in *Germaine de Staël: Crossing the Borders*, ed. Madelyn Gutwirth, et al. (New Brunswick, 1991), pp. 141-58.

<sup>19</sup>Walter Shirmer, *Der Einfluß der deutschen Literatur auf die englische im 19. Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1947), p. 39.

<sup>20</sup>Doderer, "Das englische und französische Bild von der deutschen Romantik," 397.

<sup>21</sup>Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* (Paris, 1968), I, 189.

<sup>22</sup>René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge, 1955), II, 224.



[German writers] acknowledge in their chief eulogist and indicator among foreigners' (XXVII, 476). This review and its translation are signs that the authority exercised by de Staël's biased and inaccurate interpretation of German culture was transplanted beyond the national, social, political, and aesthetic contexts of its origins. As a result of this process her interpretation acquired new meaning, since, as Jerome J. McGann has argued, "meaning, in a literary event, is a function not of" the text itself but rather the text's "historical relations with its readers and interpreters."<sup>23</sup> In Lilian Furst's analysis of the accuracy of *De l'Allemagne* as a guide to German culture the book's main source of interest is found to lie in its creative distortions.

That Carlyle should have looked abroad for literary predecessors and models is symptomatic of his marginalized status in late Romantic Britain. This status is also shared by the culturally marginalized exiles de Staël, who wrote *De l'Allemagne* in Switzerland, and Heine, who wrote *Die Romantische Schule* in Paris. As a Scot and a member of a tiny Calvinist sect Carlyle was at least twice-removed from mainstream British literary culture. At various times throughout his career Carlyle commented on his predicament: "My case is this: I comport myself wholly like an alien,—like a man who is not in his own country; whose own country lies perhaps a century or two distant." In his adopted language he once described himself as "an *abgerissenes Glied*, a limb torn from the family of Man."<sup>24</sup> Years later, even after Carlyle was established as a sage among writers living in London, he confided to Froude that his work had been produced by "a wild man, a man disunited from the fellowship of the world he lives in."<sup>25</sup> Carlyle's alienation from mainstream British culture was shared by other contemporaries whose literary careers were launched along the somewhat unconventional path of mediating foreign, mostly German, cultural artifacts. Indeed, the reception of German thought and literature in Britain from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries was largely the work of culturally ambitious outsiders—Dissenters, women, and Scots—for whom access to the majority culture was impeded by gender, class, or ethnic identity and by the absence of empowering institutional affiliations with prestigious public schools or with Oxford or Cambridge University. In addition to Carlyle, this group includes William Taylor, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Holcroft, Walter Scott, R. P. Gillies, J. G. Lockhart, Henry Crabb Robinson, Sarah Austin, and Marian Evans. Situated on the margins of mainstream British culture, these writers

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<sup>23</sup>Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 137-8.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *Two Notebooks*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York, 1898), p. 65. Inter-textual citations that follow are to this edition.

<sup>25</sup>James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London. 1833-81* (London, 1884), I, 96.

prefaced the publication of their original work with the translation and criticism of German texts. The work of translation reflected their lower-caste status within the majority culture since it was left to them to mediate the immoral and radical elements in German literature before these texts were suitable as commodities for domestic consumption. Their mediating activities also embody the shaman's function of going-out-of-the-self and leaving the familiar in an effort to embrace the foreign and the other.

Carlyle shares de Staël's vision of German literature as ethically superior (since worshipping the sublime and heroic individualism) to the cultural status quo observed in Britain, America, and France, and both critics seek to foster their hermeneutic model with missionary zeal. Heine, by contrast, finds these very same qualities dangerous, because they contradict the communitarian values enshrined by the French Revolution. In his view there is a direct correspondence and a reciprocal relationship between "the lack of political freedom in Germany" and the cultural dominance enjoyed by Goethe's aesthetic "indifference." Peter Uwe Hohendahl's description of Heine's treatise could also be applied to *De l'Allemagne* and Carlyle's essays on Goethe. He argues that *Die Romantische Schule* "combines in a highly unorthodox manner personal characteristics, descriptions of works, satire, historical commentary, and critique of ideology." What Heine calls "this constant assertion of my personality" in his satire, which also breaks through in de Staël's highly idiosyncratic interpretations and in Carlyle's worshipful essays (and is denoted by his baroque style), is considered "the most suitable means of encouraging self-evaluation from the reader."<sup>26</sup>

All three critics' readings of Goethe are based on an interpretation of his personality. While he is actually the one literary figure linking the *Sturm und Drang*, Classicism, and Romanticism, Goethe's mere presence seems to have so distracted de Staël that she, as Furst points out, "hardly touches the fringe of German Romanticism" proper in her evaluation of German literature.<sup>27</sup> Heine condemns Goethe for the "zweideutige Rolle" [ambivalent role] he played in the literary politics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: "Offen gestanden, Goethe hat damals eine sehr zweideutige Rolle gespielt und man kann ihn nicht unbedingt loben." [Speaking frankly, at that time Goethe's contribution was extremely equivocal and is not deserving of unqualified praise.]<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Goethe is responsible for condoning the formation of a cult of personality that, as Heine notes, surrounded him like a cloud of incense and adversely effected Germany's younger poets, including several of Goethe's most

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<sup>26</sup>Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca, NY, 1982), p. 66.

