

THE HARVARD CLASSICS  
SHELF OF FICTION  
SELECTED BY CHARLES W ELIOT LL D

WILHELM MEISTER'S  
APPRENTICESHIP

BY  
J W VON GOETHE



EDITED WITH NOTES AND INTRODUCTIONS  
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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

**J**OHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, the greatest of German writers and the most universal man of genius of modern times, was born at Frankfort-on-Main on August 28, 1749. His father, who came of a humble Thuringian family, was a Frankfort citizen of good standing, a lawyer and imperial councillor. From him the poet is supposed to have derived his balance and stability of character, while his mother's impulsive and imaginative nature is seen in the more artistic side of her son's temperament. Goethe's youth was spent in his native town, where his education was somewhat irregular. The occupation of the city by the French during the Seven Years' War gave him an early opportunity of becoming acquainted with a foreign language and foreign manners. At sixteen he went to Leipzig to study law, but the influence of the literary society there and a love affair were more important to him than the university lectures. His Leipzig sojourn ended with a severe illness, and on his recovery he was sent to complete his professional studies at Strassburg. Again non-professional influences had the upper hand. Herder, whom he met there, opened his eyes to the beauty of Gothic architecture and infected him with his own enthusiasm for Shakespeare and the poetry of the people; while his love for Frederika Brion, daughter of the pastor of the village of Sesenheim, had a profound effect on his emotional life.

In 1773 Goethe, who had for years been experimenting with poetry and the drama, published his first notable work, the historical play, "Götz von Berlichingen," which roused great patriotic enthusiasm, and launched the revolt against French classical influence known as the "Storm and Stress" movement. At Wetzlar, whither he went to attend the law-courts, he met Charlotte Buff, and his passion for her found expression in "The Sorrows of Werther"

(1774), a work which spread his reputation in the most sensational fashion throughout Europe.

The years 1771 to 1775, spent mostly in Frankfort, were filled with literary activity, varied by his courtship of Lili Schönemann, the daughter of a Frankfort banker, to whom he was for a time betrothed. Both "Faust" and "Egmont" were planned and in part composed during this period. In November, 1775, Goethe went to Weimar on the invitation of the young Duke of Saxe-Weimar, and this town was his home for the rest of his life. Here he was made a minister of state, and showed great energy and capacity in dealing with political and economic problems. He found sympathy and inspiration in his intimate friendship with Frau von Stein, the wife of a court official; and this relation formed the dominating influence of the years 1775-1786. His most important literary work at this time was the composition of a group of his most charming lyrics.

In September, 1786, Goethe set out on his momentous Italian journey, and remained in the south till the spring of 1788. This journey was of the highest importance for his development, for, in addition to the influence exerted on him by his study of the remains of antiquity (the work of the Renaissance hardly touched him), he found leisure to view his life in perspective and lay plans for his future activity. He came back enamoured of the classic, and the new enthusiasm found expression in his "Iphigenie auf Tauris," in "Torquato Tasso," and in the completing of "Egmont." Goethe's rapid advance during these eighteen months dislocated seriously his relations at home. The Storm and Stress movement he had outgrown, but he found it still dominant among German writers; and even his connection with Frau von Stein could not be resumed on the old footing. He withdrew from state affairs and for a time found it hard to settle down. A second visit to Italy was disillusioning; and in 1792 he accompanied the duke on a campaign against France and saw something of war. Meantime, the French Revolution, which had been shaking Europe, failed to rouse enthusiasm in Goethe, and he turned to the cultivation of two old interests, the theater and science. For twenty-two years he directed the court theater

at Weimar; and he worked intensely on problems of biology and physics. He now took up and completed "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship". The year 1794 is marked by the beginning of his friendship with Schiller, who had invited him to take part in a new periodical; and until the younger poet's death in 1805, the two men exercised on each other a remarkable mutual influence, partly stimulating and partly corrective. The beautiful narrative poem, "Hermann and Dorothea," was the outcome of interests largely caught from Schiller, and it was Schiller who induced him to finish the first part of "Faust."

