

# Collecting to the Core — Goethe's Literary Works

by **Dr. Catherine Minter** (Assistant Librarian, Arts and Humanities, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington; Germanic Languages and Literatures Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <cjminter@indiana.edu>

Column Editor: **Anne Doherty** (*Resources for College Libraries* Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

**Column Editor's Note:** The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

**J**ohann Wolfgang von Goethe's gift for constant self-renewal as a writer and his belief in the formative force of change were immortalized by **Lord Alfred Tennyson** in the opening stanzas of *In Memoriam*:

I held it truth with him who sings  
To one clear harp in divers tones,  
That men may rise on stepping-stones  
Of their dead selves to higher things.<sup>1</sup>

Given what the German Nobel laureate **Thomas Mann** noted as Goethe's "mighty powers of growth and rejuvenation," it is unsurprising that Goethe's output should not only span virtually all major literary forms from poetry to the novel, but also include other significant cultural contributions in politics, the sciences, letters, and more.<sup>2</sup> The field of Goethe criticism is correspondingly vast; and it is therefore particularly important for the modern reader and librarian not to lose sight of the classic contributions to Goethe scholarship that are perennially at risk of disappearing under the prolific new growth. With this in mind, this essay highlights a selection of classic mid-twentieth-century contributions to Goethe scholarship that are of continued relevance to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. This essay focuses on Goethe's literary output: discussion of selected general studies of Goethe's literary works will be followed by consideration of important contributions to understanding his poetry, plays, and novels.

Students and more advanced scholars alike can still derive much benefit from **Barker Fairley's** *Study of Goethe*.<sup>3</sup> Published in 1947, this was seen as a highly original and provocative contribution owing to its focus on a less perfect and more "human" Goethe than the one previously known; an admirer of Fairley's work, **Thomas Mann** paid tribute to Fairley's successful transcendence of the cult of Goethe amongst German scholars:

One gets the impression here of a quite new and livelier Goethe, who is not diminished in stature, only drawn more precisely, and who is more intelligible on a human level and more endearing in his imperfection than the one known before.<sup>4</sup>

Fairley's approach is broadly speaking a biographical one, but it differs from earlier biographical approaches in being concerned

less with the outward details of Goethe's life than with his "inner" biography — his psychological development as a man and writer. The continuing value of Fairley's study lies in the sensitivity with which its author traces Goethe's psychological and creative development, and interprets his major works against this backdrop. *A Study of Goethe* still serves as an outstanding introduction to Goethe that conveys the writer as a complex, "real" human being.

In *Goethe: A Critical Introduction*, **Ronald Gray** also breaks with the hitherto reverential criticism, but in a rather different way from Fairley.<sup>5</sup> In this work, Gray attempts to answer the question of what Goethe's literary works mean to the twentieth-century reader and arrives at some controversial conclusions in the process (for example, that the reception of the "serious" themes in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* is compromised by the title character's effusive sentimentality, which Gray assumes the modern reader cannot take seriously).<sup>6</sup> As a result of this approach, Gray gives the reader a largely negative survey of Goethe's literary achievement that, in the words of a contemporary reviewer, is somewhat "too rich in extra-censorious perceptions."<sup>7</sup> This notwithstanding, the merit of Gray's study is that it has the potential to liberate even the novice reader from unquestioning acceptance of Goethe's greatness as a writer, and thus retains a productive role in stimulating critical discussion.

The final general study of Goethe's literary works to feature here is the collection of essays *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, by **Mary Wilkinson** and **Leonard Willoughby**.<sup>8</sup> A contemporary review identifies two complementary approaches to Goethe in this volume: "the synthetic overall picture of the man and his work, and the analysis of some of the most difficult, apparently remote, yet essential, aspects of Goethean poetry."<sup>9</sup> Of the two approaches, the former has stood the test of time best, the more general essays in the volume retaining their importance better than the more technical contributions. Most valuable are probably "The Living Goethe," an accessible and appreciative introduction to Goethe's thought and style, and "Goethe's Poetry," which pays particular attention to the unity of form and meaning in the poems. The essays in this volume are distinguished by their text-immanent approach; some of the most penetrating and enduring insights are those relating to the unity of subjective and objective, sensuous and rational, elements in Goethe's writings.

