The Autobiographical Mode of Goethe: *Dichtung und Wahrheit*
and the Lyric Poems

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ABSTRACT

The dissolution of the traditional boundaries between the poet's autobiography and his "autobiographical" poems is a fairly recent phenomenon, but one can trace its origins back to Goethe, the first poet to write a prose autobiography that has the structure and coherence of a work of art, as well as to experiment with the use of autobiographical conventions in lyric poetry. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* is not a loosely organized series of reminiscences; rather, the narrative formalizes the process whereby the poet learns to unite his imaginative, instinctive—and in some respects, "demonic"—personality to the rationality, stability, and order of his boyhood universe. Goethe's autobiographical lyrics, on the other hand, are paradoxically more reticent and oblique than is the autobiography. Despite his insistence that all his poems were part of a "great confession," Goethe did not in fact violate the eighteenth-century rhetorical convention that a poem must not introduce intimate detail, realistic documentation, or observed eccentricities. Except in a rare case like "Ilmenau, Am 3 September 1788," Goethe the poet transforms personal confession into archetypal experience, as in "Willkommen und Abschied," or into symbolic narrative, as in "Seefahrt." Generally, then, Goethe's autobiographical "I" and his lyric "I" are still distinct entities, but their future fusion is forecast in a poem like "Ilmenau." (MGP)

Reading reviews of contemporary books, one has the distinct sense that autobiography is peculiarly the literary genre of our time, that

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each year the line between autobiography proper and the conventional genres is becoming narrower. In the case of the novel, critics have been quick to notice this dissolving of old boundaries; thus Stanley Kauffmann recently wrote of Peter Weiss's new "novel": "Exile is called a novel but the term seems just a talisman that Weiss hung over his desk to give himself associative freedom in writing an autobiography. His book is an exploration of self—emotional, moral, social self—from the beginnings of consciousness to the age of thirty." Again, Conor Cruise O'Brien hailed The Armies of the Night, Norman Mailer's account of the 1967 march on the Pentagon (an account somewhat pretentiously subtitled History as Novel; The Novel as History), as the "Confessions of the last American" and expressed the hope that Mailer would incorporate these "Confessions" into a full-scale autobiography.2 "After Rousseau—in fact in Rousseau," Northrop Frye notes in his discussion of prose fiction, "the confession flows into the novel, and the mixture produces the fictional autobiography, the Künstler-roman, and kindred types." And after surveying the history of English autobiography, Wayne Schumaker concludes that "the novel and autobiography are moving . . . toward closer similarity: the novel in becoming more highly personal, autobiography in adopting more of the techniques and tone of fiction." 4

In poetry, the same tendency may be observed, but here it has received much less attention and understanding. While everyone has realized that the poems in Robert Lowell's Life Studies are somehow "confessional," there has been little interest in the relationship of these poems to the prose autobiographical sketch "91 Revere Street," which is intentionally placed at the center of the volume. Paradoxically, the Life Studies poems have the air of casual good talk, of prosaic, colloquial speech, while "91 Revere Street" veers toward poetry in its exploitation of metaphor, its elaborate sound patterning, and its syntactic distortions. A rather similar conjunction of poetry and prose is found in Ted Hughes's new book Wodwo, while the painfully autobiographical poems in Sylvia Plath's Ariel are best read in conjunction with her "novel" The Bell Jar as well as with her autobiographical essay "Ocean 1212W." 6

Such dissolution of the traditional boundaries between the poet's autobiography and his "autobiographical" poems is a fairly recent phenomenon, but one can trace its origins back to Goethe, the first poet to write a prose autobiography which has the structure and
coherence of a work of art, as well as to experiment with the use of autobiographical conventions in lyric poetry. For Goethe, autobiography and personal lyric are still entirely separate genres, but it is in his autobiography, appropriately entitled *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and in certain lyric poems that the groundwork is laid for the mixed modes of the twentieth century. I propose in this essay to describe the structure of Goethe’s autobiography and to explore its relationship to Goethe’s practice as a lyric poet.

Although Thomas Mann called it “the best and certainly the most charming autobiography in the world,” *Dichtung und Wahrheit* has been beautifully misunderstood ever since its final volumes were published in 1833. Goethe’s biographers have generally accused the poet of failing to tell “the truth” in his autobiography. Thus, G. H. Lewes, Goethe’s first English biographer, complains of the book’s “abiding inaccuracy of tone, which, far more misleading than the many inaccuracies of fact, gives to the whole youthful period . . . an aspect so directly contrary to what is given by contemporary evidence, especially his [Goethe’s] own letters, that an attempt to reconcile the contradiction is futile.” A later English biographer and Goethe scholar, J. G. Robertson, similarly observes: “The most serious disadvantage of Goethe’s *Autobiography* in modern eyes is the lack of spontaneity; one misses the spirit of youth. . . . The figures that appear in it seem too often to be moved like chess-figures across the board; its apophthegmatic dogmatism and its heavy periods are wearsome and often chilling.” And in his *Study of Goethe*, Barker Fairley complains of the “curious unreality of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, by which it appears rather as history of literature than as autobiography, more academic than personal.” Lewes was right, Fairley argues, when he called the tone of the book “misleading.” “Finding . . . that his protagonist failed to come to life, he [Goethe] concentrated on stage properties and tried to make them as good and convincing as he could. The result is a period autobiography, but scarcely a vital one.” In recent books on Goethe, we continue to find this point of view: Ernst Beutler complains that Goethe does not give an adequate account of his relationship to his mother and that there is hardly any mention of the genesis of *Faust* in his autobiography, while Monroe Stearns insists that *Dichtung und Wahrheit* is “by no means an accurate record of the events of Goethe’s first twenty-six years.”
These comments reflect a general misunderstanding of the nature of autobiography. Goethe himself anticipated the criticism of his future biographers when he told Eckermann, "A fact of our lives is valuable, not so far as it is true, but so far as it is significant." A number of important studies of autobiography written during the last two decades, especially those of Georges Gusdorf and Roy Pascal, have made it increasingly clear to us that the "truth" established in autobiography is not one that is objectively verifiable, for the autobiographer presents himself not as he really was but as he thinks he was and as he would like to have been. Like all major literary forms, in fact, autobiography is governed by a particular set of conventions.

In the first place, autobiography must be distinguished from such related forms as the diary, the memoir, and res gestae. The diary moves through a series of moments in time, presenting the author's impressions at any given moment in all their immediacy. Its mode is that of the continuous present, while the autobiography uses the vantage point of the present to survey the past; it is a retrospective account, made at a particular moment in the present, of one's past life. Again, unlike the memoir, which focuses attention on the people that the author has known, the autobiography always centers on the self in all its uniqueness and individuality. Thirdly, unlike res gestae and related forms, autobiography is never a static analysis of personality or a self-portrait. It is by definition historical in method, revealing the self in and through its encounters with the outside world. Autobiography is thus both subjective and objective; the focus is on the self, but the self is created by its interaction with persons and places.

