[The Young] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

[...] German literature around 1770 saw itself in crisis. In this “watery, prolix, null epoch,” as Goethe himself later put it, “everything was flattened out.” Established dramatic themes had lost their force, and substitutes were only beginning to suggest themselves. And as yet, no critical consensus had established viable replacements for the exhausted, traditional literary forms. As G. A. Wells describes the situation, “It is hard for us to realize how unspeakably boring were the French-oriented tragedies of the so-called regular theater in mid-eighteenth-century Germany, for the simple reason that we never read them.” Goethe later acknowledged that this dearth of creative activity made it relatively easy for anyone to make a mark. But the German literary landscape was fertile ground, not a wasteland. Goethe, as we have seen, followed others who both defined the direction that his work would take and prepared a receptive audience for it. If he looms above the rest of the Sturm und Drang, he also stands firmly within it. “The Golden Touch” that Goethe brought to German literature cannot be isolated from the historical developments that led up to it.

Born to one of Frankfurt’s wealthiest families, Goethe saw himself as part of the ruling elite, not the rising middle class. “We Frankfurt patricians,” he claimed in old age, “always considered ourselves the equals of the aristocracy, and the day I held the diploma of nobility in my hand I was not aware of anything that I had not already long possessed” (Friedenthal 16). His two grandfathers had amassed the family wealth that underlay this sense of social rank. His father, Johann Caspar Goethe (1710-1782), was a leisured gentleman whose title of Rat (councillor) was a purchased, honorary appellation that involved no official duties. Instead he occupied himself with a few hobbies and the education of his two children, Wolfgang and the slightly younger Cornelia (1750-1777). Historians, always eager to find examples of generational conflict in the Sturm und Drang, have been unkind to this father. He admittedly lacked the joie de vivre of his much younger wife,
who, Goethe claimed, often had to “adjust events and steer them into some middle ground between my father’s stern sense of order and my many eccentricities” (Poetry and Truth 373). But though Caspar Goethe sought to maintain structure and displayed impatience with his son’s unhurried pursuit of a career, he also lavished care and money on the boy, gave him considerable freedom to develop his interests, and took a lively interest in his writings. His later reputation for miserliness originated with his son’s friends, especially the acerbic Merck, who apparently tried to borrow money from him. Actually, Goethe’s companions regularly enjoyed the hospitality of his father’s house as young adults, and several, especially Klinger, benefited from his largesse, if only indirectly. A young harpist that Goethe encountered on the street and brought home was only one of the impecunious artists that he expected his family to support. And the amounts spent on his own first twenty-six years were nothing short of generous; his university studies consumed almost half the family’s considerable income for that period (Boyle 59-60).

High educational expenses were a given, since Frankfurt’s only public school had a deservedly poor reputation, and the city’s wealthier sons usually went elsewhere or, like Goethe, employed private tutors. On his own the boy explored the city, which still retained much of its old social, historical and linguistic character (Blackall 1978: 482-5). He delighted in the old markets, crooked streets, and preserved traditions, and especially enjoyed watching the coronation of Joseph II as Holy Roman Emperor in 1764. His grandfather’s library of old chronicles and chapbooks also helped to steer his imagination toward former times, and it is not surprising to see him reach back into the sixteenth century for two of his early characters, Götz von Berlichingen and Faust. In 1765, Goethe moved to a more fashionable, rococo world of theater and cultivated manners by beginning his university studies in Leipzig, Germany’s “Little Paris.” There he ostensibly studied law, but academic matters impinged very little on his other activities, including the composition of some playful rococo poems, a pastoral play (Die Laune des Verliebten [The Lover’s Spleen]) and a comedy (Die Mitschuldigen [Partners in Guilt]) in the prevailing “Saxon style” […] In 1768, however, a serious illness, probably tuberculosis, required his return to Frankfurt for nine months. This period of convalescence
intercalated an anomalous phase in his education, what one biographer calls a period of twilight (Friedenthal 59). It was not a comfortable time: Goethe’s condition required surgical treatment of an abscess on his neck, and the quarrels between his father and adolescent sister about her upbringing filled the house with tension. And compared with Leipzig, Frankfurt seemed dull and backward. The enforced leisure did give him time to read, however, as well as to rework both Die Mitschuldigen and his earlier poems, which appeared anonymously as Neue Lieder (New Songs). These works indicate great things to come, at least in retrospect, but he was dissatisfied with the bulk of his efforts and later, in 1770, ceremoniously burned a number of his manuscripts. This was actually his second auto-da-fé, since he had already consigned most of his juvenilia to the flames in 1767.

