Yeats and Goethe

The influence of Goethe on the poetry and prose of Yeats has been virtually ignored by most Yeats scholars. The skeptical reader will object that Goethe's influence on Yeats could hardly be significant since the latter did not know a word of German. It is true, of course, that Yeats could have no real appreciation for Goethe's poetic technique, but as he wrote in 1912, "I know no German yet if a translation of a German poet had moved me, I would go to the British Museum and find a book in English that would tell me something of his life and of the history of his thought." This is precisely what Yeats did in the case of Goethe. For the "history of his thought," he turned to Wilhelm Meister and to Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe; for knowledge of his life, he read Dichtung und Wahrheit. These three books helped to shape Yeats's theory of the relationship of poetry to life and to determine the course that his own writing would take.

Yeats's original interest in Goethe was stimulated, not by the

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1 Two exceptions to this generalization are Edward Engleberg and Richard Ellmann. In the Preface to The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats's Aesthetic (Toronto, 1964), Engleberg writes, "... when I began reading Yeats in earnest, I was at once struck by the many similarities between the man from Weimar and the man from Dublin... Like Goethe, Yeats survived and transcended a fin de siècle; like Goethe, he was a youthful gatherer of Volkspoesie who, in time, turned to classical Greece, a romantic who would repudiate the weakness and 'vapour' of romanticism as 'unhealthy.' Goethe's insistence that all poetry should be 'occasional' and, however ethereal, be rooted in some kind of 'reality' seemed to me to have come to some form of perfection in many of Yeats's poems in which his personal responses to moments that held deep significance for him were elevated to the height of the momentous and made into a kind of history... the Autobiography is remarkably similar in spirit to Dichtung und Wahrheit" (pp. vii, xix). In Yeats, The Man and the Masks (New York, 1948), Ellmann similarly suggests that in his Autobiography, Yeats "had much the same problem Goethe did in Dichtung und Wahrheit" (p. 3). See also Ellmann's The Identity of Yeats (New York, 1954), p. 141.

2 "Gitanjali (Song Offerings)," Essays and Introductions (New York, 1961), p. 387. Subsequently noted as Essays.

Here for the first time in British criticism, GÖTHE is seen as the poet who combines Romanticism and Classicism, the subjective and objective, he is viewed as the poet who achieved what Yeats was to call "Unity of Being." Pater himself was skeptical whether in the "complex practical modern world of 1867" such "unity within one's self" could be achieved. Even Goethe, Pater argues, could not achieve it...
as easily as had those “simpler” Greek beings like Phidias or Pericles, for whom unity of self depended upon “the direct exercise of any single talent.” But the modern artist finds it difficult to accept such limits. “Goethe’s Hellenism was of another order,” the Allgemeinheit and Heiterkeit, the completeness and serenity, of a watchful, exigent intellectualism. Im Ganzem, Guten, Wahren, resolut zu leben is Goethe’s description of his own higher life” (p. 226). Pater concludes by praising Goethe’s extraordinary productivity: “his culture did not remain behind the veil; it ever emerged in the practical functions of art, in actual production” (p. 230).

Yeats must have read closely Pater’s definition of Goethean “unity within one’s self”; the following passage from Ireland after Parnell (1922) was clearly written with “Winckelmann” in mind:

I still think that in a species of man, wherein I count myself, nothing so much matters as Unity of Being, but if I seek it as Goethe sought, who was not of that species, I but combine in myself ... incompatibles. Goethe, in whom objectivity and subjectivity were intermixed, I hold, as the dark is mixed with the light of the eighteenth Lunar Phase, could but seek it as Wilhelm Meister seeks it, intellectually, critically, and through a multitude of deliberately chosen experiences...

In A Vision, Yeats places Goethe at Phase 18 (his own Phase is 17), still close to Phase 15, which symbolizes Unity of Being in its ideal, nonhuman form, but moving in the direction of objective or primary consciousness (Phase 1 on the Great Wheel). “Now for the first time since Phase 12,” writes Yeats of Phase 18, “Goethe’s saying is almost true: ‘Man knows himself by action only, by thought never.’”