Autobiography thus always involves a shaping of the past. It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs a coherent story out of individual experiences. As Northrop Frye observes, "autobiographies are inspired by a . . . fictional impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern." But such an integrated pattern must not be imposed upon the narrative; to make the line linking past and present too exactly continuous is, according to Gusdorf and Pascal, the "original sin" of autobiographers, because excessive rationalization and systematization spoil the dramatic impact of the life story. Autobiography is not, then, the exposition of something already understood; it reenacts the process whereby the self is discovered.
Autobiography is therefore much more than a retrospective account of one man's life, although we all use the word loosely in this sense when we speak of the "autobiography" of such and such a film star or general. The autobiographer not only reconstructs the past; he interprets it, evaluating his former thoughts, emotions, and actions. Memory thus becomes an instrument of grace in its ability to shed the influence of a recollected past upon present and future. Ultimately, Pascal argues, memory brings the "I" to a new awareness of his identity, a special insight into his being.19 The image that he presents of himself must carry the conviction of truth—his evaluation of his actions must seem to be in keeping with the actions themselves—but it is not a truth that can be objectively validated by measuring it against the accounts of other people or, for that matter, against earlier statements made by the autobiographer himself.20

The narrator of Dichtung und Wahrheit is not the passionate Goethe of the early lyrics and Werther; he is the calm sage of Weimar who can remember his past with a mixture of admiration, contempt, and humor. The autobiography traces the development of the poet from the time of his birth to his decision, made at the age of twenty-six, to go to Weimar—a decision that proved to be one of the turning points of his life. Goethe purposely ends his autobiography at this juncture; as he tells Eckermann, "the most important part of an individual's life is that of development, and mine is concluded in the detailed volumes of Dichtung und Wahrheit. Afterwards begins the conflict with the world, and that is interesting only in its results" (p. 37). Like Wordsworth's Prelude, Dichtung und Wahrheit might be subtitled "The Growth of a Poet's Mind"; the events that Goethe chooses to recall all relate, more or less directly, to the discovery of his vocation. But unlike Wordsworth, who draws his poetic inspiration chiefly from the solitary contemplation of nature, Goethe derives his from intense social contact with all types of men and women, and from the literary, political, and philosophical movements of the day. If he describes his acquaintances in rather minute detail, it is not because "his protagonist failed to come to life and so he had to concentrate on stage properties," as Fairley thinks, but because he was profoundly influenced by the outside world. Goethe himself considered it the main object of his autobiography "to exhibit the man in relation to the features of his time; and to show to what extent they have opposed or favored his progress; what view of mankind and the world he formed from them,
and how far he himself, if an artist, poet, or author, may externally reflect them” (I, XIV).  

It is impossible to discuss the structure of Goethe’s long book in anything less than another book. What I propose to do here is to give the reader some impression of that structure by concentrating on three sections: Book I, which deals with the poet’s earliest childhood memories; the Leipzig sequence, which extends from the end of Book VI through Book VIII; and Book XX, the concluding one, in which the decision to go to Weimar is made. I purposely choose the Leipzig sequence, rather than the more exciting Gretchen story (Books V and VI) or the so-called Sesenheim idyll (Books X and XI), because the account of Goethe’s first experience at a university is especially open to the charges of distortion of truth, stuffiness, and irrelevance.  

Superficially, the mood of Book I is cheerful and serene. Goethe recalls that as a young boy he spent many happy hours in the “birdcage”—the street-level hall of the gracious old family house in Frankfurt—where the cook cleaned her salad, the servants did their sewing, and neighbors arrived for leisurely visits. He loved to wander through the pleasant town, crossing and recrossing the great bridge over the river Main, and admiring the towers, gates, cathedral, and council house—architectural structures that imbued him with the spirit of German history. The routine of bourgeois life was punctuated by colorful ceremonies that stirred the child’s imagination; he was particularly awed by the pageantry of Francis I’s coronation.  

This rather idyllic setting serves, however, as a backdrop for some puzzling, and even unpleasant, images and incidents. The book is, in fact, built around a series of contrasts or tensions: the law of polarity which Goethe will discuss in Book VIII—the constant alternation of opposites exemplified in the force of attraction and repulsion which is inseparable from matter—is dramatized here. On the opening page, Goethe presents a paradox: although he was born under the most propitious horoscope, he almost died at birth: “through the unskilfulness of the midwife, I came into the world as dead, and only after various efforts was I enabled to see the light” (I, I). The vision of a bright future is thus immediately juxtaposed with an element that is dark and irrational. Throughout Book I, Goethe presents images and incidents that convey the tension between the bourgeois respectability of the Frankfurt middle class on the one hand and the poet’s instinctive drives on the other.
The first such incident is a "prank" that Goethe committed as a very young child. A crockery fair was held in Frankfurt and the little boy was given a whole collection of pots and pans. Soon bored with these new toys, he impulsively hurled a dish out of the window. Some curious neighbors appeared on the scene and urged him on. Stimulated by their interest, he rapidly broke every pot in the collection and then ran into the kitchen to get more such treasures, thus delighting his captive audience until the horrified adults at his house finally came to the rescue. Goethe does not comment on the significance of this seemingly trivial incident, but it speaks for itself: symbolically, it presents the embryo poet, wanting to perform as long as anyone will applaud. He derives a peculiar and unique pleasure from the response of his audience and knows only one thing: the show must go on! There is, then, something undisciplined and even willful about this small child, a personal drive quite at odds with his upbringing.24

A second tension is that between his father's educational system and Goethe's own intellectual bent. Having retired from business, Goethe's father personally supervised his son's education, hoping that the boy would follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer. But Goethe found the study of Latin grammar distasteful: the rules seemed totally pointless because they were invalidated by so many exceptions. "If the first Latin work had not been in rhyme," he comments dryly, "I should have got on but badly in that" (I, 20). From the beginning, the boy regarded Greek and Latin as languages to be learned not for their own sake but as vehicles for poetry. Homer and Ovid provided him with a nucleus of elegant phrases and attractive images, and soon he himself was writing verses that he felt, without being able to explain why, were better than any his friends could write.

Goethe draws no conclusions about these youthful poetic ambitions; he simply mentions them. Nor does the autobiographer, looking back on his education, reject his father's pedagogy outright; he insists, for example, that his lifelong enthusiasm for Italian art was originally stimulated by his father's carefully selected collection of Italian engravings and marbles. Book I does not announce the direction in which the boy will ultimately move; the reader is left in suspense. What is made clear, however, is that father and son will be at odds with one another, for although the father admires his son's natural endowments, admitting that they are much greater
than his own, he wants those gifts to be used toward one particular end: his son must take his degree in law and become a useful and cultivated citizen. It is already implicit in Book I that this will not happen.

A third tension occurs in the religious sphere. The year 1755 was the year of the great Lisbon earthquake; the autobiography describes the profound impression this natural disaster made on the six-year-old Goethe: "A great and magnificent capital . . . is smitten, without warning, by the most fearful calamity. The earth trembles and totters, the sea roars up, ships dash together, houses fall in. . . . Sixty thousand persons, a moment before in ease and comfort, fall together. . . . on all sides nature asserts her boundless capriciousness" (I, 18). The young Goethe heard Sunday sermons about the earthquake, sermons expressing the idea that it was God's will to punish Lisbon. He immediately felt himself cut off from the other children at church because he could not accept this doctrine. Why, he wondered, should a wise and benign God punish equally the just and the unjust? The same question arose when, the following summer, a sudden hailstorm seriously damaged the Goethe house. Again the children were told that an angry God was punishing them for their sins; again Goethe stresses that even as a young child he could not accept this version of Protestant theology without question.

Book I culminates in a comic incident which is, in fact, a minor religious crisis. Unsatisfied with the "dry morality" of "Church-Protestantism" (I, 29), the boy decided to approach the Old Testament God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, more directly: he would build Him an altar (I, 30). For this purpose, some fumigating pastilles were placed on a saucer, which was, in turn, put on a lacquered music-stand having the shape of a pyramid. The "young priest" now celebrated his daily rites every morning at sunrise and was delighted with his method of worship until one morning, finding the saucer missing, he lit the flame directly on the lacquered stand: "so great was the devotion of the priest, that he did not observe, until it was too late, the mischief his sacrifice was doing. The pastils had burned mercilessly into the red laccker [sic] and beautiful gold flowers, and as if some evil spirit had disappeared, had left their black ineffaceable footprints. By this the young priest was thrown into the most extreme perplexity. . . . the spirit for new offerings was gone, and the accident might almost be considered
a hint and warning of the danger there always is in wishing to approach the Deity in such a way” (I, 31).