The Storm and Stress period in German literature had been succeeded by the Romantic movement, but Goethe's classicism rendered him unsympathetic to it. Nevertheless, as the romantic novelists had taken "Wilhelm Meister" as a model for their fiction, so the poets regarded Goethe's lyrics with the greatest enthusiasm and found, with good reason, romantic elements in "Faust." Thus, almost against his will, he continued to be a leading influence in contemporary literature.

The last twenty-five years of Goethe's life were less eventful externally. In 1806 he married legally Christiane Vulpius with whom he had long been intimate; and in 1807 began the friendship with Bettina von Arnim, so delightfully recorded in his letters to her. The publication of "Faust" in 1808 was followed by that of "Elective Affinities" in 1809, a psychological novel of great influence; and in 1811 he began his idealized autobiography, "Poetry and Truth from my Life." He continued "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship" in the "Travels", and added a second part to "Faust", the work which crowns his literary life. Meantime, death was depriving him of his more intimate associates, and he was left more and more a gigantic survival from the previous age. His wife died in 1816, Frau von Stein in 1827, the duke of Saxe-Weimar in 1828. In March 22, 1832, Goethe followed them, and Europe recognized that she had lost her greatest literary figure.

No estimate of Goethe's work in general is possible in this place. "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", which is here published in Carlyle's translation, remains in many



respects the greatest of German novels. Begun as a picture of theatrical life it was broadened out till it became a study of a young man's apprenticeship to life. In point of construction it is, of course, extremely loose, a weakness explained by the change made in the plan in the course of composition. But so rich and various is it in content, so crowded with vivid characters and so charged with reflection on a multitude of themes, that one is fain to waive the ordinary standards of structure, and accept it gratefully for the ripe wisdom it contains.

"Werther" is as unified as "Wilhelm Meister" is unorganized. Seldom has any work achieved a vogue so amazing as that enjoyed by "Werther" in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Its influence extended beyond literature to conduct, and young men, distraught by love, shot themselves with copies of the book in their hands. Yet to the modern reader it is clear that, though the book is to some extent written out of the author's experience, Goethe had already transcended that experience, and saw in the young Werther an example of the danger of a type of morbid sentimentalism against which his age stood in need of warning. But the book is not a sermon. Old-fashioned though we may now feel the manners and mode of expression, it remains an exquisite and touching picture of the tragedy of sensibility.

W. A. N.

# CRITICISMS AND INTERPRETATIONS

## I

BY HJALMAR H. BOYESEN

**T**HERE is no name in the literary history of modern times which is even remotely comparable to that of Goethe; with every year that passes it gains a larger significance. In its suggestiveness it is as unlimited as life itself. It is only a shallow critic who imagines that he has exhausted, or can exhaust, its full meaning. Catholics and Protestants, basing their argument upon some detached passage in his writings, have claimed him as their own. Spinozists have pronounced him the most illustrious disciple of their master; and still others have seen in him the apostle of artistic paganism. None of these were either wholly right or wholly wrong. Goethe, with the sovereign right of the artist, could embrace all these tenets in his universal creed, without being in danger of contradicting himself. "For my part," he writes to his friend Jacobi, "with the manifold directions in which my nature moves, I cannot be satisfied with a single mode of thought. As a poet and artist, I am a polytheist; on the other hand, as a student of nature, I am a pantheist—and both with equal positiveness. When I need a God for my personal nature, as a moral and spiritual man, He also exists for me. The heavenly and the earthly things are such an immense realm that it can only be grasped by the collective intelligence of all beings."

It is in this universality of Goethe's mind, this elevation above all the narrow limits of sects and schools and special sciences, that one must seek the true key to his greatness. The study of his writings is a perpetual journey of discovery; it is as stimulating as mountain-climbing; every

fresh effort rewards you with a larger view of the world about you. Your intellectual horizon is constantly widening. —From "Goethe and Schiller, Their Lives and Works" (1907).

