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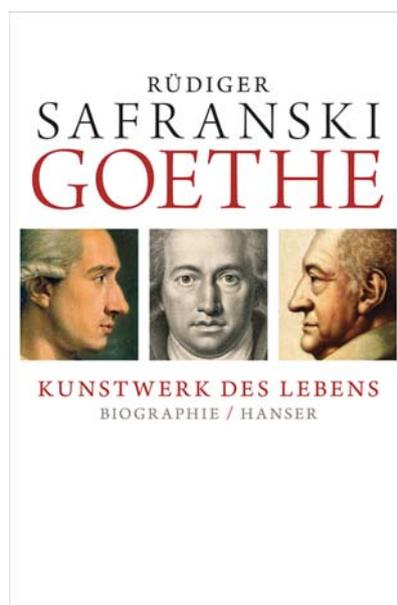
Rüdiger Safranski
Goethe. Kunstwerk des Lebens. Biographie

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Rüdiger Safranski
Goethe: Life as a Work of Art. Biography

Translated by Michael Ritterson



Preface

Goethe is a veritable event in the history of the German mind — one without an afterlife, according to Nietzsche. But Goethe did in fact leave us a legacy. True, German history did not take a more favorable course because of him, but in another respect he remains highly influential: the model of a life well lived, one combining a massive intellect, creative power, and wisdom for living. A thrilling life, possessing certain innate gifts, but struggling to make its own way, threatened by inner and external risks and challenges. What fascinates us again and again is the individual shape that life took on — not the kind we would normally expect.

Our present age does not favor the growth of individuality. The interconnectedness of everyone with everyone else places a high value on conformity. Goethe was intimately connected with the social and cultural life of his time, but he also knew how to remain an individual. He made it a basic rule to take in only as much of the world as he could put to use. Whatever he could not respond to productively did not concern him, in other words: he had a talent for ignoring things. Of course, he also had to be concerned with many things he would rather have spared himself. But insofar as he had the choice, he preferred to set the boundaries of his own life.

We understand fairly well nowadays the process of metabolism in the physiological sense, but we can learn from Goethe's example what constitutes a proper intellectual and emotional metabolism with the world around us. Also: the fact that we need not only a physical but also an intellectual, emotional immune system. One needs to know what may be ingested and what may not. Goethe knew, and this was part of his wisdom for living.

So it is that he exerts a stimulating effect, not just in his works but also in his life. Not only a great writer, he was also a master at living. The two taken together are what makes him inexhaustible for posterity. He sensed this, even though he wrote, in one of his last letters to Zelter, that he was completely rooted in an epoch that would never come again. Still, Goethe can be more alive and timely than many another person living today.

Every generation has the opportunity to understand itself and its own age better as reflected in Goethe. This book is an attempt to see such a reflection by describing the life and works of a towering genius while at the same time exploring Goethe's example for the possibilities and limits of an art of living.

A young man of good family from Frankfurt am Main studies at the universities of Leipzig and Strasbourg without completing his degree but does finally become a lawyer, and is continually in love, with a swarm of young girls and more mature women. With his drama

Götz von Berlichingen, he wins fame in Germany; following the appearance of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, he is the talk of literary Europe. Napoleon will claim to have read the novel seven times. Visitors stream into Frankfurt to see and hear the handsome, eloquent, brilliant young man. A generation earlier than Lord Byron he feels himself a favorite of the gods and, like Byron, he too keeps poetic company with his devil. While still in Frankfurt he begins his lifelong work on *Faust*, that canonical drama of the modern age. After his "Storm and Stress" period in Frankfurt, Goethe grows weary of the literary life; he ventures on a radical break, moving in 1775 to the little duchy of Saxony-Weimar, where, as a friend of the duke, he rises to the office of minister. He dabbles in the natural sciences, runs off to Italy, takes a mistress — all the while writing the most unforgettable love poetry — engages in lofty give-and-take with his friend and fellow writer Friedrich Schiller, pens novels, makes policy, and moves in high artistic and scientific circles. Goethe becomes a kind of institution within his own lifetime. He becomes his own historical subject and writes what is probably — after Augustine's *Confessiones* and Rousseau's *Confessions* — the most important autobiography of the old Europe: *Poetry and Truth*. But rigid and dignified as he presents himself at times, he also appears, in the works of his old age, as a bold and sardonic Mephisto breaking all conventional rules.