Book I ends with these words. Goethe does not need to interpret the incident for us; it immediately foreshadows Faust, anagrammatizing the name of God and calling up evil spirits. The poet's future is implicit in this incident: it will be his fate to build an altar to God according to his own rather than to any orthodox system, and as in the case of the accident to the lacquered table, his daring will alternate with periods of humiliation. In trying to understand his childhood motives, Goethe depicts the earliest manifestations of the conflict between instinct and order, emotion and reason, which permeates the autobiography.

The Leipzig books follow a slightly different pattern. It has been argued that the expository essay on the state of literature in eighteenth-century Germany which opens Book VII is a digression from the main narrative and that, in any case, it reflects Goethe's later views on the subject rather than those of the young university student. But in fact the "essay" has a definite place in the structure of the Leipzig chapters; the sequence might be called "Fallen Idols," for it chronicles a dark period—perhaps the darkest period of the poet's life. Unsure of his vocation and of his place in the world, the young student attempted one thing after another, only to find all his efforts unfruitful; one by one, the ideals of his childhood were destroyed. If there is comparatively little incident in this section, it is because the childhood relationship between self and world was now fractured; the poet could no longer communicate with other people in the casual, easy style of his adolescence. The deception of Gretchen and her friends, poignantly rendered in Book V, had made him extremely wary. Goethe the autobiographer judges Goethe the young man rather severely in these chapters; the futility of his student life is not played down. If little is said about his Leipzig love affairs, it is surely because, looking back at them, Goethe now understands that they were mere distractions from his real vocation.

The young student had no real interest in the study of law. But when he told his host, Hofrat Böhme, that he wanted to learn more about literature, the older man warned him to forget poetry. Goethe then turned to philosophy but was soon disappointed in the conventional and dull lectures he attended: "In the logic, it seemed strange to me that I had to tear asunder, isolate, and, as it were, destroy those
operations of the mind which I had performed with the greatest ease from my youth upwards. . . . Of the thing itself, of the world, and of God, I thought I knew about as much as the professor himself . . . .” (I, 208).

The young Goethe also suffered because his Frankfurt clothes were not the fashion in Leipzig and because his provincial dialect was an embarrassment in the more sophisticated city. During this period when all authority became suspect—even his idol Frederick the Great no longer inspired Goethe's awe—he lost his friend Behrisch, who was forced to leave Leipzig when his patron, a young count, learned of his association with certain unsavory characters. Increasingly uncertain about his own literary taste and judgment, Goethe became so depressed that one day he burned all the poems and the sketches for future work that he had brought to Leipzig. The burning of the books is the climactic ending of Book VI. In this context, the survey of literary history in Book VII is not a digression; its function is to explain that the young poet's despair about the value of his poetry was brought on not only by his own inner failings but also by the general aridity of German culture in the middle of the eighteenth century. The autobiographer must show that the particular case is representative as well.

Looking back on his Leipzig years, Goethe argues that an impressionable, imaginative young writer like himself was stifled by a literary milieu that recognized only two forms of literature: satire and criticism. "Clever" writers were producing pleasant little mock-epics on the model of Pope's Rape of the Lock. The critics, even more vacuous than the satirists, defined poetry as the imitation of something greater than nature—of, say, the supernatural or marvelous—whose purpose must be to improve mankind. These three requirements (imitation, the marvelous, and the moral aim) were found in their most perfect form, the leading critics argued, in Aesop's fables, which thus won the prize as the greatest of all literary masterpieces, surpassing Homer and Ovid. "It may well be imagined," Goethe remarks caustically, "into what perplexity young minds felt themselves thrown by such dislocated maxims, half-understood laws, and shivered up dogmas" (I, 223).

The young poet's reaction to the pedantry and foolishness of his literary environment was to rely increasingly on his own feelings and experiences as the raw material for poetry: "If I now desired a true basis in feeling or reflection for my poems, I was forced to grasp into
my own bosom. . . . And thus began that tendency from which I could not deviate my whole life through; namely, the tendency to turn into an image, into a poem, everything that delighted or troubled me . . . and to come to some understanding with myself upon it. . . . The faculty of doing this was necessary to no one more than to me, for my natural disposition whirled me constantly from one extreme to the other. 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” (I, 239–240; italics mine). This is one of the highpoints of Dichtung und Wahrheit. Goethe’s insistence on the confessional or autobiographical nature of poetry—an insistence presented didactically in Eckermann and in the literary essays—here emerges out of the larger narrative. Goethe wants to explain both to himself and to his reader why he came to believe that poetry must be based upon personal experience and why he had to reject the literary values of his compatriots.

In judging his past, the autobiographer does not, then, regard his university days at Leipzig as a total waste. His recognition of his role as a poet was strengthened by his new interest in painting—an enthusiasm awakened by discussions with his friend Oeser, by the example of Winckelmann, and by his blissful visit to the Dresden art gallery. But his predominant mood remained dark. Goethe has been accused of lacking a sense of evil, but in Book VII he gives a moving account of his discovery, during this period, of the painful contrast between appearance and reality, and of the failure of religion, as he knew it, to cope with the problem of evil: “Through my adventure with Gretchen and its consequences, I had early looked into the strange labyrinths by which civil society is undermined. Religion, morals, law, rank, connections, custom, all rule only the surface of city existence. The streets bordered by splendid houses are kept neat, and everyone behaves himself there properly enough; but in-doors, it often seems only so much the more disordered. . . . How many families, far and near, had I not already seen, either overwhelmed in ruin or kept miserably hanging on the brink of it, by means of bankruptcies, divorces, seduced daughters, murders, house-robberies, poisonings . . .” (I, 241–242).

In the face of the tragedies of daily life, Protestantism offered only the most superficial comfort. In trying to understand his youthful disillusionment with religion—a disillusionment that, according to
Book I, began in early childhood—the autobiographer concludes that a Protestant of his day was denied true Christian faith because he participated in only one of the seven sacraments: the Lord's Supper. Baptism, the only other Protestant sacrament, had largely lost its significance for him, because he saw it only when it was performed on others and was not, accordingly, moved or edified by it. Lacking a real sense of membership in the Christian Church, the young Protestant inevitably lost the spiritual connection with God essential to a meaningful Christianity. The rite of confession, for example, became a mere matter of outward forms, absolution being granted him regardless of his spiritual state.

As in the case of his artistic dilemma, his religious doubts led to despair. The outward manifestation of this despair was a severe physical illness, followed by a return home to Frankfurt and a nervous breakdown. Appropriately enough, he left Leipzig during a student riot, the sound of shattering window glass ringing in his ear as he drove away (I, 286). Returning to his native city, he was oppressed by feelings of guilt: "it was a very disheartening feeling that I now returned, as it were, like one shipwrecked" (I, 288). His father, deeply disappointed by his son's failure to accomplish anything tangible during two whole years at Leipzig, interpreted his illness as hypochondria and lectured him on willpower.

It was not, the autobiography suggests, willpower that saved the young poet but his amazing capacity—the capacity of a genius—to become totally absorbed in an entirely new interest and thus to return to health and to life. Before long, he was engaged in hermetic and cabalistic studies with Fraülein von Klettenberg and her circle. One is reminded of Yeats as one reads of Goethe's delight in the occult. When his illness suddenly took a turn for the worse, Goethe asked for the "universal medicine," the great elixir, which was promptly brought to him by his frightened mother in the form of a glass of crystallized dry salt dissolved in water. "The salt was scarcely taken than my situation appeared relieved, and from that moment the disease took a turn which, by degrees, led to my recovery" (I, 293). Convinced that the "universal medicine" had cured him, Goethe now gave even more attention to cabalistic studies; he bought himself an air furnace and experimented with his own chemical mixtures. Goethe's descriptions of the "crystallizations" he was able to produce may sound silly to a modern reader, but like Yeats, whose Autobiography contains so many echoes of Dichtung.
und Wahrheit, Goethe had a religious temperament and needed articles of faith of which he felt deprived by a moralistic Protestantism. His occult studies led him to the Neoplatonists and to Paracelsus, and within a few weeks, he was able to formulate his own view of God. The poet's discovery of a new faith, described at the end of Book VIII, is the denouement of the Leipzig narrative.