Yeats’s general view of Goethe as the poet of Unity of Being is thus Paterian. His more particular insights into Goethe’s writings, however, owe a great deal to the minor poet Edward Dowden, one of his father’s close friends and Yeats’s literary mentor during the eighties when he was living in Dublin. Dowden was Professor of English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin, from 1867 until his death in 1913, and President of the English Goethe Society from 1886 until 1908. From 1880 on, he lectured on Goethe both in Dublin and in London, edited the poet’s works, and in the last year of his life translated what many consider Goethe’s most brilliant book of lyrics, the West-Ostlicher Divan.

Although in his later years Yeats came to have contempt for what he considered Dowden’s provincialism and academic pedantry—his

7 Autobiographies, pp. 354-355. Subsequently noted in text as Auto.
judgment of Dowden in the *Autobiography* is particularly severe—
he always admired his Goethe criticism. In *Ireland after Parnell*,
he regrets that Catholic Ireland at the turn of the century was so narrow-
minded that Dowden could not speak freely about Goethe without incurring
the displeasure of an Archbishop. Faced by such opposition, Yeats
observes, Dowden “abandoned . . . that study of Goethe that should
have been his life-work, and at last cared but for Wordsworth . . .”
(*Auto.*, p. 235). In the correspondence between Yeats and his father,
one notices that Dowden’s image of Goethe is the one usually invoked.
In 1906, for example, J. B. Yeats writes his son, “You are haunted by
the Goethe idea, interpreted by Dowden, that a man can be a com-
plete man.”

Dowden’s early writings on Goethe have an Arnoldian cast. In 1865
he writes that “Goethe had an immense feeling for order, decorum,
propriety, power and tact in social and ceremonial life . . . And to be
a great social being seems his highest idea almost of culture.”
But in later essays the idealized portrait of the “great personality” gives way
to a concern for Goethe’s central themes. In an essay of 1902, for
example, Dowden observes that unlike Schiller, who revealed his most
private thoughts freely,

Goethe was often pleased to veil his true self, and he indulged a whim for dis-
guises; thus he supposed that he might remain himself . . . and produce his true
impression by degrees, whereas if he were known in person, a group of notions
connoted by the name of ‘Goethe’ would, so to speak, be severed from his total
self, and the real Goethe would be obliged to act up to this notional Goethe in the
minds of other men . . .

Anyone familiar with Yeats will immediately recognize a version of
the Doctrine of the Mask in this passage. Like Goethe, Yeats had a
“whim for disguises” and thought he might “produce his true impres-
sion” by “veiling his true self.”

In “Goethe in Italy,” Dowden offers an interesting refinement of
Pater’s discussion of Goethe’s search for self-unity. The “open secret”
of Goethe’s life, Dowden argues, is his “double nature.” The opposition
between the man of emotion and imagination and the man of reflection

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10 See “Reveries Over Childhood and Youth” (1914), *Autobiographies*, pp. 85-95. Yeats calls Dowden a “provincial” and concludes that his “ironical calm” was just a “professional pose.” Yeats later admitted that the judgment in “Reveries” was “a little harsh” but that he was using Dowden as a scapegoat for “the whole structure of Dublin” (*Letters*, pp. 601-602).
and self-control occurs repeatedly in Goethe's writings: Werther is pitted against Albert, Tasso against Antonio, Wilhelm Meister against Jarno and Lothario. During his first ten years at Weimar, Goethe could not reconcile the artist and the practical businessman within himself. He could write in his diary of 1779 that "The pressure of business is very beautiful for the soul; when the burden is gone, the play of the spirit is freer, the enjoyment of life is quickened," and yet declare the following day that the life of a man of affairs is fatal to the continuity of imaginative effort. It was not until he came to Italy, Dowden suggests, that Goethe found harmony. He dramatized his own self-divided nature in Tasso, in which the poet, a solitary dreamer, is placed in conflict with the prudent, calm Antonio, the "intelligent outward man of steadfast will." The play contains the division, but "in Goethe's own nature, these opposites were cancelled out."