## II

BY THOMAS CARLYLE

A WIDE, and every way most important, interval divides "Werther," with its skeptical philosophy, and "hypochondriacal crotchets," from Goethe's next novel "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", published some twenty years afterwards. This work belongs, in all senses, to the second and sounder period of Goethe's life, and may indeed serve as the fullest, if perhaps not the purest, impress of it; being written with due forethought, at various times, during a period of no less than ten years. Considered as a piece of Art, there were much to be said on "Meister"; all which, however, lies beyond our present purpose. We are here looking at the work chiefly as a document for the writer's history; and in this point of view, it certainly seems, as contrasted with its more popular precursor, to deserve our best attention: for the problem which had been stated in "Werther," with despair of its solution, is here solved. The lofty enthusiasm, which, wandering wildly over the universe, found no resting place, has here reached its appointed home; and lives in harmony with what long appeared to threaten it with annihilation. Anarchy has now become Peace; the once gloomy and perturbed spirit is now serene, cheerfully vigorous, and rich in good fruits. Neither, which is most important of all, has this Peace been attained by a surrender to Necessity, or any compact with Delusion; a seeming blessing, such as years and dispiritment will of themselves bring to most men, and which is indeed no blessing, since even continued battle is better than destruction or captivity; and peace of this sort is like that of Galgacus's Romans, who "called it peace when they had made a desert." Here the ardent, high-aspiring youth has grown into the calmest man, yet with increase and not loss of ardor, and with aspirations higher as well as clearer.



For he has conquered his unbelief; the Ideal has been built on the actual; no longer floats vaguely in darkness and regions of dreams, but rests in light, on the firm ground of human interest and business, as in its true scene, on its true basis.

It is wonderful to see with what softness the skepticism of Jarno, the commercial spirit of Werner, the reposing, polished manhood of Lothario and the Uncle, the unearthly enthusiasm of the Harper, the gay, animal vivacity of Philina, the mystic, ethereal, almost spiritual nature of Mignon, are blended together in this work; how justice is done to each, how each lives freely in his proper element, in his proper form; and how, as Wilhelm himself, the mild-hearted, all-hoping, all-believing Wilhelm, struggles forward towards his world of Art through these curiously complicated influences, all this unites itself into a multifarious, yet so harmonious Whole, as into a clear poetic mirror, where man's life and business in this age, his passions and purposes, the highest equally with the lowest, are imaged back to us in beautiful significance. Poetry and Prose are no longer at variance, for the poet's eyes are opened: he sees the changes of many-colored existence, and sees the loveliness and deep purport which lies hidden under the very meanest of them; hidden to the vulgar sight, but clear to the poet's; because the "open secret" is no longer a secret to him, and he knows that the Universe is *full* of goodness; that whatever has being has beauty.—From "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays" (1828).

### III

BY SIR J. R. SEELEY

IT is commonly said that "Wilhelm Meister" seems to make Art the one object of life; but this is not Goethe's intention. He was himself an artist, and, as the work is in a great degree autobiographical, art naturally comes into the foreground, and the book becomes especially interesting to artists, but the real subject of it, as I hold,

is vocations in general. In the later books, indeed, art drops into the background, and we have a view of feminine vocations. The "Beautiful Soul" represents the pietistic view of life; then Therese appears in contrast, representing the economic or utilitarian view; finally, Natalie hits the golden mean, being practical like Therese, but less utilitarian, and ideal like her aunt, the pietist, but less introspective. On the whole, then, the lesson of the book is that we should give unity to our lives by devoting them with hearty enthusiasm to some pursuit, and that the pursuit is assigned to us by Nature through the capacities she has given us. It is thus that Goethe substitutes for the idea of pleasure that of the satisfaction of special inborn aptitudes different in each individual. His system treats every man as a genius, for it regards every man as having his own unique individuality, for which it claims the same sort of tender consideration that is conceded to genius. . . .