Goethe's central belief is that everything in the universe is animated by the law of polarity: "I could well represent to myself a Godhead which has gone on producing itself from all eternity; but as production cannot be conceived without multiplicity, so it must of necessity have immediately appeared to itself as a Second, which we recognize under the name of the Son" (I, 300). In the same way, a third "eternal element" appeared, and with the Trinity created, the circle of Godhead was complete. But "since . . . the work of production always proceeded, they [the Trinity] created a fourth, which already fostered in himself a contradiction, inasmuch as it was, like them, unlimited, and yet at the same time was to be contained in them and bounded by them. Now this was Lucifer . . . ." (I, 300).

The fall of the angels is thus explained as the result of the contradiction between their mortality and immortality, their finiteness and infinitude. Like Lucifer, Goethe argues, man is a creature at once unlimited and bounded. Because of his dual nature, he is eternally in need of Redemption. The human condition forces us to recognize that it is our duty "to raise ourselves up, and to fulfill the purposes of the Godhead in this manner, that while we are compelled on the one hand to concentrate ourselves (uns zu verselbsten), we, on the other hand, do not omit to expand ourselves (uns zu entselbstigen) in regular pulsation" (I, 302).

This grand assertion is the culmination of Goethe's narrative in Books VII and VIII; its rising action dramatizes the transformation of Goethe from the "indifferent" student who left Frankfurt in 1766 (p. 203) to the creator of cosmologies of 1768. In re-creating his past, the autobiographer discovers that the "dark period" described in these books did have value in that it forced the poet to turn inward and to rely upon personal experience. Introspection also helped him to formulate his religious beliefs: the weltanschauung defined at the end of Book VIII remained a central one throughout his life. The Leipzig episode, moreover, gives us the paradigm of the Faustian endeavor: Goethe rejects in turn the study of law, philosophy, and
theology; he turns to magic for relief, but by the time that he leaves home for the second time in 1769 he no longer needs magic—it is experience that he now craves. Book IX appropriately opens with a reference to the heart.

Book XX, the final book of Goethe's autobiography, recapitulates all the themes under discussion thus far but broadens their implications. It opens with the poet at loose ends, having just broken his engagement to Lili Schönemann, and ends with one of the turning points in his life: his move to Weimar. Again, the incidents appear at first glance to have little relationship to one another. There are four sections: (1) Goethe's friendship with the painter John Melchior Kraus, who had spent some time at the Weimar court and aroused the poet's interest in it; (2) a "digression" in which Goethe defines the "demonic"; (3) the misunderstanding about his means of transportation to Weimar, which led Goethe to reconsider an earlier plan, proposed by his father, to go to Italy instead; and (4) the strange circumstances that took him, despite this plan, to Weimar after all.

The definition of the "demonic" furnishes the theme of Book XX—and indeed an important theme of the whole autobiography. Goethe recalls how as a young man he intuitively recognized this irrational element: "He thought he could detect in nature—both animate and inanimate, with soul or without soul—something which manifests itself only in contradictions. . . . It was not godlike, for it seemed unreasonable; nor human, for it had no understanding; not devilish, for it was beneficent; nor angelic, for it often betrayed a malicious pleasure. It resembled chance, for it evolved no consequences; it was like Providence, for it hinted at connexion. All that limits us it seemed to penetrate; it seemed to sport at will with the necessary elements of our existence . . . ." (II, 157). The most fearful manifestation of the demonic, Goethe observes, is when this element predominates in the character of any one human being. Such persons—Goethe considers his Egmont one of them—are not necessarily great men morally or intellectually, but by their peculiar power and energy they win mankind over to their side. If the demonic man falls, it is not because he is defeated by any one individual but because the whole universe suddenly seems to rise up against him. "It is from the observation of this fact," Goethe concludes, "that the strange, but most striking proverb must have risen: Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse" (II, 159).
The demonic is not only the theme of Book XX but also its structural principle. Although Goethe is not a demonic man to the degree that his own character Egmont is one, it is the demonic element in his nature that draws him to Weimar. Setting off on his Italian journey, because the envoy of the duke of Weimar, who had promised to drive him to the court, had failed to turn up in Frankfurt, Goethe stopped in Heidelberg, partly because he had heard that the envoy would be passing through that city, and partly so that he could visit the confidante of his beloved Lili, Mlle Delph. Enjoying the weather, the society, and the company of a certain young lady who reminded him of Friederike Brion, Goethe dawdled in Heidelberg for weeks. Finally, just when he had made up his mind to continue his journey southward, he received, very late one night, a letter with the Weimar seal. The envoy, no longer looked for, had arrived in Frankfurt after a series of accidents and urged Goethe to return immediately so that they could continue on to Weimar together.

The conflict adumbrated in the earlier books of the autobiography is now brought to the surface. Common sense told the young Goethe to go to Italy: his father had furnished him with a “fine plan of travel” (I, 167), which would make it possible for him to see the glorious works of art he had read so much about; Mlle Delph, moreover, had repeatedly lectured him on the mistake of putting off such an advantageous journey. Yet a sudden impulse told the poet to accept the invitation; despite his hostess’s protests, he hurriedly engaged a post coach for Frankfurt. “I tore myself away; she would not let me go, and with so much art brought up all the arguments of the present, that finally, impassioned and inspired, I shouted out the words of Egmont: ‘Child! child! no more! The coursers of time, lashed, as it were, by invisible spirits, hurry on the light car of our destiny, and all that we can do is in cool self-possession to hold the reins with a firm hand, and to guide the wheels, now to the left, now to the right, avoiding a stone here, or a precipice there. Whither it is hurrying who can tell? and who, indeed, can remember the point where it started?’ ” (I, 168).

_Dichtung und Wahrheit_ ends with this striking and mysterious image. Goethe assumed, of course, that his reader would know that the decision to go to Weimar turned out to be the right one, even though it seemed capricious at the time. His narrative thus leads
to the insight that a mysterious, irrational principle—a demonic element—controls our destinies. This is not to say that man is not also guided by reason and by social custom, but Goethe implies that although man needs order and organization in his life, there is something more fundamental, profound, and elusive guiding his actions. This theme is never imposed upon the narrative of Goethe’s life, but it is implicit from the very beginning in the image of the child irrationally smashing his pots and pans.

Goethe’s autobiography is, I have argued, inspired by what Northrop Frye calls a “fictional impulse.” The narrative formalizes the process whereby the poet comes to terms with that law of polarity defined in Book VIII; he ultimately learns to relate his unique self to the outside world, to unite his imaginative, instinctive, and in some respects demonic personality to the rationality, stability, and order of his boyhood universe.

It is a commonplace that Goethe’s lyric poetry was inspired by the pivotal experiences of his own life. In Eckermann’s Conversations with Goethe, which contains the clearest statement of Goethe’s poetic theory in its ultimate form, the poet insists repeatedly, as he did in his autobiography, that all poems must be “occasional,” that they must be suggested by real life and not “snatched out of the air” (p. 8). “I have never uttered anything I have not experienced,” he tells Eckermann; “I have only composed love-songs when I have loved” (p. 361).