The conflict between artist and practical man which Dowden notes in Goethe's work is precisely the same as that between Yeats's Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, antithetical man and primary man. Like Goethe, Yeats raged against "Theatre business, management of men," and felt torn between "Perfection of the life, or of the work." Like Goethe, he knew that Unity of Being was man's goal but that it was a difficult reconciliation of opposites.

A collection of Dowden's later essays on Goethe contains an important piece on the Divan. Explaining why Goethe had such a predilection for Eastern philosophy and religion, Dowden says, "In the East it was possible for an old man to be innocently gay. One could be blessed without being dévot." This might be a description of the mood of the final stanza of Yeats's "Dialogue of Self and Soul" or of Part III of "Vacillation"—the mood that Richard Ellmann has called one of "secular blessedness." Dowden's translation of the Divan appeared posthumously in 1914, edited by his wife. In her introduction, Mrs. Dowden writes, "The Divan is the product of Goethe's Indian Summer of art-life, the rejuvenescence that came when he was sixty-five." Again one thinks immediately of the "rejuvenated" sixty-five-year-old Yeats of 1930, writing the Crazy Jane lyrics and rhapsodizing on the joys of the sexual life in his letters to Olivia Shakespear.

Delineated by Dowden, Goethe emerges as the Poet of the Divided Self who yearns for Unity of Being, the Poet whose favorite Mask is that of the passionate but innocent Eastern Sage. It is this image

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16 Identity of Yeats, p. 9.
of Goethe which Yeats undoubtedly drew upon in creating his own "mythology of self."

It is difficult to determine precisely which of Goethe's works Yeats read and when he read them since his library has not yet been catalogued and since Yeats, like Wordsworth, is rather vague in his references to other writers. Like all his contemporaries, Yeats obviously knew Werther,\textsuperscript{18} Faust, and the major lyrics; he probably also knew such major dramas as Egmont, Tasso, and Iphigenia. But the works which particularly influenced him were three: the Carlyle translation of Wilhelm Meister, the John Oxenford translation of Eckermann's Gespräche mit Goethe, which appeared in 1850 and is still the definitive translation, and the Oxenford translation of Dichtung und Wahrheit, the first edition of which appeared in 1948 under the title, The Auto-Biography of Goethe, Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} In a recent Letter to the Editor of the Times Literary Supplement (Nov. 21, 1968), John Lucas suggests that a possible source for the famous dancer image of "Among School Children" may well have been the following description of Lotte dancing in Werther: "One must see her dance. You see, she is so wrapped up in it with her whole heart and her whole soul, her whole body one single harmony, so carefree, so unaffected, as if she were thinking of nothing else, feeling nothing else; and in that moment, surely, everything fades away." "The parallel," Lucas comments, "is less verbal than imagistic..." (1321).

\textsuperscript{19} The British Museum Catalogue, Vol. LXXXVII, provides the following information. Johann Peter Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe (1836-1848) was first translated into English by John Oxenford in 1850 and published in two volumes. It was included in Bohn's Library Edition of Goethe's Works, the standard edition used by English readers. The Everyman text (London, 1935) is a slightly abridged version of the Oxenford text of 1850 and is the text I refer to in this essay. It will be subsequently noted as Eckermann.

The first fifteen books of Dichtung und Wahrheit were published in 1814; the remaining five were published posthumously in 1833. The first translation into English was that of Parke Godwin (New York, 1846-47). This American translation into English was rapidly superseded by Oxenford's translation of 1848-49. Oxenford drew heavily on Godwin's translation and only the first thirteen books are his. These constitute Vol. I. Vol. II contains the last seven books as well as translations of the Briefe aus der Schweiz and the Italienische Reise. The whole volume is the translation of the Rev. A. J. W. Morrison. The Oxenford-Morrison translation became part of Bohn's Library and was very popular; it went through new editions in 1868, 1872, 1882, and 1902. Throughout these years no new translation appeared, so that Yeats must have read Goethe's autobiography in the Oxenford translation. I refer to the two-volume first edition of 1848-49 in this essay. It is subsequently noted as Oxenford, and all references are to Vol. I unless otherwise specified.