During his convalescence, he also began to explore Pietism by meeting with a group that had gathered around Susanne Katherine von Klettenberg (1723-1774), a distant relative. This remarkably otherworldly woman [...] took the young man under her spiritual wing. Her fellow believers’ introspective speculations struck a responsive chord in the young Goethe before he eventually wearied of what he came to consider their superficial self-indulgence and lack of discipline. His impatience, however, did not extend to Klettenberg. Under her guidance he also explored the occult: Paracelsus, Swedenborg, Rosicrucianism and alchemy [...].

When sufficiently recovered from his illness in April, 1770, he returned to his legal studies, this time matriculating in Strasbourg. The city had been part of France since 1679, but it and the surrounding countryside retained a strong German heritage, and it is here that Goethe, together with a number of other Sturm und Drang writers, developed a sense of national culture. As in Leipzig, his studies failed to divert him inordinately from more personal matters. Aided by a private tutor he quickly passed his examinations with distinction and was left unsupervised to write a dissertation. The resulting work, subsequently lost, was rejected, apparently because of its religious heterodoxy, but he was permitted to substitute a formal public disputation -- which none of the participants seems to have taken seriously -- and was awarded a doctorate in the summer of 1771. Of greater value than this formal education was his customary midday
meal, which he took at an eating establishment with about a dozen other students. An avuncular bachelor, Johann Daniel Salzmann (1722-1812), presided over the table and kept the conversation from descending into coarseness or unseemly levity. The group varied over time, but the presence of Goethe, Heinrich Jung-Stilling, Franz Christian Lerse, Heinrich Leopold Wagner, and Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz made Salzmann’s table an important center of the nascent Sturm und Drang.

Even more crucial was [Johann Gottfried] Herder’s arrival in Strasbourg in September, 1770, discussed in the previous chapter. Goethe’s report of their interaction stresses Herder’s “scolding and criticizing” and suggests that “the greater part of his contradictory, bitter, mordant disposition derived from his ailment and the suffering it cost him” (Poetry and Truth 300). But Herder had additional grounds for impatience. Romanticized histories to the contrary, the older critic had no suspicion that his adept had the potential to become, as he later put it, a German Shakespeare. The young man before him seemed too narrow, naive, and superficial for that. As late as March, 1772, Herder wrote to his fiancée that “Goethe is really a good fellow, only [he is] extremely light-minded -- and much too light-minded -- and flibbertygibberty -- for which he always got reproaches from me. He was the only one who visited me in my Strassburg confinement and whom I liked to see. Also, without flattering myself, I believe I impressed on him a few good things that can be effective later.”5 (Of course, Herder’s description of Goethe may also have been intended to mute whatever attraction his fiancée might have felt toward the young man she had just met.)

Herder’s influence manifests itself in two of Goethe’s earliest essays. *Von deutscher Baukunst* (On German Architecture) was first printed anonymously as a pamphlet in 1772 and then included a year later in Herder’s anthology, *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (Of German Kind and Art). This essay rhapsodically praises Strasbourg’s Gothic cathedral and “the genius of the great builder,” Erwin von Steinbach.6 Goethe’s appreciation rests on two misapprehensions: that the Gothic style is uniquely German, and that Erwin alone designed the cathedral. The essay attacks “modern esthetizers” who judge by “the rules” and thus conclude that the Gothic style is formless. Universal strictures cannot
discern the building’s artistic unity, which derives from a single creative impulse rooted in an authentic national tradition:

And even if this creative activity produces the most arbitrary shapes and designs, they will harmonize despite the apparent lack of proportion. For a single feeling created them as a characteristic whole.