<sup>27</sup>Furst, "Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*," p. 58.

<sup>28</sup>Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Manfred Windfuhr (Hamburg, 1979), I, 148.

fervid admirers. In Heine's colorful retelling of their meeting in Weimar, we read that Goethe "brusquely drove the Schlegel brothers from the temple . . . and established his autocratic reign in German literature." Throughout their conversation "one spoke no more of romantic or classical poetry, but of Goethe and again of Goethe."<sup>29</sup>

The same could be said of Carlyle after he got over his infatuation with the sublimity of Schiller and the arabesques of Jean Paul. It has often been remarked that the European mind in the modern age "spricht Deutsch." Goethe's impact on Carlyle reflects the initial phase of this tendency and is a factor of overwhelming importance in his own intellectual development. The extent of this influence is apparent from the outset of Carlyle's career. The major essays and translation published from 1822-32 promote the German poet as a viable leader of British culture. Carlyle's objective in this body of writing is to instigate Britain's breakthrough into a broader cultural compass and to emulate the cosmopolitanism that Goethe himself embodied and propagated. Goethe's reputation in early nineteenth-century Britain is not, he reveals, indicative of his true worth. Unlike Kotzebue and other objects of transient literary fashions in London, Goethe is to be revered as a living classic, who possesses "some touches of that old divine spirit" and is worthy of comparison with "the masters of Italian painting, and the fathers of Poetry in England." Goethe represents that singular example of a writer who is "what Philosophy can call a Man," and his writings serve as an expression of "the voice of [his] whole harmonious manhood . . . it is the very harmony, the living and life-giving harmony of that rich manhood which forms his poetry" ("Goethe," XXVI, 207-08).

Carlyle's preoccupation with Goethe's "manhood" or humanity encodes a signal tendency of much nineteenth-century literary criticism: the pursuit of a critical agenda combining ethics and aesthetics through biography. This tendency reaches its culmination in the cultural criticism and historiography of Carlyle's disciples, Froude, Charles Kingsley, and Leslie Stephen. Carlyle puts the matter concisely: "All good men may be called poets in act, or in word; all good poets are so in both." By equating moral and literary excellence, Carlyle identifies Goethe as the "Teacher and exemplar of his age," whose writings embody "the beautiful, religious Wisdom . . . which is proper to his time . . . [and] which may still . . . speak to the whole soul" because in addition to "his natural gifts, he has cultivated himself and his art, he has now studied how to live and to write, with a fidelity, an unwearied earnestness, of which there is not other living instance; of which among British poets especially, Wordsworth alone offers any resemblance" (XXVI, 208).

The emphasis de Staël places on Goethe's genius and the comprehensive greatness of his personality suggests a framework for Carlyle's own interpretive strategy that evolves in the four major essays. He simply transposes her influ-

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<sup>29</sup>Heine, *Sämtliche Werke*, I, 148.

ential reading of Goethe from an overtly political to a quasi-theological key. Goethe thus emerges from Carlyle's reading as far more than a dominant cultural figure; his works reveal a divine presence immanent in the world, a *deus absconditus*, a god in the guise of a poet, whose appearance inaugurates a new epoch of faith in a post-Enlightenment world grown weary of doubt and relativism. Carlyle's identification of Goethe as "the Strong One of his time" (XXVI, 435), exerting religious, ethical, and cultural authority, received corroboration from Matthew Arnold in strikingly similar terms:

when Goethe came, Europe had lost her basis of spiritual life; she had to find it again; Goethe's task was,—the inevitable task for the modern poet henceforth is,—as it was for the Greek poet in the days of Pericles, not to preach a sublime sermon on a traditional text like Dante, not to exhibit all the kingdoms of human life and the glory of them like Shakespeare, but to interpret human life afresh, and to supply a new spiritual basis to it. . . . Goethe is the greatest poet of modern times, not because he is one of the half-dozen human beings who in the history of our race have shown the most signal gift for poetry, but because, having a very considerable gift for poetry, he was at the same time, in the width, depth, and richness of his criticism of life, by far our greatest modern man.<sup>30</sup>

If Goethe served as Arnold's most eminent example of cosmopolitan literary culture, it was Carlyle's efforts as a *Vermittler* of German literature that stimulated Goethe's expression of a coming multicultural utopia of *Weltliteratur*. Concerning the broad intercultural value of translation, Goethe asks Carlyle's opinion of Charles Des Voeux's English translation of his own *Torquato Tasso* (1827):