The English title is problematic: Wahrheit means not only "truth" but also "reality," and I would prefer the title Imagination and Reality or Fiction and Fact to the misleading Poetry and Truth. Oxenford himself apologizes for the title and suggests that The Prose and Poetry of my Life might be a more accurate rendition of Goethe's meaning. Since no translation is wholly adequate, I refer to the autobiography by its German title.
Yeats evidently read *Wilhelm Meister* for the first time in 1909. E. R. Walsh, a friend who shared lodgings with the poet during that year, recalls, "I well remember the excitement aroused in him by the reading of *Wilhelm Meister* and I date from that event a desire to follow the great poet in the dual role of poet and philosopher." 20 Yeats's admiration for Goethe's novel was also noted by George Russell (A.E.), who recalls that Yeats told him, "I read in that book which I still think the wisest of all books, *Wilhelm Meister* by Goethe, 'The poor are; the rich are enabled also to seem.' I was then shy and awkward and I set myself to acquire this technique of seeming. I forced myself to attend functions of every kind until I had it." 21

Yeats was less interested in the plot and characters of *Wilhelm Meister* than in its themes; he used it as a book of maxims, a bedside book of wisdom. In "Anima Hominis" (1917), for example, he writes, "I think that all religious men have believed that there is a hand not ours in the events of life, and that, as somebody says in *Wilhelm Meister*, accident is destiny." 22 Or again, in a note to the Cuala Press edition of *Responsibilities* (1914), Yeats says, "Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister* describes a saintly and naturally graceful woman, who, getting into a quarrel over some trumpery detail of religious observance, grows—she and all her little religious community—angry and vindictive. In Ireland I am constantly reminded of that fable of the futility of all discipline that is not of the whole being." 23

The whole being—the union of opposites symbolized by Wilhelm and Lothario, or by Wilhelm and Mignon—this is the theme in Goethe's novel that attracted Yeats just as it had attracted Pater and Dowden. A number of critics have noted that the "chestnut-tree," the "great-rooted blossomer" of "Among School Children"—one of Yeats's most famous symbols for Unity of Being—was probably derived from an important statement in *Wilhelm Meister*. In discussing *Hamlet*, the hero insists that the play cannot be abridged because it is an organic whole: "... it is a trunk with boughs, twigs, leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruit. Is not the one there with the others, and by means of them?" 24

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

There is no indication that Yeats was interested in the literary technique of Wilhelm Meister; rather, he adapted Goethe’s ideas and cited his statements in order to give his own beliefs greater authority. Much more important for his own poetic development was Eckermann’s Conversations with Goethe. Here the young Irish poet found an aesthetic doctrine that gave sanction to his own definition of poetry as “personal utterance.” How strongly Yeats felt about Eckermann’s book is made clear in an amusing account of a conversation between Yeats and Oliver St. John Gogarty, recorded in the latter’s memoirs:

“You remember Goethe says”—how well Yeats remembered, I knew, for I remembered long ago mentioning Goethe to Moore and Moore pointing to Eckermann’s Life of Goethe and saying with a snigger: ‘That’s where Yeats gets all his information. That’s his text-book’—‘that the passing of a genius is measured by the woman it leaves behind.’

“Yeats’s text-book” contains perhaps the clearest statement of Goethe’s poetic theory in its ultimate form; it is the culmination of five decades of speculation on the poetic process. Goethe’s central doctrine is that poetry must be based upon the personal experience of the poet, not upon abstract ideas. “All my poems,” he tells Eckermann, “were occasioned poems, suggested by real life ... I attach no value to poems snatched out of the air ... Reality must give the motive, the points to be expressed—the kernel; but to work out of it a beautiful animated whole, belongs to the poet” (Eckermann, p. 8). In another conversation he insists, “I have never uttered anything I have not experienced ... I have only composed love-songs when I have loved. How could I write songs of hatred without hating!” (p. 361).

The poet’s first aim must therefore be to avoid abstraction and undigested philosophy. “The most difficult part of art,” says Goethe, is “apprehension of what is individual. You must do violence to yourself to get out of the Idea ... while you content yourself with generalities, everybody can imitate you; but in the particular, none can—and why? because no others have experienced exactly the same thing” (pp. 16-17). But the “apprehension of what is individual” is not synonymous with excessive attention to eccentric detail; the individual always symbolizes something universal. “Each character,” Goethe insists, “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).