This characteristic art is in fact the only true art. If it springs from a sincere, unified, original, autonomous feeling, unconcerned, indeed unaware of anything extraneous, then it will be a living whole, whether born of a coarse savagery or cultured sensitivity. You see endless variations of this in different nations and individuals. The more the soul develops a feeling for proportion, which alone is beautiful and eternal, whose fundamental harmony we can prove but whose mysteries we can only feel, in which alone the life of the god-like genius dances to blissful melodies, and the more deeply this beauty penetrates the mind so that both seem to have originated as one and the mind can be satisfied with nothing but beauty and produces nothing but beauty -- then the more fortunate is the artist, the more glorious is he, and the deeper we bow before him and worship God’s anointed one. (8-9)

This could be Herder speaking: true art is the expression of the forms and values of a particular time and nation, composed by a single, creative mind. One can appreciate such art only through empathy with its context and creator.

Zum Schäkespears-Tag (Shakespeare: A Tribute), a talk delivered before friends on Shakespeare’s name day in 1771, was first printed posthumously, in 1854. In it, Goethe rails against the three unities and praises Shakespeare for transcending such pedantic notions of aesthetic order and creating an artistic whole. “Shakespeare’s theater is a colorful gallery where the history of the world passes before our eyes on the invisible thread of time. The structure of his plays, in the accepted sense of the word, is no structure at all. Yet each revolves around an invisible
point which no philosopher has discovered or defined and where the characteristic quality of our being, our presumed free will, collides with the inevitable course of the whole.”

To those who take offense at Shakespeare’s characters, Goethe replies, “Nature! Nature! Nothing is so like Nature as Shakespeare’s figures” (165).

Herder was not Goethe’s sole companion during this period. Visiting the village of Sesenheim in October, 1770, he met and fell in love with Friederike Brion (1752-1813), whose family seemed to him to come straight out of Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield*, another work to which Herder probably introduced him. Before their relationship ended with Goethe’s departure from Strasbourg the following August, it inspired some of the most memorable lyric poetry of the Sturm und Drang -- or of any period -- works like “Mailied” (May Song) and “Willkommen und Abschied” (Welcome and Farewell). Friederike suffered greatly from being left so abruptly, and Goethe’s conscience troubled him the rest of his life. Lenz, as we will see later, did his best to console her.

Goethe’s return to Frankfurt in August of 1771 marked the beginning of an enormously fruitful period. The legal practice that he started held his attention only briefly. More interesting were his friends. His mother, too, delighted in their company. The house “was, as she said, ‘from top to bottom stuffed full of beaux esprits’, who might stay up half the night, gossiping, arguing, reading, improvising” (Boyle 61). Drawing on the cellar she had inherited from her father, she kept the wine flowing, calling it “tyrant’s blood” in gentle mockery of the young men’s boisterous declarations of armchair rebellion. She called them all her “dear sons,” and she was their adored “Frau Aja,” after a mother figure in the French romance *Les quatre fils Aymon*.

**Götz von Berlichingen**

But most of all, Goethe wrote. Looking for national subjects, he encountered the autobiography of Gottfried von Berlichingen (1480-1562) and determined to use the Imperial Knight’s life as the basis for a German play in the style of Shakespeare’s histories. During the fall of 1771 he dashed off one such work in just six weeks and sent a copy to Herder. His mentor’s “harsh and unfriendly” criticisms (*Poetry and Truth* 420) have been lost, but we do know that they accused the young
author of having been completely corrupted by Shakespeare. Stung, Goethe reworked the drama, now entitled Götz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand (Götz von Berlichingen with the Iron Hand). His friend Merck was more encouraging and arranged for the court printer in Darmstadt to publish it anonymously in 1773, with Goethe paying for the paper himself. Ironically, the play’s enormous success prevented its author from recouping this cost, since pirated editions began to appear almost immediately.

Götz was more than popular: it shot Goethe to the forefront of German letters. [...] The play, for all its practical difficulties, struck its contemporaries as such effective drama that it single-handedly gave rise to a whole new genre of historical “knight plays.”