And he was always aware that literary works are one thing, life itself is another. Life itself was something he wanted to fashion as a work. And what exactly is a work? It rises above the times, it has beginning and end, and in between, a clearly delineated form. An island of significance in the sea of random shapelessness that struck terror in Goethe. For him everything had to have form. Either he discovered it or he created it, in everyday human affairs, in friendships, in letters and conversations. He was a man of rituals, symbols, and allegories, fond of suggestion and allusion — and yet he always wanted to achieve a result, a form, in short: a work. This was especially true concerning the duties of his position. The roads should be improved, the peasants should be freed of burdens, poor and hardworking people should receive wages and bread, mining should be profitable, and the audience in the theater every evening should have something to laugh at or to weep over.

On one hand are the works, in which life is given form; on the other hand, attentiveness, the finest compliment one can pay to life — one's own and the lives of others. Nature too warrants loving attention, and Goethe studied nature by careful observation. He believed that one needs only to look closely enough, and whatever is significant and true will reveal itself. Nothing more, no veil of mystery. He practiced a kind of science in which hearing and seeing are not dulled. He was pleased with most of what he discovered. He was also pleased at his own successes. And if others were not pleased, in the end that made no difference to him. A lifetime was too precious to be spent in criticism. *Adversaries are of no consequence*, he once said.

Goethe was a collector, not only of objects but also of impressions. So it was with personal contacts. He continually asked himself whether and in what ways they had *benefited* him, this being his favorite expression in such matters. Goethe loved the animate world and wanted to capture and give some kind of form to as much of it as he could. A moment, once given form, is preserved. Half a year before his death he climbs the Kickelhahn once again to read that line scratched long ago on the inside wall of the hunting lodge: *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh, ...*

No other author in modern times has prompted such a flood of biographies, but neither has any other been shrouded in so many opinions, speculations, and interpretations. This book approaches perhaps the last *Universalgenie* on the basis exclusively of primary sources — his works, letters, diaries, and conversations, and notes of his contemporaries. In this way Goethe comes alive, making his entrance as if for the first time.

Along with Goethe we also gain a close view of his age. Several historical breaks and upheavals occurred during this man's lifetime. He grew up in the playful Rococo period, in a stiff, antiquated urban culture; was troubled and challenged by the French Revolution and its intellectual aftermath; experienced the new European order under Napoleon, the demise of the emperor, a restoration that could not stop time; witnessed the dawn of the modern age more sensitively and thoughtfully than almost anyone else; and his lifespan encompassed the sobriety and acceleration of the railroad era with its pre-socialist dreams. He was a person whose name would later be used in reference to the whole span of these enormous upheavals: the Age of Goethe.

[...]

It was a risky thing to do, setting off without having been granted leave by Karl August, for he had figured on being away for several months, never imagining that the months would extend to nearly two years. He did not want to request leave in advance; that would have meant putting his journey at the duke's discretion and making his own decision dependent on that of the duke. That he did not want. The decision was to be entirely his own. It had to be a *fait accompli*. The chance that the duke would react negatively and perhaps even call him back was one that he had to take. By omitting all place names from the letters he wrote while en route, he made it nearly impossible for any such order to reach him before he got to Rome. Only there could he feel secure in being far enough away. That was the idea, that was the plan, and that was how he carried it out.

But being ordered to return was not the only risk. The duke could also have withdrawn his trust and dismissed him from service. There is no indication in his letters to friends and acquaintances, even in letters from later years, that Goethe had seriously considered this possibility and its disastrous, especially its financial, implications. Only one time is it suggested to the duke as a "possible impossibility": *Do not deny me the assurance of Your concern and affection for me. Cast out into the world alone, I should be in worse condition than a neophyte*, he wrote three months after his departure, troubled by the duke's silence. But otherwise Goethe seems to have been fairly sure of his trust, high regard, and devotion. Still, he was not sure enough to dispense with the almost obsequious tone of his first letters from Italy. We sense the desire to have an insubordinate act simply forgotten.