Goethe scoffs at those who ask him what “idea” was in his mind.

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when he wrote Tasso: “Idea!... as if I knew anything about it. I had the life of Tasso, I had my own life; and whilst I brought together two odd figures with their peculiarities, there arose in my mind the image of Tasso; to which I opposed as a prosaic contrast, that of Antonio, for whom also I did not lack models... I can truly say of my production, it is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh” (p. 205).

It is interesting that this view of poetry was enthusiastically endorsed by John Butler Yeats, although the emphasis on personal experience would have been unacceptable to most of his fellow pre-Raphaelites. “I have been reading Goethe...his life and conversation,” he writes to the poet Susan Mitchell in 1912. “Get out of the idea, he commands, and get to particulars, for in particulars is the life of art... If you would write more and use your own life more, we should have not only more poetry, but it would be stronger and more intimate. Goethe said all his poems were ‘occasional’—in each ‘an experience seeking to strengthen itself.’ I am now trying to write on personality. Personality is neither right nor wrong—for it is divine—it transcends intellect and morality...” (p. 150).

In subsequent letters, J. B. Yeats preaches the same Goethean gospel to his son. In 1921, irritated by the obscurity of Yeats’s Noh dramas and of such esoteric poems as his “Double Vision of Michael Robartes,” he writes:

When is your poetry at its best? I challenge all the critics if it is not when the wild spirit of your imagination is wedded to concrete fact... Not ideas but the game of life should have been your preoccupation... Never are you happier and never more felicitous in words than when in your conversation you describe life and comment on it... It is easier to write poetry that is far away from life, but it is infinitely more exciting to write the poetry of life [p. 281].

The ambitious father need not have worried. As early as 1908, Yeats applauded Goethe’s belief that the poet must base his fictions on personal experience. “It was Goethe, the founder of the historical drama of Germany,” he declares, “who said, ‘We do the people of history the honour of naming after them the creations of our own minds.’” The reference is to Goethe’s criticism of the excessive historicism of Alessandro Manzoni’s novels. It is impossible and undesirable, Goethe argued, for the poet to recreate historical characters. “The poet must know what effects he wishes to produce, and regulate the nature of his characters accordingly... I needed an Egmont more in harmony with his own actions and my poetic views; and this is... my Egmont” (Eckermann, p. 166).

Again, Yeats makes precisely the same distinction as does Goethe

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between concrete and abstract, emotion and intellect. He repeatedly quotes Goethe's statement that the poet needs all philosophy but must keep it out of his work. In a letter to his father written in 1916, Yeats distinguishes between the "rhythmic" (i.e., the concrete) and the "abstract." "Rhythm," he writes, "implies a living body, a breast to rise and fall, or limbs that dance, while the abstract is incompatible with life... I think Keats perhaps greater than Shelley and beyond words greater than Swinburne because he makes pictures one cannot forget and sees them as full of rhythm as a Chinese painting. Swinburne's poetry... is as abstract as a cubist picture." In *Four Years, 1887-1891* (1922), Yeats attributes his poetic difficulties during the late eighties to the excessive abstraction of his verse: "I generalized a great deal and was ashamed of it... I began to pray that my imagination might somehow be rescued from abstraction and become as preoccupied with life as had been the imagination of Chaucer. For ten or twelve years more I suffered continual remorse, and only became content when my abstractions had composed themselves into picture and dramatization" (*Auto.*, p. 188). Abstraction, he adds, is the "enemy" of Unity of Being (p. 190). And Yeats seems to echo Goethe when he writes in 1937 that "A Poet writes always out of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love or mere loneliness" (*Essays*, p. 511).

Abstraction, idea, philosophy—these may be designated as the Scylla of both Goethe and Yeats. Their Charybdis, on the other hand, is subjectivity. In 1937, Yeats wrote to Edmund Dulac, "Goethe said that all our modern poetry is wrong because subjective... All my life I have tried to get rid of modern subjectivity by insisting on construction and contemporary words and syntax" (*Letters*, p. 892).