But paradoxically, although poetry must be based on personal experience, Goethe insisted that it must also be objective. “Most of our young poets,” he comments, again to Eckermann, “have no fault than this, that their subjectivity is not important, and that they cannot find matter in the objective” (p. 72). The subjective poet is, for Goethe, the solipsistic one who turns inward, creating wholly imaginary events and characters instead of basing his themes on his own experience. Thus Goethe criticized a celebrated improvisatore because “he has the general sickness of the present day—subjectivity. . . . I gave him a task to try him; ‘Describe to me,’ said I, ‘your return to Hamburg.’ He was ready at once, and began immediately to speak in melodious verses. I could not but admire him, yet I could not praise him. It was not a return to Hamburg that he described, but merely the emotions on the return of a son to his parents, relations, and friends. . . . Yet what a remarkable,
peculiar city is Hamburg! And what a rich field was offered him for the most minute description, if he had known or ventured to take hold of the subject properly" (pp. 125–126).

Subjectivity is, then, synonymous with sentimentality, triviality, and lack of precision; it is the failure to objectify personal emotion. Like its opposite—the impersonal, expository presentation of an Idea—it destroys the artistic value of the work of art. Goethe's whole conception of poetry is, in short, based on the conviction of the interdependence of subject and object, mind and nature. Rene Wellek summarizes this aesthetic neatly: "In penetrating to the core of nature, the artist expresses his innermost being; in surrendering to the deepest instincts of his mind he grasps the essence of things." 27

Yet when one turns from Goethe's poetic theory to his lyric poems, it becomes clear that his insistence on the "confessional" nature of his poems must be taken with a grain of salt. Goethe's personal lyrics are, in fact, strangely reticent; they reveal singularly little about the poet's inner self and about the world he lived in. Typically, the Goethean first-person lyric depicts a decisive experience or a particularly pregnant moment—what Erich Trunz has called "den erfüllten Augenblick" 28—of the poet's life in images at once concrete and symbolic, so that a seemingly isolated case is transformed into an archetypal experience. "Each character," Goethe told Eckermann, "however peculiar it may be, and each object you can represent, from the stone up to the man, has generality; for there is repetition everywhere, and there is nothing to be found only once in the world" (p. 17). The relationship between Goethe's lyrics and his autobiography is thus strangely oblique: the conventions operative in Dichtung und Wahrheit are not those that govern the "personal" poems.

Such separation of genres may seem surprising when one remembers how vehemently Goethe, under the influence of Herder, rebelled against the neoclassic doctrine of decorum—the doctrine that insists on the correspondence between the language a poet chooses and the subject matter he is depicting. 29 Goethe would no doubt have scoffed at Addison's argument that Vergil's Georgics deserve special praise because the great Mantuan poet understood, as many of his contemporaries did not, that the bucolic poem demands the "middle" rather than the "low" style: "he delivers the meanest of his precepts with a kind of grandeur: he breaks the
clods and tosses the dung about with a kind of gracefulness." 

For Goethe, there are only three basic literary genres: the "clearly telling" ("die klar erzählende"), or epic; the "enthusiastically excited" ("die enthusiastisch aufgeregte"), or lyric; and the "personally acting" ("die persönlich handelnde"), or dramatic. To go beyond such basic distinctions, to classify lyrics according to the ancient doctrine of "the Three Styles"—such pigeonholing characterized, in Goethe's view, the sterile neoclassicism of Gottsched and his circle, a rigid academicism that Goethe emphatically rejected, as he tells us in Book VII of Dichtung und Wahrheit (I, 218–223).

Nevertheless, a reputedly highly "personal" poem like "Willkommen und Abschied," written in 1771 during Goethe's Sturm und Drang days, still observes, as Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads were to do, the eighteenth-century prescription that a lyric must not introduce intimate detail, realistic documentation, or observed eccentricities—either one's own or those of other people. Paradoxically, "Willkommen und Abschied" is less autobiographical, less revelatory of Goethe's unique self than is the Sesenheim idyll (Books X and XI) of Dichtung und Wahrheit, even though Goethe's retrospective account of his love affair with Friederike Brion, written forty years after the fact, is generally considered "cold" and "distant" in comparison to the warm, emotional lyric written during the affair itself.

In his autobiography, Goethe recalls a particularly dreary day spent in the study of medicine at Strasbourg, a day miraculously reclaimed when the professor suddenly gave his students an unexpected holiday. The young poet, who had recently met the charming daughter of the Sesenheim pastor, was electrified: "I thought I heard a voice from heaven, and made all the haste I could to order a horse and dress myself out neatly. I sent for Weyland, but he was not to be found. . . . the preparations unfortunately went on slowly, and I could not depart so soon as I had hoped. Fast as I rode, I was overtaken by the night. . . . the moon shed her light on my impassioned project. The night was windy and awful, and I dashed on, that I might not have to wait till morning before I could see her" (I, 391). Arriving in Sesenheim, the poet repaired to the inn where he learned that his sweetheart and her family had only just gone home for the evening because they were expecting a "stranger." Jealous of his potential rival, Goethe hurried to the vicarage only to learn that he himself was the stranger; he spent
a delightful hour with Friederike in the midst of her family circle.

In "Willkommen und Abschied," all references to the medical lecture, the search for Weyland, the arrival at the inn, and the meeting with Friederike's relatives are carefully omitted. The focus of the poem is on the night ride itself in all its immediacy; it presents a movement from feverish anticipation of a meeting with the beloved to its blissful but sobering aftermath. The central theme of transformation from violent excitement to calm, from unconsciousness to consciousness, from selfishness to responsibility, is conveyed through the development of imagery and syntax.

Throughout the poem, landscape is symbolic of the speaker's mental state. The light imagery is particularly striking: the movement of the poem is from total darkness (Stanza 1), to faint moonlight (Stanza 2), to dawn (Stanza 3), to full daylight (Stanza 4). The initial darkness symbolizes the poet's dreamlike state; he barely knows what is happening to him, as the passive construction of line 2 ("Es war getan fast eh gedacht"; "It was done before it was even thought of") makes clear. As his horse speeds through the night, the mysterious landscape takes on human attributes:

Der Abend wiegte schon die Erde,
Und an den Bergen hing die Nacht;
Schon stand im Nebelkleid die Eiche,
Ein aufgetürmter Riese da,
Wo Finsternis aus dem Gesträuche
Mit hundert schwarzen Augen sah. (italics mine)

The evening already cradled the earth
And the night hung on the mountains;
Suddenly the oak in its cloak of fog rose up
Like a towering giant,
While darkness peered from the tangled wood
With its hundred black eyes.

Even the moon, a mirror image of the poet's beloved, looks plaintively ("kläglich") from behind the mists, while the winds, like shivering ghosts, roar through his ears. The stormy night reflects his inner turmoil: "In meinen Adern welches Feuer! / In meinem Herzen welche Glut!" ("In my veins what fire! / In my heart what a glow!").

But with the strong metrical reversal at the opening of Stanza 3 —Dich sah ich" the mood is transformed. The violent winds give way to the quiet breathing of the poet's sweetheart, and as the rosy dawn comes up, his ecstasy is mixed with a vague sense
of guilt: "Und Zärtlichkeit für mich—ihr Gotter! / Ich hofft' es, ich verdient' es nicht!" ("And tenderness for me—oh Gods! I hoped for it, I did not deserve it!"). The racing heart of line 1 contracts and the rising sun of Stanza 4 brings the lover full circle from blindness to rationality, from dreams to responsibilities. Because he is now in full control of his faculties, the landscape no longer has power over him. Concrete nature imagery accordingly gives way to abstractions; narrative gives way to exclamatory statement, often without a finite verb; and the self-absorbed "I" of Stanzas 1 and 2 is finally replaced by "you." As the lover departs, the initial situation ("Es schlug mein Herz, geschwind zu Pferde!"; "My heart beat fast. Away! To horse!") has been neatly reversed: "Ich ging, du standst und sahst zu Erden/Und sahst mir nach mit nassem Blick" ("I went. You stood downcast/And looked after me with moist eyes"). The passionate boy has been rapidly and almost imperceptibly transformed into a grateful and contemplative man.