But now I wish to know from you what may be the merit of this Tasso as an English translation? It will greatly oblige me if you will inform and enlighten me as to this, because it is precisely the bearing of an original to a translation, which most clearly indicates the relations of nation to nation, and which one must especially know and estimate for the furtherance of the prevailing, predominant and universal World-literature.<sup>31</sup>

Starting with his translations and early critical writings, Carlyle instigated the breakthrough of his native insular culture into a broader cultural compass and, at the same time, established a pattern of cultural emulation of Germany that has continued into the present time and is especially noticeable in the pres-

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<sup>30</sup>*Passages from the Prose Writings of Matthew Arnold*, ed. William Buckler (New York, 1963), pp. 28, 29. In *The German Idea* (Cambridge, 1980) Rosemary Ashton notes that "Arnold modelled his idea of culture and *Weltliteratur* partly on Goethe's and quoted Goethe in almost every essay he wrote" (p. 20).

<sup>31</sup>*Correspondence between Goethe and Carlyle* (1 January 1828), p. 42.

tige of Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, and Habermas in Anglo-American academic circles. When viewed as a contribution to intellectual history, Carlyle's essays on Goethe are comparable to T. S. Eliot's reassessment of the cultural significance of the Metaphysical Poets. But the focus on Goethe and other German writers—Schiller, Wieland, Jean Paul, Novalis, and Friederich Schlegel—suggests that Carlyle's critical essays are unique among the works of major English critics from after the time of Dryden until the late nineteenth century. As a coherent, sustained critique of an entire tradition, only Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* approaches Carlyle's essays both in scale and in method, which is best described as a fusion of biography and practical criticism. Indeed, Carlyle's guiding conviction that biography provides the most authentic basis for literary criticism—"Would that I saw the Poet and knew him [I] could then fully understand him!" (*Two Notebooks*, p. 128) anticipates Dilthey's psycho-biographical hermeneutic in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, Freud's investigations of the psychology of artists and writers, and, more recently, the approaches to biography in the work of W. J. Bate, Harold Bloom, and John Bowlby.<sup>32</sup>

Carlyle first came to the attention of the English reading public with his translation of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1824) and this text played a key role in situating Goethe on Britain's intellectual horizon. Indeed, prior to its publication and the appearance of Carlyle's essays on Goethe (1828-1832), the canonical niche that Goethe would occupy beside Dante and Shakespeare as a representative European poet was not yet established nor even conceivable. Carlyle, however, single-handedly created a context for the reception of Goethe which combined speculation on the links between aesthetics and ethics with homilies on the importance of great men. In additional essays on Schiller, Jean Paul, Novalis, and other German writers, Carlyle anticipates the enthusiastic appropriation of German culture throughout nineteenth-century Europe. Echoing Carlyle's intuition of the centrality of German thought in forming the modern mind, Taine insists that "l'Allemagne a produit toutes les idées de notre âge historique" [Germany has produced all the ideas of our historic epoch].<sup>33</sup> Taken as a body of critical writing Carlyle's essays provide much more than a rebuttal to the less gifted William Taylor or to ideologically antagonistic critics such as George Ellis and John Hookham Frere writing for the *Anti-Jacobin*; they also comprise a fulfillment of Coleridge's envisioned "history of Belles Lettres in Germany" that he wished to combine with "a biographical and critical analysis" of "Goethe as poet and philosopher" plus an additional component

<sup>32</sup>See, for example, Walter Jackson Bate's *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (New York, 1972), and *Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1975); Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (London and New York, 1973); and John Bowlby's *Charles Darwin* (New York, 1990).

<sup>33</sup>Hippolyte Taine. *Histoire de la littérature Anglaise* (Paris, 1863-64), p. 277

unplanned by Coleridge: a consideration of the relevance of German culture for post-Romantic England, a theme that would recur in Carlyle's writing and conversation to the end of his life.<sup>34</sup> Despite insisting upon a caveat concerning Carlyle's "avowed tendency towards 'philosophical' rather than 'formal' criticism," even the usually skeptical Saintsbury concedes that "altogether there are few things in English Criticism better worth reading, marking, and learning . . . than the literary parts of these earlier volumes of Essays."<sup>35</sup>