For Goethe, the subjective poet is the solipsistic one who turns inward, creating wholly imaginary events and characters instead of dramatizing his own experiences. "Most of our young poets," he complains, "have no fault than this, that their subjectivity is not important, and that they cannot find matter in the objective" (p. 72). Thus, when asked his opinion of a celebrated *improvisatore* from Hamburg, Goethe tells Eckermann, "He is a decided talent without doubt, but he has the general sickness of the present day—subjectivity... '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

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described, but merely the emotions on the return of a son to his parents, relatives, and friends..." (pp. 125-126).

Subjectivity is, then, synonymous with lack of precision, with triviality, and sentimentality; it is the failure to objectify personal emotion. When Yeats says, following Goethe, that all his life he has tried "to get rid of modern subjectivity," he is thinking, no doubt, of his early pre-Raphaelite poetry, in which the speaker is all too often an unspecified lover, mourning the cruelty of a shadowy sweetheart.

In 1933, Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespear, "We are happy when for everything inside us there is an equivalent something outside us. I think it was Goethe said this" (Letters, p. 810). This proverbial statement, which Goethe made with regard to his Theory of Colors (Eckermann, p. 168), sums up the aesthetic of both poets: the personal and the objective—self and world—must be adequately reconciled. The poet must write about his own experience, but, as Goethe puts it, his personal impression must be "rounded off" and given a "lively representation" (p. 206). The poet, Yeats asserts, "never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmasgoria" (Essays, p. 509).

Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe thus provided Yeats with a basic theory of poetry; no English romantic poet was to insist, as did Goethe, on the occasional nature of all poetry, on the twin dangers of abstraction and subjectivity, and on the objectification and concretization of personal experience. In Goethe's autobiography many of the same doctrines are advanced, but here they are presented dynamically as part of the larger narrative pattern. Although Yeats refers to Dichtung und Wahrheit only obliquely,29 it may well have been the model for his own autobiography. In the Preface to the first part of the autobiography, Reveries Over Childhood and Youth (1914), he explains that it was not his aim to record his life story fully or accurately: "I have changed nothing to my knowledge, and yet it must be that I have changed many things without my knowledge; for

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29 In The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, ed. Donald R. Pearce (Bloomington, Ind., 1960), we find the following comment: "We know, of course, that Goethe was greatly troubled when a man was taken from a river, having drowned himself. The man had in his pocket a copy of 'Werther' which is also about a man who had drowned himself. It has again and again cropped up in the world that the arts do appeal to our imitative faculties. We comfort ourselves in the way Goethe comforted himself, that there must have been other men saved from suicide by having read 'Werther'" (p. 52). This is a reference—albeit a confused one since Werther did not drown himself—to Book XIII of Dichtung und Wahrheit, in which Goethe discusses the violent reactions to Werther (pp. 511-517). I have found no other direct reference to Goethe's autobiography in Yeats's writings.
I am writing after many years and have consulted neither friend, nor letter, nor old newspaper, and describe what comes oftenest into my memory” (Auto., p. 3). Like Goethe, Yeats will, in other words, combine “Dichtung” and “Wahrheit.”

The main theme of Goethe’s autobiography is the resolution of tension between what Goethe calls the demonic—the instinctive, unconscious, irrational, and perverse element in human life—and the rational control of an ordered bourgeois society. Yeats’s Autobiography dramatizes precisely the same quest to attain Unity of Being by overcoming the essential polarity between instinctive self and external world. For both poet-autobiographers, tension is viewed as existing on three levels: the personal, the artistic, and the religious.