One may conclude that in "Willkommen und Abschied," Goethe subordinates realism to singleness of effect: the experience becomes an archetypal movement from the anticipation of love to its aftermath. It is particularly interesting that although the poem exhibits the typically romantic strategy of reading meanings into the landscape, it contains nothing that, say, Samuel Johnson would have been likely to censure. Goethe does not number the streaks of the tulip: the poem contains no proper names, whether of persons or of places; it refers to no specific time, place, or season; it mentions none of the actual circumstances of Goethe's relationship with Friederike. Nor are the lovers individualized in any way. Goethe's innate sense of decorum evidently dictated this treatment: although the poem must originate in personal experience, the experience has poetic value only insofar as it is universalized. There is no étalage du moi in such a poem, and although Goethe talks of "fragments of a great confession," he would no doubt have been mystified by such painfully personal fragments of a great confession as Robert Lowell's Life Studies.

"Willkommen und Abschied," like so many of Goethe's lyrics, dramatizes the process of experience itself; it does not, strictly speaking, have an autobiographical structure, for it does not relate the past to the present. But even when Goethe does write what Max Kommerell has called "Lebenslaufsgedichte"—poems that cast a look backward to explore the meaning of a significant episode in the
poet's former life—he generally uses a symbolic rather than a realistic mode. "Seefahrt," written in 1776, is a good example.

Thematically, the poem corresponds to Book XX of Dichtung und Wahrheit: it refers to Goethe's difficult decision to become a citizen of Weimar. In Stanza I, the poet obliquely refers to those last days in Frankfurt when, having taken farewell of his friends, he anxiously and impatiently awaited the arrival of the duke's envoy. Because his friends and relatives were convinced that he would soon tire of the pleasure-loving Weimar society, they wished him well, promising him to celebrate his return with love and honor (Stanza 2). When rumors reached the Frankfurt community, however, that he was leading a wild, dissipated life at court and had made no plans to return, they became apprehensive and their good will turned to disapproval, censure, and fear (Stanza 8). The poet, however, ignored their well-meant but petty moral injunctions and decided that he was the best judge of his own fate (Stanza 9).

This conflict between reason and intuition, which we have already met in Book XX of the autobiography, is here presented symbolically as a stormy and dangerous sea journey. The sea-voyage metaphor is, as W. H. Auden has shown, one of the central motifs of romantic iconography. The ocean, regarded by poets from Homer to Dante and Shakespeare as a place of uncertainty, danger, and violence, becomes in the romantic era the symbol of freedom, adventure, and daring. The romantic voyager leaves behind him the safety, monotony, and materialism of the land and tests his fate on the open sea. Typically this voyager is something of an outcast, like Melville's Ishmael or Coleridge's Mariner, but he is redeemed by his searching sensibility, and eventually he is brought back to land by favorable winds, symbolic of regenerative life and power.

Although Auden makes no reference to "Seefahrt," Goethe's poem obviously contains the motif of the romantic sea voyage. The "I" of the opening stanza is a merchant seaman, whose heavily laden ship has languished in the harbor for many long days and nights, awaiting favorable winds. Now fair weather comes and the voyage begins auspiciously: the sun shines, the winds are gentle, and the protagonist's friends, watching from the shore, rejoice as the boat sails off on a calm sea. But soon a storm comes up, deflecting the sailor, who is now viewed from the outside as "he," from his intended path and threatening his life. Stanza 8 is bitterly ironic: the ordinary, practical men, safely stationed on the shore, watch
the boat’s struggle anxiously and hold postmortems about their adventurous friend:

Ach, warum ist er nicht hiergeblieben!
Ach, der Sturm! Verschlagen weg vom Glücke
Soll der Gute so zu Grunde gehen?
Ach, er sollte, ach, er könnte! Götter!

Alas, why did he not stay here!
Alas, the storm! He is rebuffed by fortune!
Must the good man perish in this fashion?
Alas, he might . . . , alas, he could . . . Oh, Gods!

Their solution, as the unfinished, broken phrases of the last line make clear, is purely negative. The protagonist, who has imperceptibly become the boat’s skipper, ignores their cries and bravely steers his boat through the storm. The final stanza of “Seefahrt” is the poetic counterpart of the last paragraph of Dichtung und Wahrheit, in which Goethe cites Egmont’s speech on the demonic. The storm is the poet’s testing ground; in accepting it with a calm heart, he emerges victorious:

Herrschend blickt er auf die grimme Tiefe
Und vertrauet scheiternd oder landend,
Seinen Göttern.

Commandingly, he looks on the fierce depths
And trusts, whether shipwrecked or safely landed,
His Gods.

As a symbolic narrative, “Seefahrt” stands behind a whole line of romantic and symbolist poems culminating in Rimbaud’s “Bateau ivre.” Goethe transforms a set of actual experiences in his life into a generic human situation. A line like “Drückt die Vögel nieder aufs Gewässer” (“presses down the birds upon the waters”), for example, symbolizes in the context of the sea-voyage metaphor the temporary loss of inspiration that the poet suffers—he can no longer sing—but this poet has no identifying traits; he is depicted as generic bard. The switch from the first to the third person in the course of the poem, moreover, again precludes a “confessional” reading.

One of Goethe’s few poems that does have an autobiographical structure, as that structure was defined at the beginning of this essay, is “Ilmenau, Am 3 September 1783.” In this poem, the “I,” clearly designated as the poet himself, speaks in the present tense
from his vantage point in a specific landscape. Contemplating his past actions in their relationship to the outside world, he measures his past against the present and comes to a new awareness of his identity.40

The setting of “Ilmenau”41 is at once realistic and symbolic. Dramatically situated in the Harz Mountains, Ilmenau was, during Goethe’s youth, a shamefully neglected district of the Weimar duchy. In his early years at Weimar, Goethe found an old disused silver mine here and immediately decided that the mine must be worked again, so as to cure financial ills of the region. For years Goethe devoted himself to the mining project, but although he refers to it optimistically in lines 172–173 of the poem, eventually his work came to nothing. Flooding, insufficient skilled manpower, inadequate funds, disputes over mining rights, and general despondency brought the project to ruin. But it was one of Goethe’s great practical schemes, and he always felt a special devotion to the mountain region.42

But Ilmenau was not only a poor mining region; it was also the scene of the wild hunting parties and midnight revels that Goethe shared with the young duke of Weimar, who was only eighteen when the poet first came to his court. In Eckermann, Goethe describes Karl August as “a fine wine, still in a high state of fermentation” (p. 277), “a daemonic nature, full of unlimited power of action and unrest” (p. 392). By extension, Ilmenau thus symbolizes the tensions of the Sturm und Drang period in the lives of poet and patron. Goethe describes its genesis to Eckermann as follows: “The poem of Ilmenau contains, as an episode, an epoch which, in the year 1783 when I wrote it, lay many years behind us; so that I could describe myself in it as a historical personage, and could hold a conversation with the self of former years. There occurs in it . . . a nightscene after one of the breakneck chases on the mountain” (p. 278; italics mine). The fiery duke described in lines 140–151 of “Ilmenau” is, Goethe tells Eckermann, exactly like the original, but within a few years Karl August was to renounce Sturm und Drang for a state of “useful serenity,” so that on his twenty-sixth birthday, in 1783, Goethe could afford to remind him of this image of his earlier days” (p. 278).