Goethe is perhaps best known as a poet, but classic monographic studies of his poetry are in surprisingly short supply. Two mid-twentieth-century contributions are worthy of mention as having something of the character of monographs: **James Boyd's** *Notes to Goethe's Poems* and **Ronald Gray's** *Poems of Goethe*.<sup>10-11</sup> Boyd's *Notes* take the form of a series of narrative overviews of individual poems; Volume One covers poems to 1786, and Volume Two poems to 1832. In his foreword, Boyd explains that the notes are intended to be comprehensive from a student's point of view, aiming to provide all the information necessary for a complete understanding of each individual poem. This being so, the approach taken varies throughout, depending upon each poem's origins and significance: while the approach to some poems is biographical, to others it is thematic, to others contextual, and so on. Gray's *Poems of Goethe* is an anthology of around one hundred poems that includes a general introduction, brief introductions to twelve thematic groups of poems, and commentaries. Together with a sketch of the poet's life, the general introduction features an accessible discussion of Goethe's poetic language that covers technical features such as verse form and meter. Throughout, the poems are juxtaposed with commentaries which "gives the edition something of the character and value of a monograph."<sup>12</sup> As might be expected given that Gray's



*Poems of Goethe* was written in tandem with his *Goethe: A Critical Introduction*, the commentaries on the individual poems are sometimes provocative; like Gray's *Goethe*, this anthology therefore has the potential to stimulate critical debate and is still likely to be of use in a classroom context.

Readers seeking core, classic criticism on Goethe's plays are well served by *Goethe's Major Plays*, by **Ronald Peacock**, a distinguished British Goethe scholar.<sup>13</sup> Peacock traces Goethe's development as a dramatist from its beginnings in *Götz von Berlichingen* to the classical plays generally regarded as the pinnacle of Goethe's dramatic achievement, which receive fullest attention in this volume. In his introduction, Peacock notes that at the time when his study was published, it was common for Goethe's plays to be criticized for their "undramatic" form and tone; in order to baulk this negative trend, he sets about reevaluating the fundamental nature and form of the plays, suggesting that the reader approach these not as flawed dramas, but as deliberately unortho-

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dox dramatic experiments. Peacock's study not only offers stimulating reassessments of Goethe's major plays; it also contains sensitive close analyses of character, themes, structure, and style. In a concluding chapter, the author does an outstanding job of bringing Goethe's plays to life for the modern reader. Not an introductory work, *Goethe's Major Plays* is well suited to advanced undergraduates, who can here find both accessible and innovative perspectives on literary works that are likely to seem remote to them.

Of Goethe's plays, *Faust* — and, in particular, the first part of the drama — is probably most often studied by undergraduates. A series of lectures intended for Bryn Mawr College but never delivered, Fairley's *Goethe's Faust: Six Essays* features three essays discussing *Faust* as a whole and three analyzing individual parts and scenes of the play.<sup>14</sup> Among the former, particularly still useful are "Goethe's Dramatic Characters," in which Fairley posits a philosophical type of Goethean dramatic character personifying an element of our common human mentality, and "The Form of Faust," a sensitive analysis of the combination of dramatic, epic, and lyrical elements in *Faust*, and of the form of the play as a series of episodes structured by a dialectical principle. Among the more specialized essays, Fairley's analysis of the fifth act of *Faust* deserves mention as a boldly optimistic interpretation that breaks with the "defeatist" reading of Goethe's play common in mid-twentieth-century German literary criticism. The essays in this volume represent particularly significant contributions to an understanding of the unity of *Faust I* and *Faust II*, and can still profitably be consulted by readers at all levels.