Keeping his travel plans a secret thus had a clear purpose. Goethe wished to make his decision concerning Italy independently of the duke. But there was an irrational motive for the secrecy as well. It had been the same with his Harz journey in the winter of 1777. At that time too, he had told no one of what he'd already had in mind for some time. Then as now, the external secrecy corresponded to an inner mystification, for he saw his climb to the summit of the Brocken as an appeal to divine judgment in charting his course back in Weimar. Secrecy protects the magic circle of higher signification. So also with the journey to Italy: Goethe sought healing for body and soul in Rome, so he superstitiously guarded against talking about it, lest mention ahead of time nullify for him the city's miraculous powers. Having arrived in Rome, he writes to the duke: *At last I can open my mouth and send You joyful greeting; pardon the secrecy and the, as it were, underground journey here. I hardly dared tell even myself where I was going.*

Until his arrival in Rome he kept himself effectively independent of the duke; but once there, he clearly places his fate back in Karl August's hands: *The length of my stay here, he writes in the first letter from Rome, will depend on ... a sign from You.* Phrasing it differently each time, he emphasizes that he will return as a changed man; let the duke not withhold his favor, *so that in returning I might enjoy with You the new life I am learning to appreciate only here in foreign lands.*

Of course Karl August was irritated by Goethe's secretiveness, but in the long run he didn't blame him for it. Indeed, as Goethe had hoped, relations between the two are placed on a new basis. Charlotte, however, will not forgive his flight to Italy and the breach of trust it represented. Her first reaction will be to demand the return of her letters.

One practical feature of this secrecy was a carefully maintained incognito. If he didn't travel under his own name, he could not be called back by it. But just as with secrecy in general, an assumed identity has a deeper significance for Goethe. In Sesenheim, on his first visit to Friederike Brion's house, he had disguised himself and appeared under a different name. Likewise on the winter Harz journey. On that occasion he wrote to Charlotte: *I find it a curious sensation to move about in the world unrecognized; it seems that I feel much more truly my relationship with persons and things.*

As a rule, Goethe would choose characters of low social status for his games of disguise and incognito appearances. He hoped thereby to experience a greater veracity. Not only other people, so it seemed to him, engaged him more openly then; he himself was open and discovered new sides of himself that did not otherwise come to expression. In self-diminution (according to social rank) he found a surprising self-intensification. Later, in one of his letters to Schiller, he will refer to this tortuous self-portrayal as his *tic, by which I find it convenient to conceal my self, my deeds, my writings from others' sight. I shall always enjoy traveling incognito, choosing simpler dress over finer; in conversation with strangers or infrequent acquaintances, preferring the unimportant subject or at least the less weighty expression; behaving more recklessly than is my wont; and thus, I might say, take up a position between myself and what I appear to be.*

So on the way to Italy he traveled as the painter Johann Philipp Möller. His ennobled "Excellency, the Privy Councilor" made himself almost ten years younger and disappeared into the decidedly lower social class of the artists' community in Rome, where he moved as if in his proper element.

Back to the departure. All the preparations had been made. He had carefully rearranged his official duties, too. Everything had been so efficiently and unobtrusively organized that he

could write to the duke: *For general purposes I am certainly dispensable just now, and as for those particular matters for which I am responsible, I have set them in such a way that they can easily continue by themselves for some time; indeed I might die and it would not cause a jolt.*

At the end of July 1786, as in the preceding year, Goethe travels to Karlsbad for the bathing cure. He knows that from there he'll continue on to Italy and has thus needed to prepare for the great journey before leaving Weimar. The Herders are taking the cure in Karlsbad, and the duke and Charlotte arrive there as well. These are pleasant, relaxed weeks, an impression shared by everyone who saw Goethe at that time. Water baths in the morning, long walks later in the day, social gatherings in the evening. Goethe gives readings from *Faust*. There are lengthy conversations with the duke, to whom one evening, to the surprise of both men, he delivers a kind of account of his life, as if he needed to file a testament with the duke. But concerning his immediate plans he says nothing.

On September 3, 1786, at three in the morning, he sets out. The group he was part of until the very day before feels duped. The canoness Amelie von Asseburg writes to the duke: "Privy Councilor von Goethe is a deserter whom I should wish to treat with the full force of military law. He has seized this opportunity without taking proper leave of us, without giving us the slightest indication of his decision. That was really most inconsiderate — taking leave, I am tempted to say, *à la française!* No! We Prussians may deceive our enemies, but we never use deception against our friends."