This is Goethe’s polite way of saying that in “Ilmenau” he had adapted the conventions of the courtly, complimentary birthday
poem to his own purposes. Despite the reference to the birthday in line 5 and the eulogy of Karl August in the last few stanzas, the main emphasis of the poem is on the demonic young duke of Goethe's early Weimar days. The meaning of "Ilmenau"—the thematic stress on the self-discipline to which the wild spirit of youth inevitably and naturally submits in due course of time—is developed by means of the autobiographical convention, which is at the heart of the poem's structure.

"Ilmenau" is divided into three symmetrically balanced parts: the first four stanzas describe the poet's return to a familiar and beloved landscape; the next thirteen stanzas constitute a flashback in which the poet confronts his former self; finally, the last four stanzas mark a return to the present in which the poet can look both at himself and at his patron, the duke, in a new light.

The "here I am again" motif which opens the poem suggests that this will simply be another one of those eighteenth-century topographical poems recording the traveler's return to one of his favorite landscapes, with the usual contrast between tranquil nature and sorrowing poet. But it quickly becomes apparent that the speaker's response to the landscape is ambivalent: he apostrophizes the lofty, majestic mountain, only to beg, the very next moment, for repose on its soft gentle slopes. And even while he imaginatively transforms the mountain landscape into a new Eden (line 10), he cannot quite forget that the poor of Ilmenau are chained to the earth:

Der Landmann leichtem Sand den Samen anvertraut
Und seinen Kohl dem frechen Wilde baut,
Der Knappe karges Brot in Klüften sucht,
Der Köhler zittert, wenn der Jäger flucht.

The peasant trusts his seed to thin soil
And raises cabbage which is eaten by the insolent deer,
The miner seeks his meager food in the ravines,
The woodsman at his charcoal fire trembles when he hears the hunter curse.

As the poet contemplates the landscape, a sudden fog blankets the valley in darkness, and he has a dream vision in which the past suddenly and mysteriously comes to life. Following the distant call of hunters, the poet discovers a group of men gathered around a campfire, drinking and exchanging loud jests. For a moment, his imagination transforms these revelers into elves, gypsies, or perhaps the inhabitants of Shakespeare's Forest of Arden. But then he rec-
Recognizes two men: although they are not named in the poem, we know from Goethe's comments to Eckermann (p. 278) that they are his former friends Knebel and Seckendorf.

The choice of these particular individuals is not fortuitous; they have a symbolic function in the poem. Knebel, who is pictured in Stanza 8 as indifferently puffing away at his pipe and amusing his companions with his clever imitations of different dialects, was one of Goethe's first friends at Weimar. His life was evidently an unhappy one: detesting court life, he finally retired to Jena and became something of a recluse. Seckendorf, depicted in Stanza 9 as slender, delicate, musically inclined, and ecstatically lazy ("Ekstatisch faul"), was a young nobleman of about Goethe's age who resembled Knebel in his dislike for the empty frivolity of Weimar court life, but who, unlike the older courtier, did not have the energy to go elsewhere and remained at Weimar where he tried to distract himself by singing, composing, and translating German poetry into French.44

Knebel and Seckendorf thus symbolize the futility of the Weimar court, the violent activity and the excitement for its own sake that were demanded of his followers by the young duke, who, ironically, sleeps through their midnight revels. Approaching the duke's hut, which is set apart from the rest of the camp, the poet meets a stranger ostensibly standing watch but in fact lost in his own thoughts—a stranger who is none other than Goethe's former self, the Goethe of 1776 who participated feverishly in the young duke's every escapade. When the older poet asks his counterpart of six years ago why he is so melancholy, the "stranger" makes a moving reply that constitutes the central movement of the poem (Stanzas 12–17).

The gist of the young Goethe's speech is that man suffers because he cannot foresee the consequences of his actions. The innate poetic gift he brought to Weimar was, as lines 108–111 suggest, pure flame ("reines Feuer vom Altar"), pure desire to do good; nevertheless, he incited in others a feeling somehow less pure, less noble. It was he, after all, who extolled to his patron the virtues of daring and self-reliance. The irony is that his creed of total freedom has now backfired on the poet; he is appalled by the mood of restlessness, the worship of emotional excess, the lack of self-control characteristic of the duke and his companions. On the other hand, he is incapable of pretending that he espouses the conventions and
narrow restrictions held by the more conservative members of the court circle. Caught between two worlds, he can neither desert the duke nor enjoy his company without certain misgivings: “Nun sitz’ ich hier zugleich erhoben und gedrückt, / Unschuldig und gestraft, und schuldig und beglückt” (lines 118–119; “Now sit I here, at once exalted and stifled, / Innocent and punished, guilty and fortunate”).

The suspense of Goethe’s narrative is heightened by the delayed entrance of the duke in Stanza 11. If the duke is a man at war with himself, the young poet declares, it is not so much his fault as the fault of nature. Just as the caterpillar inevitably becomes a chrysalis and finally a butterfly at the proper stage of development, so too the duke will inevitably and naturally be transformed from headstrong boy to wise ruler in due time. But this optimistic view of the future does not make the present any less frightening: in Stanza 17, the duke is described as a demonic personality, a man of paradoxes whose boisterousness lacks gaiety, whose daring lacks spirit, whose rest is unrestful. He can fall asleep anywhere but his soul remains wakeful and oppressed. Contemplating the duke’s anguish, the poet cannot understand how he has let himself become involved in this nightmare world.

But with the words “Verschwinde, Traum!” (“Be gone, dream!”) in line 156, the flashback is dissolved, and the Goethe of 1783 is once more alone at Ilmenau. As the fog lifts and the sun comes out, the poet rejoices in the knowledge that the past he has just relived is behind him. The fearful vision has taught him to be grateful for the present. The duke has indeed, as the poet of 1776 had hoped he would, learned to temper his passions, to renounce his more extreme pleasures, and to serve his people. Order and peace have returned to Ilmenau; the workers are at their tasks and the mine is being re-habilitated. In the last stanza, the duke is viewed as the biblical “sower of good seed”—the seed from which a rich harvest will be reaped throughout the land.

“Ilmenau” thus charts the process whereby the poet learns to understand the events of the past six years in his life. Memory has a major function in the poem: it leads the protagonist toward the insight that his close bond with the duke was, after all, worthwhile, and that in judging other people one must trust one’s own instincts. At the opening of the poem, the traveler, returning from the world of practical concerns, is weary and depressed; he looks to the landscape for comfort and longs to retire to its solitary pleasures.
Instead of comfort, however, the landscape gives him nothing but painful memories. He recalls his former conflict between the desire to escape the trying situation at Weimar and the conviction that it was his destiny to stay. By the end of the poem, the conflict has been resolved. The momentary depression of the poet and his memory of former pain are transformed into joy at the recognition of the duke's fortunate metamorphosis. The poet's search for the past thus illuminates his present and brings the "I" to a new self-awareness.

Yet as a total poetic structure, "Ilmenau" is something less than successful. There is a hiatus between the second and third parts of the poem that is not easily glossed over. How and why has the duke changed so miraculously? The analogy to the butterfly is not wholly convincing: there is no natural law according to which the wild young duke necessarily becomes a temperate ruler. Similarly, the final emphasis on Ilmenau as a model community remains unconvincing. What has happened to the problems of the poor peasants described in the first few stanzas—problems which originally disturb the "I" of 1783, not his younger counterpart? How is the poet of the final section so sure that Ilmenau will receive God's blessing?