The first major monographic study in English of Goethe's novels, Hans Reiss's *Goethe's Novels* has retained its centrality as a source on this topic since its 1969 publication.<sup>15</sup> *Goethe's Novels* represents an English version (as opposed to a translation) of its author's *Goethes Romane* (1963); four substantial chapters devoted to *Werther*, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* respectively are flanked by an introduction and conclusion assessing Goethe's achievement as a novelist. Reiss's study is outstandingly comprehensive: to take but one example, his chapter on *Werther* provides information on the genesis of the novel, versions of the text, form and style, main themes, reception, and *Werther's* significance to the modern reader. A contemporary reviewer contrasts Reiss's study favorably with Gray's "opinionated" *Goethe*, noting that he "would not hesitate recommending Reiss's study to advanced students as a solid guide, but [does] not expect many converts to Goethe's novels on the basis of the book."<sup>16</sup> This seems a little unfair, for not only does Reiss's admiration for Goethe's art as a novelist shine through in many places, but his evenhanded approach may induce appreciation more than polemical treatments. *Goethe's Novels* has stood the test of time well and can still profitably be consulted by both advanced students and more seasoned scholars.

The final work in this overview of classic Goethe criticism is also the most recent — Eric Blackall's *Goethe and the Novel*.<sup>17</sup> This study of Goethe's novels against the background of the development of the novel as a literary form in western Europe represents an important contribution to comparative Goethe scholarship; it is also to be recommended for its perceptive close readings of Goethe's novels and analyses of narrative technique. Blackall's basic thesis is that Goethe's novels are all concerned with the quest for order and with the attempt to integrate elements lying outside of most accepted concepts of order (such as chance and the un-

expected) into this framework. It is worth noting that while this thesis seems to apply least well to *Werther*, the only novel by Goethe with a central place in the undergraduate curriculum, Blackall's nuanced close reading of this novel as the narrative of man's attempt to construct an artificial world as a surrogate for reality nevertheless remains persuasive.

A short bibliographic essay such as this promising an overview of select criticism on Goethe's diverse and immense literary output can hardly avoid giving the impression of a whirlwind tour. The works surveyed here share an effortless and holistic quality that much of the more specialized recent literary scholarship lacks; these classic studies also tend to be bolder in their statements than their modern counterparts, and in some instances are therefore more contentious. For both of these reasons, this classic criticism has retained its importance to undergraduate study and teaching, being more accessible and often more conducive to critical debate than harder-wrought scholarly contributions. 🌲

#### Endnotes

1. Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *Selected Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks. London: Penguin Books, 2007, 97. Of these lines, Tennyson wrote: "I alluded to Goethe's creed. Among his last words were [...] 'from changes to higher changes'" (*Selected Poems*, 337).
2. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *The Permanent Goethe*, edited by Thomas Mann. New York: Dial Press, 1948, xi.
3. Fairley, Barker. *A Study of Goethe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947.\*
4. Man glaubt einen ganz neuen, lebendigeren Goethe zu sehen, der nicht verkleinert ist, aber schärfer umrissen, menschlich übersehbarer und lebenswürdiger in seiner Problematik als der sonst Angebotene, quoted in Barker Fairley, *Selected Essays on German Literature*, edited by Rodney Symington. Kanadische Studien Zur Deutschen Sprache Und Literatur, Vol 29. New York: Lang, 1984, 15.
5. Gray, Ronald D. *Goethe: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967.\*
6. Ibid, 52.
7. Atkins, Stuart. Review of *Goethe: A Critical Introduction*, by Ronald D. Gray. *Modern Language Review* 64 (1969): 452-59.
8. Wilkinson, Elizabeth M., and L. A. Willoughby. *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*. London: Edward Arnold, 1962.
9. Wassermann, Felix M. Review of *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, *Monatshefte* 58 (1966): 367-68.
10. Boyd, James. *Notes to Goethe's Poems*, 2 vols. Oxford: Blackwell, 1944-49.
11. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Poems of Goethe: A Selection with Introduction and Notes*, by Ronald D. Gray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.
12. Yuill, W.E. Review of *Poems of Goethe*, by Ronald D. Gray. *Modern Language Review* 64 (1969): 459-61.
13. Peacock, Ronald. *Goethe's Major Plays*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1959.
14. Fairley, Barker. *Goethe's Faust: Six Essays*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.
15. Reiss, Hans Siegbert. *Goethe's Novels*. London: Macmillan, 1969.\*
16. Schweitzer, Christoph E. Review of *Goethe's Novels*, by Hans Siegbert Reiss. *Monatshefte* 64 (1972): 177-79.
17. Blackall, Eric. *Goethe and the Novel*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.\*

\*Editor's note: An asterisk (\*) denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.