But we shall find much more unity in "Wilhelm Meister" if we regard it not as a theatrical novel, but as a novel of culture and education, and if we consider it in close connexion with Goethe's Life. The story of Mignon, as we have remarked, expresses that yearning after the ancient world, which was perhaps the deepest of all his feelings. The devotion to Shakspeare was his strongest feeling at a particular period of his life, the period when he undertook "Wilhelm Meister." That it should disappear at a particular point of the novel, answers to that change in his views on which we have enlarged and which is represented in his life by his Italian journey. The Confessions of a Beautiful Soul taken together with the philosophy of the Uncle and his Hall of the Past, represent the struggle which went on in Goethe's mind through the greater part of his life between two forms of religion, between certain Christian ideas from which he would never consent to part, and a sort of Heathenism which at times he avowed with the utmost frankness. And all this various material he has united in "Wilhelm Meister" by means of his practical philosophy of culture, which taught him that a man should study to develop all that is in him, that a man should spare no pains to discover his true vocation, and that in doing so

he will receive little help from the reigning system of education, which excites wishes instead of awakening aptitudes. Looked at then in this way, the book sets before us more fully than any other book of Goethe's, and in a highly remarkable, if not a perfectly satisfactory way, what we may call the Goethian philosophy of culture.—From "Goethe Reviewed after Sixty Years" (1894).

## IV

BY EDWARD DOWDEN

IT is a novel without a hero. When William first appears in this pseudo-epos,<sup>1</sup> we see him as a kind of tamer, less attractive Werther; less imaginative than Werther, less of a poet, but like Werther vague, unpractical, self-involved, indulging to excess a shallower sensibility and a poorer kind of passion. How he came by the name of *Meister* was unknown to Goethe, for his right name was Wilhelm *Schüler*.<sup>2</sup> William must start from low beginnings. He has small sense of his duties to others; he wastes himself in dreams of little profit; and it is out of such stuff as this that a worthy, useful, even admirable man is to be formed. It is enough at first if there lies within him the capacity of growth, the possibility of progress. But the way is long: delusions, snares, wanderings must be experienced; by error he must be delivered from error. In "Werther" Goethe had exhibited the ruin that comes upon an idealist who will not and cannot abandon his dreams and immoderate desire. In "Tasso" he had shown how a masculine prudence, an enlightened worldliness—presented in the person of Antonio—may come to the aid and deliverance of the idealist when he cannot deliver himself.<sup>3</sup> Here in "Wilhelm Meister" a foolish dreamer is to be formed into a true man; the vague and void of indefinite idealism is to be filled hereafter by a life of well-chosen, well-defined activity.

<sup>1</sup> So Goethe terms his novel in a letter to Schiller.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe to Schiller, December 6th, 1794.

<sup>3</sup> "Tasso" was conceived at a later date than "Wilhelm Meister," but it was completed long before the completion of the novel.

He is to be educated not in the schools—it is now unhappily too late for that—but by the harder discipline of life; he is to be delivered from the splendid prison painted with idle visions into the liberty of modest well-doing.—From “New Studies in Literature” (1895).

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

TO THE FIRST EDITION OF MEISTER'S  
APPRENTICESHIP

[*Edinburgh, 1824*]

WHETHER it be that the quantity of genius among ourselves and the French, and the number of works more lasting than brass produced by it, have of late been so considerable as to make us independent of additional supplies; or that, in our ancient aristocracy of intellect, we disdain to be assisted by the Germans, whom, by a species of second-sight, we have discovered, before knowing any thing about them, to be a tumid, dreaming, extravagant, insane race of mortals; certain it is, that hitherto our literary intercourse with that nation has been very slight and precarious. After a brief period of not too judicious cordiality, the acquaintance on our part was altogether dropped: nor, in the few years since we partially resumed it, have our feelings of affection or esteem been materially increased. Our translators are unfortunate in their selection or execution, or the public is tasteless and absurd in its demands; for, with scarcely more than one or two exceptions, the best works of Germany have lain neglected, or worse than neglected, and the Germans are yet utterly unknown to us. Kotzebue still lives in our minds as the representative of a nation that despises him; Schiller is chiefly known to us by the monstrous production of his boyhood; and Klopstock by a hacked and mangled image of his "Messias," in which a beautiful poem is distorted into a theosophic rhapsody, and the brother of Virgil