It appears, then, that voices of dissent open and close the nineteenth century. Coleridge denounced Goethe's works of imagination as "utterly unprincipled" and George Saintsbury, in his massive effort of revisionist literary history, compared Goethe's reputation as a critic to a "stale superstition" (III, 352). Moreover, Goethe's neglect of purely literary criteria inspires Saintsbury's re-evaluation of the legacy of Romanticism, in which a concern for personality, moral conduct, and character is a chief component. Saintsbury's pre-Modernist critique of Goethe anticipates the twentieth century's realignment of the canon of criticism. In rejecting Goethe's emphasis on the personality, Saintsbury refashions the predominately ethical or social-cultural function of criticism, which was adopted by Victorian critics. This is the nativity of Modernism. Coleridge's objection to Goethe, in contrast to Carlyle's admiration, was based on a concern for morality. As he remarked to Crabb Robinson in 1810, he "conceded to Goethe universal talent, but felt a want of moral life to be the defect of his poetry." Some time later Coleridge elaborated on this judgment in conversation with Wordsworth. In denying "merit to Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*," he expressed "the improbability of being a good poet without being a good man."<sup>36</sup> It becomes apparent in further conversations with Robinson that Coleridge's attitude towards Goethe was capable of modification. The appearance of a complete edition of *Faust* compelled him to acknowledge "the genius of Goethe in a manner he never did before." And yet, as in the past, "the want of religion and enthusiasm in Goethe" remains "in Coleridge's mind an irreparable defect." In addition, he found fault with the beginning of *Faust* and with what he describes as the inadequately developed character of Mephistopheles. As for the protagonist of the drama, Coleridge finds that "the character of Faust is not *motivirt*" because Goethe fails to offer a convincing explanation for the "state of mind which led to the catastrophe." But Robinson knew Coleridge well enough to remark on his plan to write "a new Faust" that

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<sup>34</sup>Letter to Josiah Wedgwood in *Collected Letters of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford, 1958), IV, 698-9.

<sup>35</sup>George Saintsbury, III, 497.

<sup>36</sup>Henry Crabb Robinson, *Robinson's Diary and Reminiscences*, ed. Thomas Sadler (London and New York, 1872), I, 202.

“he would never get out of vague conceptions—he would lose himself in dreams.”<sup>37</sup>

At other times Coleridge’s objections to Goethe were based on literary and aesthetic grounds, which he attempted on several occasions to clarify and to defend. For example, in March 1813, Coleridge distinguishes, in a manner similar to the pattern of development later articulated by Carlyle, the chief characteristics of the early and mature phases of Goethe’s career. As Robinson recorded their conversation, Coleridge “thought Goethe had, from a sort of caprice, underrated the talent which in his youth he had so eminently displayed in his *Werther*, that of exhibiting man in a state of exalted sublimity.” In contrast to his early manner, the later Goethe, Coleridge complained, “delighted to exhibit. . . purely beautiful objects, not objects of desire and passion. . . as a statuary. . . does a succession of marble figures.”<sup>38</sup> *Wilhelm Meister* is the one later work which elicited Coleridge’s approval. On another occasion, Robinson found Coleridge at Flaxman’s house “enraptured” with Goethe’s novel. Although he considered “the conclusion very bad” and the death of Mignon and the incidents in the castle “unworthy of the exquisite earlier parts,” he “repeated *Kennst Du das Land* with tears in his eyes and he praised the ‘Song of the Harper’ which Walter Scott told Coleridge was the original of his Minstrel in the Lay [March 20, 1813].”<sup>39</sup>

Although skepticism contributed to Coleridge’s complex attitude towards Goethe, a week after the conversation in which he notes the irreverent tendencies in *Faust*, he informs Robinson of his plans for “writing a new *Faust*” from the proper moral and religious perspective.<sup>40</sup> The impulse to revise Goethe is expressed a few years later in connection with the *Farbenlehre* [*Theory of Colors*]. On July 4, 1816, Coleridge makes the astonishing claim that “some years back” he had “discovered the same theory and would certainly have reduced it to form and published it, had not Southey diverted his attention from such studies to poetry.”<sup>41</sup> Writing to Robinson a year later, Coleridge, still pre-occupied with the *Farbenlehre*, unveils his intention to publish a study of Goethe that, like so many of his projects (including the aborted “Life of Lessing”), never came to fruition: “As this is the very work I am now taking in hand and shall send to the press within a week after my second sermon [*Lay Sermons*,

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<sup>37</sup>Sadler, I, 206-07.

<sup>38</sup>Sadler, I, 214-15.

<sup>39</sup>Cited in Frederick Norman’s *Henry Crabb Robinson and Goethe* (London, 1930-31), I, 70.

<sup>40</sup>Sadler, I, 207.

<sup>41</sup>Cited in Norman, I, 75.