Werther

Götz von Berlichingen established Goethe as the new German literary hope, but his epistolary novel of the following year, Die Leiden des jungen Werther (The Sufferings of Young Werther, 1774), earned him world-wide fame. Because the present study concerns itself primarily with drama, I will discuss this novel only briefly. The story, as Goethe described it in a letter from the same year, portrays “a young person who, endowed with profound, pure feeling and true penetration of mind, loses himself in rhapsodic dreams, undermines himself by speculation until he finally, ravaged by the additional effect of unhappy passions and in particular by an infinite love, shoots himself in the head” (translation by Swales 88). The many suicides attributed to Werther’s example are an exaggeration, but it is still hard to overstate the novel’s effect. “Werther Fever” gripped a whole generation. French and English translations appeared quickly, and others soon followed, including one in Chinese, a first for a German book. When Napoleon visited Goethe in 1808, it was to meet the author of Werther, a book he claimed to have read seven times. Eighteenth-century enthusiasts bought Eau de Werther and fans, gloves, bread boxes, jewelry, and porcelain on which the sensitive hero and his beloved Lotte were painted. A whole generation adopted his dress: boots (rather than the more effete buckled shoes), a blue swallow-tail coat and a yellow waistcoat and breeches. Imitations and sequels proliferated, and
continue to do so today. One list of literary descendants, compiled in 1949, covers eighty-nine pages and includes nine Italian operas.\footnote{1}

Part of the novel’s initial popularity derives from the events upon which it was based. Goethe spent from May until September, 1772, in Wetzlar, the seat of the Imperial Court. His father had hoped that he would gain some legal experience there, but as usual personal activities intervened. He became infatuated with Charlotte Buff (1753-1828), despite her betrothal to Johann Georg Christian Kestner (1741-1800). The novel reflects this triangular relationship, as well as the suicide of a mutual acquaintance, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem (1747-1772), a death that caused a considerable stir nationally. Composing the first version in just four weeks -- or so he claimed -- Goethe used bits and pieces from his own correspondence, including Kestner’s detailed description of Jerusalem’s death and burial. Readers, encouraged by the contemporary setting, were titillated by this roman à clef. Charlotte Buff (“Lotte” in the novel) and Kestner (“Albert”) remained celebrities for the rest of their lives, and Jerusalem’s grave became a destination for pilgrimages. Goethe always found this interest annoying, not only because it overshadowed all his subsequent achievements, but because it reduced his careful composition to bits and pieces of gossip (see Poetry and Truth 434-35) […].

Notes


3 Eric A. Blackall, The Emergence of German as a Literary Language, 1700-1775 (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978), 482. Literally scores of biographical studies of Goethe exist in English and hundreds more in German. Perhaps the best of all is Nicholas Boyle’s Goethe. The Poet and the Age (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). See also Richard Friedenthal, Goethe. His Life and Times (Cleveland: World, 1965), translated from the German.
Goethe


5 Quoted in translation by Robert Thomas Clark, Herder. His Life and Thought (Berkeley: University of California, 1955), 129. Goethe admits in Poetry and Truth, “In Leipzig I had become accustomed to narrowly circumscribed conditions, and my situation in Frankfurt had not been conducive to the broadening of my general knowledge of German literature” (300).


7 Collected Works, vol. 3: Essays on Art and Literature, 164-65. The translators render Raritätenkasten as “colorful gallery” but point out in their notes that it means “raree show” (255).

8 In De la littérature allemande (1780), quoted in the commentary to the play in Goethe’s Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 1. Abteilung, Band 4, 790; see also Andreas Huyssen, Drama des Sturm und Drang. Kommentar zu einer Epoche (Munich: Winkler, 1980), 130-57; Goethe’s own recollections are found in Book 13 of Poetry and Truth.

9 Citations to the play in English are from Cyrus Hamlin’s translation, Goetz von Berlichingen with the Iron Hand, in vol. 7 of the Collected Works, 1-82; here: 47. We can follow the process of revision, because Goethe retained a copy of the original version; see Ilse Appelbaum Graham, “Vom Urgötz zum Götz: Neufassung oder Neuschöpfung? Ein Versuch morphologischer Kritik.” Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schiller-Gesellschaft, 9 (1965): 245-82.


“Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Götz von Berlichingen (1773),” *Interpretationen: Sturm und Drang* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997), 13. Götz himself first describes his iron hand as “one with its glove” (I, 2). Note that Selbitz has only one leg.


For more on this concept, see the chapters on Gerstenberg and Lenz, as well as Eric A. Blackall, *The Emergence of German as a Literary Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978), especially 387-90.

For a guide to the considerable secondary literature on Werther, even in English, see Martin Swales’s suggestions in *Goethe: The Sorrows of*