<sup>1</sup> This preface of Carlyle's is here reprinted because, in addition to its value as an appreciation of "Wilhelm Meister," its tone of defense and almost of apology affords an interesting landmark in the advance of Goethe's reputation outside of his own country.—Ed.



and Racine ranks little higher than the author of *Meditations* among the *Tombs*.

But of all these people there is none that has been more unjustly dealt with than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. For half a century the admiration, we might almost say the idol of his countrymen, to us he is still a stranger. His name, long echoed and reëchoed through reviews and magazines, has become familiar to our ears: but it is a sound and nothing more; it excites no definite idea in almost any mind. To such as know him by the faint and garbled version of his "*Werther*," Goethe figures as a sort of poetic Heraclitus; some woe-begone hypochondriac, whose eyes are overflowing with perpetual tears, whose long life has been spent in melting into ecstasy at the sight of waterfalls, and clouds, and the moral sublime, or dissolving into hysterical wailings over hapless love-stories and the miseries of human life. They are not aware that Goethe smiles at this performance of his youth; or that the German *Werther*, with all his faults, is a very different person from his English namesake; that his *Sorrows* are in the original recorded in a tone of strength and sarcastic emphasis, of which the other offers no vestige, and intermingled with touches of powerful thought, glimpses of a philosophy deep as it is bitter, which our sagacious translator has seen proper wholly to omit. Others again, who have fallen in with Retzsch's "*Outlines*" and the extracts from "*Faust*," consider Goethe as a wild mystic, a dealer in demonology and osteology, who draws attention by the aid of skeletons and evil spirits, whose excellence it is to be extravagant, whose chief aim it is to do what no one but himself has tried. The tyro in German may tell us that the charm of "*Faust*" is altogether unconnected with its preternatural import; that the work delineates the fate of human enthusiasm struggling against doubts and errors from within, against scepticism, contempt and selfishness from without; and that the witchcraft and magic, intended merely as a shadowy frame for so complex and mysterious a picture of the moral world and the human soul, are introduced for the purpose not so much of being trembled at as laughed at. The voice of the tyro is not listened to; our indolence takes part

with our ignorance; "Faust" continues to be called a monster; and Goethe is regarded as a man of "some genius," which he has perverted to produce all manner of misfashioned prodigies; things false, abortive, formless, Gorgons and Hydras and Chimæras dire.

Now, it must no doubt be granted, that so long as our invaluable constitution is preserved in its pristine purity, the British nation may exist in a state of comparative prosperity with very inadequate ideas of Goethe: but, at the same time, the present arrangement is an evil in its kind; slight, it is true, and easy to be borne, yet still more easy to be remedied, and which therefore ought to have been remedied ere now. Minds like Goethe's are the common property of all nations; and, for many reasons, all should have correct impressions of them.

It is partly with the view of doing something to supply this want, that "Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre" is now presented to the English public. Written in its Author's forty-fifth year, embracing hints or disquisitions on almost every leading point in life and literature, it affords us a more distinct view of his matured genius, his manner of thought and favourite subjects, than any of his other works. Nor is it Goethe alone whom it portrays; the prevailing taste of Germany is likewise indicated by it. Since the year 1795, when it first appeared at Berlin, numerous editions of "Meister" have been printed: critics of all ranks, and some of them dissenting widely from its doctrines, have loaded it with encomiums; its songs and poems are familiar to every German ear; the people read it, and speak of it, with an admiration approaching in many cases to enthusiasm.