1816] is out—namely on Goethe as poet and philosopher with a biographical critical analysis of his writings with translations.<sup>42</sup>

Coleridge's enthusiasm for Goethe during the mid-1810s, like his interest in Schiller a decade before, did not endure. Inexplicably, his attitude toward Goethe slips back into a familiar mood of moral uneasiness. In June 1824 Robinson records Coleridge's conversation at Charles Lamb's. In a manner reminiscent of William Taylor, Coleridge "set Goethe far below Schiller, allowing no other merit than that of exquisite taste." Then he reiterated "his favorite reproach," namely, that "Goethe wrote from an idea that a certain thing was to be in a certain style, not from the fulness of sentiment on a certain subject." For good measure he also "called Herder a coxcomb" and repeated his conviction that Goethe is "utterly unprincipled." Identifying with the generation of Novalis and his old friends the Brentanos and August Schlegel, Robinson disputed Coleridge's assertion that Goethe was a mannerist without emotion. On the same occasion Robinson met John Irving. Noting that the conversation revolved around Goethe, Irving mentioned a young friend, Thomas Carlyle, who, coincidentally, had just completed his translation of *Wilhelm Meister*.<sup>43</sup>

Twenty years previously Robinson published a series of essays that represent the first coherent effort by a British Romantic writer to evaluate and to translate Goethe's lyric poetry and epigrams.<sup>44</sup> At the same time he makes the first tentative strides toward an interpretation of Goethe as a cultural authority for Europe. He is, moreover, aware of the symbolic quality with which the events in a poet's life are invested. He recognizes that in such matters there is always an appeal open to nature, which is ultimately the bond between "Dichtung" and "Wahrheit," poetry and truth: "in a truly great man," he writes, "everything is important." And the greatness of Goethe, he suggests, has to do with his concern for realism: "Goethe has done more than any man to bring back the public taste to works of imagination—a faculty which does not refuse all alliance with frightful realities, but which refines and idealizes them."<sup>45</sup> The first in his generation to recognize the broader importance of Goethe, Robinson anticipates Carlyle's extension of Goethe's influence from art to ethics. Twenty years later, in his essays for the *Edinburgh Review*, Goethe is described as a prophet and medium through which supernatural revelation in the modern world has taken place.

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<sup>42</sup>Cited in Norman, I, 76.

<sup>43</sup>Cited in Norman, I, 91

<sup>44</sup>"Letters on German Literature," *Monthly Register and Encyclopedian Magazine* (Aug.-Apr. 1802-03).

<sup>45</sup>Cited in Norman, II, 58.



Carlyle found the British Romantics deficient in the philosophical vision and the moral seriousness which he felt were necessary if poets were to instigate a new cultural dispensation. Scott's "deep recognition of the Past" is deemed superficial because it lacks philosophical foundation and he is parodied as "the great *Restaurateur* of Europe." Byron is ridiculed as "a Dandy of Sorrows," and Wordsworth is dismissed as "genuine but a small diluted man." Hazlitt is rejected because he "has discovered nothing; been able to believe nothing." Coleridge's "cardinal sin" is a lack of will power: "He has no resolution . . . . The conversation of the man is much as I anticipated—a forest of thoughts . . . . But there is no method in his talk . . . he is like the hulk of a huge ship—his masts and sails and rudder have rotted quite away" (*Life of Carlyle, 1795-1835*, I, 222). What is lacking, then, in Britain is a "modern spiritseer," a genius with the "spiritual eye" to discern the potential for the aestheticization of modern life. Goethe, whom he designates as just such a genius, "had opened a new world to him" and countered the loss of a spiritual center in his existence. Goethe's writings represent "a mind working itself into clearer and clearer freedom; gaining a more and more perfect domination of its world. The pestilential fever of Skepticism runs through its stages; but happily it ends . . . in clearer, henceforth invulnerable health" (XXVI, 430). Carlyle's assertion that "Biography is the only History" reflects how, in an age in which literature has usurped functions once served by religion, the lives of the poets—and of Goethe in particular—become as important as Acts of Apostles and Lives of the Saints were in ages of faith (V, 1).

In opposition to "these hard unbelieving utilitarian days" Carlyle was convinced that Goethe's writings "reveal to us glimpses of the Unseen but not unreal world, so that the Actual and the Ideal may again meet together, and clear knowledge be again wedded to Religion in the life and business of men." Carlyle admits that his critique of Goethe is intuitive, irrational, unscientific, and wholly "interested" in nature, though he insists that "the merits and characteristics of a poet are not to be set forth by logic," but rather "by personal, and by deep and careful inspection of his works." Understanding is gained through an exertion of imagination, sympathy, and openness of mind, without which it is impossible to "transfer ourselves in any measure into his [the author's] peculiar point of vision" (XXXVI, 208).

The openness and objectivity that is, for Carlyle, the first duty of the critic is once again inferred from Goethe's personality. Indeed, "clearness of sight" is "the foundation of all talent," to which "all other gifts are superadded" (XXVII, 430), and Goethe's and Shakespeare's superior "Spiritual Endowment" is derived from this "utmost Clearness" and an "all-piercing faculty of Vision":

For Goethe, as for Shakespeare, the world lies all translucent, all *fusible* we might call it, encircled with *WONDER*; the Natural is in reality the Supernatural, for to the seer's eyes both become one. What are the *Hamlets* and *Tempests*, the *Fausts* and *Mignons*, but glimpses accorded us into the translucent, wonder-encircled

world; revelations of the mystery of all mysteries, Man's life as it actually is? ("Burns," XXVI, 276).