Chapter Eighteen

The Italian journey. Incognito, address unknown. First relaxations.

Palladio. "I do more studying than enjoying". Rome.

Iphigenia completed. Among artists. Moritz. Naples and Sicily.

The charm of the Phaeacians. Second stay in Rome. *Egmont* completed.

Faustina. Departure from Rome.

Over the first part of the journey by way of Regensburg, Munich, Innsbruck, and Bolzano to Trento, Goethe urged the coachman to make all possible speed. They made fewer stops than were customary along the way. In the "Diary of the Italian Journey for Frau von Stein, 1786," he notes: *How much I am leaving behind in order to pursue this One Idea, even now grown almost too old in my breast.* This one idea is: to arrive in Rome at last! Still, in keeping with his intentions, he takes time along the way to collect fossils and botanical specimens. Charlotte, still awaiting an explanation for his secret departure, must be content with rather tiresome descriptions of climate, rocks, and vegetation. It is only because *urgency and impatience* are driving him on to Rome that he doesn't spend all too much time on such things.

Goethe is driven not only by the desire to get to Rome and to have the dreams of his youth become reality there. He is driven by other intentions as well. Indeed, everything he is undertaking with this journey is very intentional. The letters he writes along the way confirm this, as when he tells his mother: *I shall return as a new person*; or writes to friends in Weimar: *For a new life is beginning*; or to Herder: *One must, so to speak, be reborn.*

But can one really intend such a thing? Rebirth as an assigned task? And how should he like to be? He doesn't know exactly, of course. But he does give some idea of it, for example in a letter to Herder a week after his arrival in Rome: *What I can say, however, and what pleases me most profoundly is the effect I can already feel in my soul: an inner solidity, as it were, imprinting my spirit; seriousness without dullness and a settled nature open to joy.*

Seriousness and a *settled nature* — these the privy councilor had already achieved in the years preceding; in that regard he has no need to change. But now he proposes a *seriousness without dullness*. The stiffness that many faulted him with dissolves under the southern sun, and the *settled nature* is bound with a sense of joy. He would like to open himself to it without compromising himself. A relaxed nature that is sure of its center point, that is what he calls a sense of *inner solidity*. Given that, one can abandon oneself confidently to the throng

with its picturesque life. *In my character, for which I wear linen stockings (and thus descend several steps), I take my place among them in the marketplace, talk about anything at all, ask them questions, observe how they act among themselves, and have only the greatest admiration for their simplicity, frankness, and good manners.*

After bathing in these ordinary waters, he realizes what he is lacking in Weimar: *I cannot tell you how much humanity I have gained already in this short time. But also how much I feel what miserable, lonely people we in the little sovereign states must be, because we, and especially in my case, can almost never speak with someone who doesn't want or hope to get something.*

Occasionally Goethe gives himself over to a situation spontaneously, following the lure of byways and back alleys. He must first re-acustom himself to such liberties, for now, more than before, he places importance on following a schedule. He has equipped himself with art and travel guidebooks, and he must work his way through them. Chief among these is Johann Jakob Volkmann's guide, an indispensable source for the educated audience of its time. Later, like a schoolmaster, he will propose that Charlotte might wish to trace his itinerary in Volkmann, and for himself he prescribes a meticulously worked-out sightseeing program. But he doesn't wish to be mistaken for one of those Englishmen traveling all around either. In Verona he purchases clothes of the kind worn there and is pleased that he can make use of the Italian language skills he'd secretly brushed up on beforehand in Weimar. He mingles with the people, *I speak with the people I meet as if we'd known each other a long time. I find it quite enjoyable.* He likes the colorful life in the squares and on the streets. *And the people strolling this way and that remind one of cherished images. The women's coiled braids, the men's bare chests and light jackets, the splendid oxen they drive back home from the market, the laden donkeys ... And then, when evening comes and the air is warm and a few clouds rest on the hills.*

By contrast, the region he comes from appears cold and somber to him, and he himself seems to be *a Nordic bear*. On another occasion he writes: *but we Cimmerians hardly know what daylight is. In eternal mist and shadow it matters little to us whether it is day or night, for how much time can we really spend out of doors walking about and enjoying some diversion?* This image of the miserable weather that awaits him back home among the Northern Germanic peoples will accompany him for the duration of the Italian journey.