That it will be equally successful in England, I am far indeed from anticipating. Apart from the above considerations, from the curiosity, intelligent or idle, which it may awaken, the number of admiring, or even approving judges it will find can scarcely fail of being very limited. To the great mass of readers, who read to drive away the tedium of mental vacancy, employing the crude phantasmagoria of a modern novel, as their grandfathers employed tobacco and diluted brandy, "Wilhelm Meister" will appear beyond endurance weary, flat, stale and unprofitable. Those,

in particular, who take delight in "King Cambyses' vein." and open "Meister" with the thought of "Werther" in their minds, will soon pause in utter dismay, and their paroxysm of dismay will pass by degrees into unspeakable contempt. Of romance interest there is next to none in "Meister"; the characters are samples to judge of, rather than persons to love or hate; the incidents are contrived for other objects than moving or affrighting us; the hero is a milksop, whom, with all his gifts, it takes an effort to avoid despising. The author himself, far from "doing it in a passion," wears a face of the most still indifference throughout the whole affair; often it is even wrinkled by a slight sardonic grin. For the friends of the sublime, then, for those who cannot do without heroical sentiments and "moving accidents by flood and field," there is nothing here that can be of any service.

Nor among readers of a far higher character can it be expected that many will take the praiseworthy pains of Germans, reverential of their favourite author, and anxious to hunt out his most elusive charms. Few among us will disturb themselves about the allegories and typical allusions of the work; will stop to inquire whether it includes a remote emblem of human culture, or includes no such matter; whether this is a light airy sketch of the development of man in all his endowments and faculties, gradually proceeding from the first rude exhibitions of puppets and mountebanks, through the perfection of poetic and dramatic art, up to the unfolding of the principle of religion, and the greatest of all arts, the art of life,—or is nothing more than a bungled piece of patch-work, presenting in the shape of a novel much that should have been suppressed entirely, or at least given out by way of lecture. Whether the characters do or do not represent distinct classes of men, including various stages of human nature, from the gay material vivacity of Philina to the severe moral grandeur of the Uncle and the splendid accomplishment of Lothario, will to most of us be of small importance: and the everlasting disquisitions about plays and players, and politeness and activity, and art and nature, will weary many a mind that knows not and heeds not whether they are true or false.

Yet every man's judgment is, in this free country, a lamp to himself: whoever is displeased will censure; and many, it is to be feared, will insist on judging "Meister" by the common rule, and what is worse, condemning it, let Schlegel bawl as loudly as he pleases. "To judge," says he, "of this book,—new and peculiar as it is, and only to be understood and learned from itself,—by our common notion of the novel, a notion pieced together and produced out of custom and belief, out of accidental and arbitrary requisitions,—is as if a child should grasp at the moon and stars, and insist on packing them into its toy-box."<sup>1</sup> Unhappily, the most of us have boxes; and some of them are very small!

Yet, independently of these its more recondite and dubious qualities, there are beauties in "Meister" which cannot but secure it some degree of favour at the hands of many. The philosophical discussions it contains; its keen glances into life and art; the minute and skilful delineation of men; the lively genuine exhibition of the scenes they move in; the occasional touches of eloquence and tenderness, and even of poetry, the very essence of poetry; the quantity of thought and knowledge embodied in a style so rich in general felicities, of which, at least, the new and sometimes exquisitely happy metaphors have been preserved,—cannot wholly escape an observing reader, even on the most cursory perusal. To those who have formed for themselves a picture of the world, who have drawn out, from the thousand variable circumstances of their being, a philosophy of life, it will be interesting and instructive to see how man and his concerns are represented in the first of European minds: to those who have penetrated to the limits of their own conceptions, and wrestled with thoughts and feelings too high for them, it will be pleasing and profitable to see the horizon of their certainties widened, or at least separated with a firmer line from the impalpable obscure which surrounds it on every side. Such persons I can fearlessly invite to study "Meister." Across the disfigurement of a translation, they will not fail to discern indubitable traces of the greatest genius in our times. And the longer they study, they are likely to discern them the more distinctly. New

<sup>1</sup> "Charakteristik des Meister."