Goethe's and Shakespeare's writings are vital because they were formed in a process that started from within and moved outwards towards the surface of reality. As a result, those "Macbeths and Falstaffs . . . these Fausts and Philinas have a verisimilitude and life that separates them from all other fictions of later ages" (XXVI, 237). Decisive in this judgment is the perception of Goethe's "sincerity," which here takes on overtones of Hazlitt's "gusto," as Arnold, aged twenty-five, makes clear in a letter to his mother. He contrasts this quality in Goethe's mind with what he finds in Wordsworth: "I have been returning to Goethe's life and think higher of him than ever. His thorough sincerity—writing about nothing he had not experienced—is in modern literature almost unrivalled. Wordsworth resembles him in this respect; but the difference between the range of their two experiences is immense and not in the Englishman's favor."<sup>46</sup>

As we have seen, this position is opposed to Heine's view of Goethe, whose indifference to politics is contrasted unfavorably with Schiller's openness to real world experience. In the essay "State of German Literature" Carlyle nonetheless stresses Goethe's engagement with the material world and concrete human experience. Indeed, Goethe's greatness is found in his adaptation of "the actual aspects of life" to literature. Goethe's "realism" shows us that "the end of Poetry is higher; she must dwell in Reality and become manifest to men in the forms among which they live and move." In Goethe's works "the nineteenth century stands before us, in all its contradiction and perplexity; barren, mean, and baleful, as we have known it; yet here no longer mean or barren, but enamelled into beauty in the poet's spirit" (XXVI, 66). Goethe's mind is governed by an almost instinctive harmonizing impulse that nullifies superficial differences in the act of penetrating to the common core of phenomena. He is "the Uniter and Reconciler" of "the inward spiritual chaos" of "the most distracted and divided age . . . since the introduction of the Christian Religion." Through the "melodious reverence" and "deep, all-pervading Faith" informing his aesthetic vision, Goethe "was to close the Abyss out of which such manifold destruction, moral, intellectual, social, was proceeding" (XXVII, 434-35). In consideration, then, of Goethe's role as a catalyst for the birth of a new phase of cultural achievement, "his Spiritual History" is thus designated as "the ideal emblem of all true men's in these days; the goal of Manhood, which he attained, men too in our degree have to aim . . . in the dim weltering chaos rejoice to find a paved way" (XXVII, 440-41). Because Goethe sets the individual standard of achievement his homeland—de Staël makes the same argument in *De l'Allemagne*—"is to be the leader of spiritual Europe." This is the main empha-

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<sup>46</sup>Cited in Bruford, "Goethe and Some Victorian Humanists," p. 49.

sis of Carlyle's critique; his essays on Goethe seek to elucidate the "deep movement agitating the universal mind of Germany," whose reverberations are felt across Europe and are in turn mediated by the conflicting positions taken by de Staël and Heine (XXVII, 426).

In the essays "Goethe" and "Goethe's Works," which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1832, the year of Goethe's death, Carlyle seeks to redress the errors of his predecessors in England and Germany and properly to introduce Goethe as "a world-changer, and benignant spiritual revolutionist" (XXVII, 440). Critics before Carlyle had invoked pallid clichés in place of genuine psychological profiles of Goethe, which led to a failure to appreciate his "real poetic worth" and his importance to "his own people and to us" (XXVI, 199). Correcting this mistake, Carlyle takes the full measure of Goethe's humanity; the fundamental question underlying his inquiry thus concerns the connection between the writer's personality and his works: "What manner of man is this? How shall we even see him? What is his spiritual structure, what at least are the outward form and features of his mind?" (XXVI, 199). Carlyle's approach to Goethe reflects an adjustment in the function of the biographical impulse in criticism from a preoccupation with major life experiences to an interest in the relationship between personality and literary expression.

The result of Carlyle's critical method is to endow Goethe with a quasi-religious, oracular status. He has earned this distinction by appearing to have reconciled, as evidenced in his writings, "the inward spiritual chaos of the age" (XXVII, 434). He has, according to Carlyle's explication, suffered from the perplexities inherent in modern life, but he "has also mastered these, he is above them, and has shown others how to rise above them" (XXVII, 438). The other decisive characteristic of Goethe's life and works, which Carlyle considers the true "test for the culture of a poet," is his sincerity, a quality which may be measured by an author's readiness to reveal himself fully in his work. Carlyle's hermeneutic was therefore derived chiefly from those works which embody Goethe's renowned confessional impulse, such as *Götz von Berlichingen*, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, and *Faust*. The passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* [*Poetry and Truth*] from which Carlyle takes his cue reads: "All, therefore, that has been confessed by me, consists of fragments of a great confession; and this little book is an attempt which I have ventured on to render it complete."<sup>47</sup> These lines inspired Carlyle's longing for direct, unmediated contact with Goethe and they correspond, in large part, to Coleridge's definitions of poetry and the poet in the *Biographia Literaria*: "What is poetry? is nearly the same ques-