We may begin with the personal conflict. In both autobiographies, the conflict between father and son is a key theme, the mother playing a subordinate role as if she exerted no influence at all on her child, although the biographers tell us that in actual fact both mothers were highly imaginative women who stimulated their sons’ early interest in fiction and fantasy. Friction between father and son is, of course, a common theme in nineteenth-century autobiography—one thinks of Edmund Gosse’s Father and Son, of John Stuart Mill’s Autobiography, of Ruskin’s Praeterita—but Yeats’s Autobiography is less like these books in which the son comes to have a deep and lasting resentment against his father, blaming him for his own shortcomings, than it is like the more genial Dichtung und Wahrheit. Goethe and Yeats both view their fathers as essentially excellent men, who have failed to realize their own early ambitions and therefore place all their hopes in their son’s potential. “It is a pious wish of all fathers,” writes Goethe,80 “to see what they themselves failed to attain realized in their sons,” and in the same vein Yeats recalls that his father insisted that young Willie should become an expert horseman because he himself rode rather badly and wanted his son to compensate for his inferiority (p. 52). Both autobiographies contain detailed descriptions of a rigid paternal educational system, a system carefully designed to foster an interest in literature and art, but one that ultimately stifles the creativity of the young poet. Both Goethe and Yeats learn, with a mixture of regret and relief, that they must renounce the ideals of their fathers in order to discover their own.

Secondly, both Goethe and Yeats devote much space in their autobiographies to the portraiture of the leading literary figures of the day in order to chart the process whereby the poet moves away from the “accepted” literary values and begins to forge his own. In Book VIII

80 Oxenford, p. 20.
of Dichtung und Wahrheit, Goethe describes the aridity of German letters during his student days at Leipzig; it was a time, he recalls, when only two forms of literature—satire and criticism—were recognized genres, and poets slavishly followed "the Rules" only to create trivial, negligible works. Goethe's response to the pedantry of contemporary littérateurs was the formulation of the doctrine presented didactically in the Conversations with Eckermann, namely, that the poet must rely on his own personal experience in writing poetry: "I was compelled to seek for everything within myself... 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, or otherwise occupied me, and to some understanding with myself upon it... All, therefore, that has been confessed by me, consists of fragments of a great confession (pp. 239-240, my italics).

Yeats treats the poets of the "Tragic Generation" with much more sympathy than Goethe felt toward the German poets of his day, but his reaction turns out to be quite similar. The Rhymers' Club poets are viewed as one-sided, as poseurs who sacrificed personal emotion for outward elegance and "conscious deliberate craft" (p. 318). Their short, chiselled stanzas are ultimately devoid of life, and the poet comes to feel that "We should write out our own thoughts in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend. We should not disguise them in any way; for our lives give them force as the lives of people in plays give force to their words. Personal utterance, which had almost ceased in English literature, could be as fine an escape from rhetoric and abstraction as drama itself" (p. 102, my italics).

Finally, both autobiographers dramatize a similar pattern of religious crisis and resolution. In Book I of Dichtung und Wahrheit, Goethe complains that the "Church-Protestantism" imparted to him in his childhood was "nothing but a kind of dry morality... the doctrine appealed neither to the understanding nor to the heart" (p. 29). Unsatisfied, the child Goethe decides to build an Old Testament altar to God so that he can approach Him directly. The boy happily performs his daily rites until one day his "altar"—in actuality an old lacquered stand—catches fire, and his dream of direct contact with God is symbolically shattered.

As the boys grows up, he becomes increasingly alienated from Protestantism; in Book VIII Goethe describes the nervous breakdown he suffered when he came back from Leipzig in 1768. For relief, the poet turns to hermetic and cabalistic studies with Fräulein von
Klettenberg and her circle, and soon he is engaged in chemical experiments which lead to the discovery of the “universal medicine”—a salt and water compound that supposedly cures Goethe from a severe illness! In the weeks that follow, Goethe’s occult studies lead him, as they were to lead Yeats more than a hundred years later, to the neo-Platonists and to Paracelsus, and it is not long before he is able to formulate a concept of divinity more satisfying than his childhood image.

Goethe begins with the axiom that everything in the universe is animated by the law of polarity. He imagines a Godhead which has gone on producing itself from eternity: each manifestation fosters a contradiction and creates its opposite. Man himself thus has a dual nature: he is constantly oppressed by his limitations but has a constant opportunity to redeem himself; he vacillates between the desire to express his most individual self on the one hand, and the drive to lose his personality, to be absorbed into a larger communal consciousness on the other (pp. 300-302).