It seems to me that Goethe had difficulties in working out his theme because he had to conform to the occasional nature of the poem: it is, after all, a birthday poem addressed directly to the poet's patron. The final movement of "Ilmenau," a courtly compliment to the duke, is not convincingly related to the poem's larger theme. The rhetoric of the last stanzas therefore tends to be hollow and inflated ('So mög', o Fürst, der Winkel deines Landes / Ein Vorbild deiner Tage sein!'; "So may, O duke, this corner of your realm / Be an example of your reign"). As Ronald Gray observes, "Goethe drops deep problems and makes tactful suggestions." 45

A second difficulty has to do with the manipulation of the autobiographical convention in the second, or central, section of the poem. The confrontation of the two Goethes is meant to heighten the central conflict presented in "Ilmenau," but it is a rather clumsy device.46 In an autobiographical poem, the "I" of the past must, of course, be felt as a vivid presence, but the illusion of reality is dispelled when Goethe the older converses with Goethe the younger, who is willing to reveal his most secret thoughts to a stranger. In fact, the speech of the young Goethe (Stanzas 12–17) does not seem to be directed at anyone; the young poet is not influenced by the
presence of the older man, and his exposition of his dilemma could almost be presented as a separate poem, independent of the larger context. Later autobiographical poets were to find other ways of relating past to present without resorting to direct dialogue between the poet's two selves.

Although the mode of "Ilmenau" is much more realistic than that of "Willkommen und Abschied" or of "Seefahrt," it is interesting to note that even here Goethe does not violate eighteenth-century rhetorical conventions. A lyric poem on a serious subject must have no casual or incidental references, and so Goethe proceeds by indirection. Thus the duke is addressed directly in line 176 ("o Fürst") but is never referred to by name when the poet speaks of him in the third person. Similarly, the references to Knebel, Seckendorf, and to Goethe himself are all indirect. Place and date are identified in the title of the poem but are never mentioned in the text itself. The poem, in short, "confessional" only in a limited sense; although it exploits the autobiographical convention as a structural device, it tells us much less about the poet's past than do the pages of Dichtung und Wahrheit.

The autobiographical poem of the future was to adopt ever-increasing concretization and particularization in its drive to make the individual's past experience "real" to the reader. But more than a hundred years elapsed before Goethe's covert allusions to Knebel and Seckendorf became the explicit references, in a poem like Yeats's "All Souls' Night," to Florence Emery and Macgregor Mathers; before the apostrophe to the "Anmutig Tall du immergrüner Hain" of "Ilmenau" gave way to Yeats's almost offhand references to Coole Park and Ben Bulben. In this connection, one may compare an extract from Goethe's "Hatem,"

> Du Beschämst wie Morgenröte
> Jener Gipfel ernste Wand,
> Und noch einmal fühlet Hatem
> Frühlingshauch und Sommerbrand

> Like the rising sun, you make blush
> The solemn face of yonder mountain peak,
> And once again Hatem feels
> The breath of spring and the fire of summer,

with an extract from Yeats's "To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee,"
I, the poet William Yeats
With old Mill-boards and sea-green slates,
And smithy work from the Gort forge
Restored this tower for my wife George. . . .

In the famous lyric from the *Westöstlicher Divan*, meaning and rhyme scheme force the reader to supply the word "Goethe" at the end of line 3 as a rhyme for "Morgenröte." But the poet playfully defeats the reader's expectations and refers to himself as "Hatem" instead, in keeping with his Eastern myth. Occasionally, as in his Crazy Jane and Ribh poems, Yeats uses similar masks, but most of his later lyrics take shape from the facts of his own life. When this happens, the autobiographical "I" and the lyric "I"—still distinct entities in Goethe's work—begin to merge.

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NOTES

7. The title of Goethe's autobiography is generally translated as "Poetry and Truth." But "Dichtung" refers to the imaginative process of writing poetry rather than to the finished poem—it is the Horatian *poesis* rather than the *poema*—while "Wahrheit" means not only "truth" but also "reality." Goethe's title thus distinguishes between imagination and reality, between fiction and fact, between the poetic re-creation of events and the events themselves. No single English phrase adequately translates Goethe's meaning.
9. Goethe began work on his autobiography in 1809. By 1814, the first fifteen books had been published; the remaining five were published posthumously in 1833.


20. In his recent essay "The Autobiographer's Art," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XXVI (December 1968), 215-226, Barret John Mandel renews the case for truth as a criterion in autobiography. "The autobiographer," he argues, "may never falsify his facts for a fictional purpose without giving up his claim to the name of autobiographer" (p. 220). But in fact, autobiographers from Cellini to Rousseau and Goethe have falsified many facts. Thus Goethe writes in Dichtung und Wahrheit that he was attracted to the pastor's family of Sesenheim because they reminded him of the charming family in Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield, when in fact he read the Vicar only after his love affair with Friederike. This is simply poetic license: the whole Sesenheim idyll is more touching, more moving, in the light of Goethe's warm appreciation of Goldsmith. On the other hand, Mandel is right when he reminds us that the autobiographer is much more limited in his narrative than is the novelist; he cannot simply alter the main events of his life. Obviously, for example, Goethe might claim that he attended the university in, say, Paris; in this sense, he is restricted by the real events of his life.


22. The Gretchen story has been the subject of one of the few attempts to discuss the style and structure of Dichtung und Wahrheit. In "Die novelistische Struktur des Gretchenabenteuers in Dichtung und Wahrheit" (Stil- und Formprobleme in der Literatur, ed. Paul Bockmann [Heidelberg, 1959], pp. 303-308), Henry Remak observes that this episode has narrative, dramatic, and idyllic aspects, that the names of the characters are all fictional, and that the whole episode may be read as a novella. He concludes, "Wir besitzen noch viel zu wenige gründliche Kunstanalysen von dichterischen Autobiographien" (p. 308).
23. In his recent biography, *Goethe, His Life and Times* (Cleveland, 1965), Richard Friedenthal argues that the tone of the whole autobiography is “rather too genial, too optimistic” (p. 419). This seems to me a distortion of the intent of the narrative.

24. Freud has a very different interpretation of this incident; see “A Childhood Recollection of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*,” *Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, XVII (London, 1957), 147–156. His contention is that the act of throwing crockery out of the window “was a symbolic action . . . by which the child . . . gave violent expression to his wish to get rid of a disturbing intruder,” in other words, his brothers and sisters who died in infancy (XVII, 152). Freud argues that similar incidents were reported by three of his patients who did, in fact, resent their new siblings; but his interpretation rests on no real evidence from accounts of Goethe’s childhood, nor does it take into account the most striking aspect of the prank as Goethe describes it, namely, the response of the small boy to the incitement and approval of his audience. The response of the Ochsenstein brothers, who cheer Goethe on, seems to have nothing to do with the symbolism of the crockery itself.


29. See Wellek, *Later Eighteenth Century*, Ch. 1 passim.


35. All translations of the poems are my own. My aim is purely literal translation.

36. Note that the first version (1775) has “Ich säh dich,” which places emphasis on the seeing process itself rather than on the object of the speaker’s love. The revision intensifies the power of her image.


38. Again, the reference is to *Goethes Werke* (see n. 34 above), p. 50.


40. The following poems might also be classified as autobiographical lyrics: “Zueignung,” “Trilogie der Leidenschaft,” “Herrn Staatsminister von Voigt,” “Auf Miedings Tod,” and “Epilog zu Schillers Glocke.” In none of these poems,
however, is the locale as firmly established and the past as concretely and realistically evoked as it is in "Ilmenau," which therefore seems to me unique among Goethe's poems of this genre.

41. The reference is to Goethes Werke (see n. 34 above), pp. 107-112.

42. For the background, see Friedenthal, Goethe, His Life and Times, pp. 188-190; Trunz, "Anmerkungen des Herausgebers," Goethes Werke (see n. 34 above), pp. 513-514.


44. See Friedenthal, Goethe, His Life and Times, pp. 230-232.
