2017

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Recommended Citation
Doherty, Anne and Minter, Catherine (2017) "Collecting to the Core: Goethe's Literary Works," Against the Grain: Vol. 26: Iss. 4, Article 86.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6933

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Collecting to the Core—Goethe’s Literary Works

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Johann 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 stanza 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.

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. 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. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

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.10–11 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.”12 As might be expected given that Gray’s Poems of Goethe was written in tandem with his Goethe: A Critical Introduction, the commentaries on 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.13 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 buck 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 unorthodox.

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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. Among the former, particularly still useful are “Goethe’s 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 Faust’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. 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.” 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 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. 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 unexpected) 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.

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Endnotes

1. Tennyson, Alfred Lord. Selected Poems, ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Penguin Books, 2007, 97. Of these lines, Tennyson wrote: “I allude to Goethe’s creed. Among his last words were […] ‘from changes to higher changes’” (Selected Poems, 337).
6. Ibid, 52.

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