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<sup>47</sup>*The Autobiography of Johann Wolfgang Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford (Chicago, 1974), I, 305.

tion with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself."<sup>48</sup>

In the "Translator's Preface to the First Edition of *Meister's Apprenticeship*" Carlyle offers a reading of the early works *Götz* and *Werther* which emphasizes Goethe's centrality to contemporary culture. In his view "it would be difficult to name two books which have exercised a deeper influence on the subsequent literature of Europe . . . . Sceptical sentimentality, view-hunting, love, friendship, suicide, and desperation became the staple of literary ware" (XXVII, 431, 435). Moreover, the highest importance is assigned to these works because of their role in awakening the historical consciousness of the nineteenth century and in revealing what would presently be recognized as typically modern forms of experience, especially the "feelings that arise from passion incapable of being converted into action" (XXVI, 210). Carlyle deduces from his examination of Goethe's life experiences that he, too, had been driven to despair through "Unrest" and "Discontent" and that *Werther* gives voice to "the cry of that dim, rooted pain, under which all thoughtful men of a certain age were languishing" (XXVI, 215). Affirming Goethe's cultural authority as an expression of his capacity for redemptive suffering, Carlyle identifies the novel as the product of auto-therapy; it is identified as "a symptom, indeed a cause, of his now having got delivered from such melancholy" (XXVI, 216-7). The salutary effect of *Werther* is contrasted with Byron's "life-weariness, his moody melancholy, and mad stormful indignation" (XXVI, 217). Not discounting Byron's affinity with the *Sturm-und-Drang* phase of Goethe's career—"Byron was our English Sentimentalist and Power-man," Carlyle nonetheless pits the health he construes from Goethe's efforts at self-healing against what he calls the "spasmodic Byronism" of the age (XXVII, 427). In a well-known passage in *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle encodes his cultural bias toward Germany and combines it with a rejection of Enlightenment eudamonism that he associates with English culture:

It is only with Renunciation (Entsagen) that life, properly speaking, can be said to begin . . . . What act of Legislature was there that *thou* shouldst be HAPPY? . . . Art thou nothing other than a Vulture, then, that fliest through the Universe seeking after somewhat to eat: shrieking dolefully because carrion enough is not given thee? Close thy Byron; open thy *Goethe*.<sup>49</sup>

The pattern of authorial development that Carlyle infers from his reading of *Werther* and other early works is replicated in *Sartor Resartus*. Presented as the faux biography of the "Clothes Philosopher" Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, who

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<sup>48</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, 1983), II, 5.

<sup>49</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. C. F. Harrold (Garden City, NY, 1937), pp. 191-2.

is presented as a caricature of a German idealist philosopher, the novel also functions as a satire on the author/editor as a *Vermittler* of German culture. Much of the dramatic interest in the novel is located in the implied symmetry between the protagonist's psyche and the spiritual condition of Europe. Carlyle simultaneously ventriloquizes Goethe's depression in *Werther* and his own personal crisis regarding faith and authority. In Froude's *Life of Carlyle* the contours of this spiritual crisis are distorted through the use of grandiose comparisons:

Thus to poverty and dyspepsia there had been added the struggle which is always hardest in the noble mind, which Job had known, and David, and Solomon, and Aeschylus, and Shakespeare, and Goethe. Where are the tokens of His presence? where are the signs of His coming? Is there, in this universe of things, any moral Providence at all?<sup>50</sup>

Teufelsdröckh's spiritual growth—from the “Everlasting No” through the “Centre of Indifference” to the “Everlasting Yes”—mirrors the triadic structure of Carlyle's construction of Goethe's biography. He identifies the three major phases of Goethe's development with *Werther*, *Wilhelm Meister*, and the *West-östlicher Divan*. As previously noted, *Werther* embodies “a poetic utterance of the World's Despair.” *Wilhelm Meister*, by contrast, belongs to “the second and sounder period of Goethe's life” and the at times bafflingly circuitous plot heralds “a free recognition of Life, in its depth, variety and majesty. Anarchy has become Peace; the once gloomy and perturbed spirit is now serene, cheerfully vigorous . . . . For he has conquered his unbelief; the Ideal has been built on the Actual, [it] no longer floats vaguely in darkness and regions of dreams, but rests on light, on the firm ground of human interest and business” (XXVI, 224). While the Romantics, especially Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, expressed a special affinity for *Faust*, the next generation felt a deeper bond with *Wilhelm Meister* (in Carlyle's translation). Perhaps an unlikely candidate for the English canon, Carlyle's *Meister* nonetheless appealed to Victorian readers by suggesting links between the growth of aesthetic sensibility and ethical self-awareness. But there is a key absence in the text that Carlyle notices; there is “as yet no Divinity . . . recognized here.” Only in the masterwork of Goethe's last years, the *West-östlicher Divan*, does Carlyle perceive that he expresses anything like transcendental faith; in these imitations of Persian poems a “melodious reverence becomes triumphant; a deep, all-pervading Faith, with mild voice, grave as gay” (XXVII, 431).