The polarity defined in Book VIII of Dichtung und Wahrheit is almost identical to Yeats’s dichotomy between Self and Mask, between the antithetical and the primary. Yeats’s account of his quest for religious meaning is reminiscent of Goethe’s, even though the young Yeats reacted not against Calvinism but against his father’s lack of religious belief, which was in turn a reaction to the orthodox Protestantism of the Reverend William Butler Yeats, the poet’s paternal grandfather. “My father’s unbelief,” he writes, “had set me thinking about the evidences of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety, for I did not think I could live without religion” (p. 26). Although Yeats is reticent about his occult and magical studies in his Autobiography,81 he admits that “It was only when I began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy that I broke away from my father’s influence” (p. 89). The doctrine Yeats gradually evolves and which finds its full expression in A Vision, has as its cornerstone the belief that “consciousness is conflict,” “Between antinomies / Man runs his course,” as Yeats puts it in his great poem, “Vacillation”: he is torn between the antithetical (what Goethe calls “den Trieb uns zu verselbstigen”) and the primary (“den Trieb uns

81 In Yeats’s Autobiography, Life as Symbolic Pattern (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), Joseph Ronsley argues that Yeats reduced the space allotted to occult activities about a third when he rewrote the “Memoirs” of 1916-17 (the manuscript is in the Houghton Library at Harvard) as The Trembling of the Veil, because he wanted “to provide a better balance against his other interests” (pp. 22-23). It seems more likely, however, that Yeats was embarrassed by what seemed like sheer hocus-pocus to his father and to many of his friends and did not wish to dwell on his membership in occult organizations.
zu entselbstens”), and so Unity of Being is achieved only after intense struggle to harmonize the opposed elements of one’s nature.

Both *Dichtung und Wahrheit* and Yeats’s *Autobiography* dramatize this struggle and even the conclusions reached in the two books are similar. The last installment of Yeats’s autobiography, *Dramatis Personae, 1896-1902*, was written in 1935; it is a testimonial to his patroness, Lady Gregory, and to Coole Park, her great country house—a house that Yeats came to love “more than all other houses” (p. 389). It was at Coole, Yeats recalls, that he came closest to the attainment of Unity of Being, for here he could participate in a cultural movement in which “poet and artist confined themselves gladly to some inherent subject matter known to the whole people” (p. 19). In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe similarly presents his admittedly irrational and “demonic” decision to go to Weimar in his twenty-sixth year as the turning point in his career as poet; the autobiography ends with an account of this fateful decision. The progress of Yeats from his father’s house to Coole thus parallels Goethe’s progress from his narrow, middle-class Frankfurt environment to the aristocratic culture of the Weimar court.

One may conclude that *Dichtung und Wahrheit* gave Yeats a particularly impressive example of the way a poet’s autobiography might be written. When he came to write his own autobiography, Yeats chose to avoid the step-by-step account of early upbringing and education one finds in Mill and Ruskin and used the more discursive mode of Goethe’s autobiography, in which seemingly unrelated incidents and images are juxtaposed so as to illuminate and intensify one central theme.

For further parallels between Yeats and Goethe one could, no doubt, turn to the plays or poems. Yeats’s early lyric, “The Sorrow of Love,” for example, contains phraseology highly reminiscent of Goethe’s poem “Freundliches Begegnen.”82 But here one treads on dangerous ground

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82 The second stanza of “Freundliches Begegnen” is the following quatrains:

“Auf einmal schien der neue Tag enthüllt:
Ein Mädchen kam, ein Himmel anzuschauen,
So musterhaft wie jene lieben Frauen
Der Dichterwelt. Mein Sehen war gestillt.”

Compare this to the second and third stanzas of “The Sorrow of Love”:

“A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers.

Arose, and on that instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man’s image and his cry.”

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because Yeats could hardly appreciate the formal qualities of a German poem, and I prefer not to emphasize such conjectural parallels. The influence of *Wilhelm Meister*, of Eckermann, and especially of Goethe’s autobiography is, however, unmistakable. If Yeats was—as he liked to call himself—the “last Romantic,” Goethe was surely the first, and when we try to “place” Yeats in the romantic tradition, as a number of critics have recently done,”83 we must look beyond Wordsworth to the great European poet whose search for “unity within one’s self” became the model for the magnificent dialogues of self and soul of Yeats’s later years.

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