In “Goethe's Works” Carlyle responds to *Wilhelm Meister*'s critics in Germany and England, including De Quincey and Novalis, who derided the novel's form and morality. Despite its fragmentary appearance, he praises the novel as “one of the most perfect pieces of composition that Goethe has ever produced

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<sup>50</sup>*Life of Carlyle, 1795-1835*, I, 66.

... [which] coheres beautifully within itself ... [giving] us the notion of a *completed fragment*." Goethe's fusion of allegory and realism, wisdom literature and the lyric reminds Carlyle of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, but *Wilhelm Meister* presents an allegory of the nineteenth century and therefore contains "a picture full of the expressiveness, of what men are striving for, and ought to strive for, in these actual days" (XXVI, 232-33). The realism of *Wilhelm Meister* serves as a counterweight to the "wild suicidal Night-thoughts of *Werther*," the signature work of Goethe's youth (XXVI, 234). The appearance of the later novel indicates to Carlyle "that a great change had taken place in the moral disposition of the man; a change from inward imprisonment, doubt and discontent into freedom, belief and clear activity" (XXVI, 242-43). He credits Goethe with having gone further than "any other man in his age" in breaking through the paralysis of reflection and demonstrating the possibility of meaningful action in the modern world (XXVI, 269).

Carlyle offers reflections on Goethe's achievement in the realistic mode. He suggests that his realism has a "supernatural" quality because of its "figurativeness," that is, Goethe's "singularly emblematic intellect; his perpetual never-failing tendency to transform into shape, into life ... the opinion, the feeling that may dwell in him. Goethe's figurativeness ... manifests itself as the constructing of the inward elements of a thought, as the vital elements of it." As Keats notes concerning Shakespeare, that he "led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it,"<sup>51</sup> this "emblematic" faculty is, according to Carlyle, "the very essence of Goethe's intellect" (XXVII, 438). Allegory is, as is well known, also central to Carlyle's writings. In *Sartor Resartus* his idea of "Natural Supernaturalism" suggests that the universe itself is a symbol. It is alternatively "the Godlike rendered visible" and "the living visible Garment of God." For Carlyle, it is in the nature of "the Symbol proper" that "there is ever some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible attained there." Such is the importance of Goethe's achievement that he "conquers heaven for us." Since it is "in and through symbols" that the individual human being "lives, works, and has his being," Carlyle implies that every person, not simply poets and artists, gains his identity as a symbol-maker, *homo idolons*. The poet's function differs only in that he exploits the bivalent nature of the symbol itself, in which "there is concealment and yet revelation."<sup>52</sup>

The other decisive characteristic of Goethe's mind, which Carlyle considers the "test of the culture of a Poet," is once again his sincerity and, closely related to this, his penchant for self-revelation. This explains Carlyle's interest in those works which give most direct expression of Goethe's personality. Consistent

<sup>51</sup>*The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, MA), II, 67.

<sup>52</sup>*Sartor Resartus*, pp. 178, 43, 182, 175.

with his position that the “wisdom” that they contain is of greater value than their status as works of art, his assessment of works other than *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister* is at times cursory. Of “Wild, apocalyptic” *Faust*, Carlyle remarks that it evokes “a death-song of departing worlds.” Although he notes the essentially “anthropomorphic character” of the classical, “Pagan” phase in Goethe’s career, he expresses no real sympathy for the masterpiece of this period, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. By contrast, Carlyle waxes enthusiastic over the “old Ethic tone” of the *Venetianische Epigramme* [*Venetian Epigrams*], which he describes as both “musical” and “joyfully strong” (XXVII, 431). But he is clearly more interested in offering an interpretation of these verses which is consistent with the cult of personality he has derived from his reading of Goethe’s works, than he is in engaging in an objective analysis of the texts.

At mid-century, the construction of the cult of personality surrounding Goethe continues in the writings of Arnold, G. H. Lewes, F. D. Maurice, and Walter Pater and exfoliates throughout the century. At first restricted to Goethe and German literature, English enthusiasm for German culture eventually encompasses aesthetics, philosophy, historiography, theology, and, perhaps most important of all, science. Carlyle’s critique of Goethe, in which the German poet is identified as the prophet of a new aesthetic, philosophical, and moral dispensation, engendered this decades-long process of cultural appropriation. Thus, beginning with Carlyle’s essays in the 1820s, responding to Goethe becomes one of the chief organizing principles in the intellectual life of nineteenth-century Britain.

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