

# Goethe Climbs a Mountain

## Introduction

Goethe was born into a wealthy bourgeois family in Frankfurt, a prosperous *Reichsstadt* (imperial city) straddling the River Main, just before it joins the Rhine, Europe's most important waterway. As an imperial city Frankfurt was subject only to the authority of the emperor, which made it a centre of industry, commerce, and culture. Young men born into affluence often find themselves in a position of being unable to channel their good fortune to positive effect, and Goethe too occasionally teetered on the brink of waywardness. As an eighteen-year-old law student in Leipzig he was saved from stumbling over the edge by a near fatal illness.<sup>1</sup>

After taking a year out, he completed his studies in Strasbourg, and made a half-hearted attempt at practicing law. But he was much more interested in writing poetry and falling in love. He was able to free himself from the despondency he experienced during one of these infatuations by writing what could arguably be called the first international best seller, 'The Sorrows of Young Werther'.

For the young Goethe, still only twenty-five and unable to deal with the fame suddenly thrust upon him, this made his existential situation even worse. Not knowing what to do with his life (and considerable talents!) he agreed to visit the recently befriended Karl August, Duke of the small impoverished Duchy Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, far from the excitement of city life. Amazingly, he lived and worked there for the rest of his long life.

But the decision to settle into a productive life (and what a life it turned out to be!) could not be made before he was guided, and more or less forced, towards a third crisis, a crisis which could not be resolved by illness or literary success. This time he would have to do it by himself, on his own, alone.

What follows is an exploration of the people and events which led him to that lonely mountain top. He was twenty-eight.

## Alchemy and Nature

Goethe arrived home in Frankfurt on his nineteenth birthday in a critical condition. Recuperation took more than a year, and he put aside his law books, using the time to immerse himself in alchemical studies. From an early age he had been convinced of the unity, the wholeness of Nature, and he now carried out experiments with water glass, trying to discover the primal substance from which he was sure that everything in Nature (minerals, plants, animals, and humans) had developed and evolved. In his studies of Georg von Welling's<sup>2</sup> cabbalistic works he came across the idea of an all creative "*Earth Mother*" (*Zeugemutter*), who has her being in the life sphere surrounding the earth, in what we would today call the biosphere.

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1 See separate essay *Goethe and Alchemy*.

2 Georg von Welling (1655–1727) was a German alchemical and theosophical writer. He was a mining engineer by profession, and became a director in the Baden-Durlach Office of Building and Mines. The first complete publication of his major work, *Opus Mago-Cabbalisticum et Theosophicum*, was printed in 1735.

He did not return to Leipzig to complete his course, but followed his father's wishes and went to Strasbourg (another *Reichsstadt*) instead. Here he received his Licentiate (Bachelor's Diploma) in Law in 1771.

Between 1771 and 1775 he worked in law offices in Frankfurt and nearby Wetzlar, but showed little aptitude for the work, and lost most of his cases. This came as no surprise to anyone, as he spent more time writing dramas and novels than law reports. In 1772 he organised the first Shakespeare Day on German soil in his parental home. He had come across the translations of Shakespeare's plays by Wieland while still in Leipzig; a decisive encounter in his awakening interest in literature.<sup>3</sup>

The historical drama *Götz von Berlichingen* was published in 1773; the semi-autobiographical novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774. He completed a first version of his best known drama *Faust* in 1775.<sup>4</sup> Faust, like Goethe, was deeply interested in exploring the mysteries of Nature. So much so, that he resolved to use magic to discover '*the inmost tether that binds the world together*.'<sup>5</sup> In a book by Nostradamus Faust comes across the symbol of the Spirit of Earth, whom he conjures into his study, and who overwhelms Faust with his creative powers:

*'The weaving loom of time is my care,  
And I weave the Godhead's living garment there.'*<sup>6</sup>

and rebukes Faust for his hubris:

*You match the spirit that you comprehend; not me!*<sup>7</sup>

Faust never does discover '*the inmost tether that binds the world together*', but Goethe, the poet and naturalist, devoted much of his life attempting to discover the creative weaving of the Spirit of the Earth, and it is surely no coincidence that the final line of *Faust II* is

*The inexpressible, here it is done;  
The Eternal Feminine draws us on.*<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, publication of *Werther* had made him an instant celebrity. This was not something he particularly enjoyed. In October 1772 Goethe had been deeply moved by the suicide of an acquaintance, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, who had shot himself with a pistol borrowed from Goethe's friend, Kestner. Goethe had written into his *Werther* novel not only his own impossible infatuation with

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3 Shakespeare had been introduced into Germany during the 1760's by Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), who translated the plays into prose.

4 The so-called *Urfaust* was composed between 1772 and 1775. The final scenes of *Faust Part II* were completed just eight months before his death in 1832.

5 *Dass ich erkenne, was die Welt / Im Innersten zusammenhält*, *Faust*, Part One; Night, *Faust's Study*.

6 *So schaff' ich am sausenden Webstuhl der Zeit, / Und wirke der Gottheit lebendiges Kleid*. *Faust Part One; Night, Faust's Study*.

7 *Du gleichst dem Geist den du begreifst, nicht mir!* *Faust Part One; Night, Faust's Study*.

8 *Das ewig Weibliche zieht uns hinan*.

an unobtainable woman, (Kestner's fiancé Charlotte Buff) but also Jerusalem's suicide.

The extra-ordinary success of *Werther* also had unexpected tragic consequences. Werther became a cult-figure for a whole generation of young men and women, who were so affected by the power of the novel that those grieving over an unrequited love occasionally imitated not only Werther's yellow costume, but also, although rarely, his suicide. For example, on Jan 16, 1778, Christel von Lassberg drowned herself in the River Ilm in Weimar clutching a copy of Goethe's *Werther*.

The book was severely criticized as provocative and a threat to morality. The authorities became so alarmed by the wave of depressed young people suffering from the so-called Werther illness that in Denmark and Italy the book was banned.<sup>9</sup>

Still completely at a loss as to what to do next, Goethe now found himself in a relationship for which he was ill prepared. In 1775 he became engaged to Lili Schönemann, but during the course of their brief engagement, he contrived to escape to Switzerland on a three month 'Grand Tour', travelling with friends on foot and by coach as far as the Gotthard Pass overlooking Italy. Soon after his return to Frankfurt he was invited to Weimar by the recently befriended Duke Karl August of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1757-1828). He accepted the invitation and broke off the engagement.

### **Duke Karl August**

Karl August's father had died when Karl was still in his infancy, and he was brought up under the regency and supervision of his mother, the dowager Duchess Anna Amalia (1739-1807). In 1771 Christoph Martin Wieland was appointed as his tutor.

In 1774 Karl Ludwig von Knebel (1744-1834) was invited to Weimar to tutor his younger brother Frederick Constantin (1758-1793). In the same year the princely brothers, accompanied by their tutors, went on an educational trip to Paris. It is no exaggeration to state that on that journey von Knebel arranged the most important meeting in Goethe's life; he introduced Goethe (now 25) to the seventeen-year-old Duke, who formed an immediate friendship with the famous poet, a friendship which was to last to the end of his life.<sup>10</sup> He spontaneously invited Goethe to visit him Weimar.

On the return journey from Paris Karl August stopped at the court in Darmstadt, where he was betrothed to Princess Louise Auguste of Hesse-Darmstadt (1757-1830). On his eighteenth birthday on 3 September 1775, Carl August came of age. He married Louise Auguste on 3 October. His bride was a sophisticated young woman, but shy and withdrawn. She had been brought up under the strict guidance of her mother, the landgravine Caroline, who was a keen and enlightened patron of German poetry, an interest she passed on to her daughter. This boded well for Weimar, and indeed for Goethe, who recognized her shyness, and took her under his wing.

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9 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(14\)70229-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(14)70229-9/fulltext)

10 Knebel and Goethe became lifelong friends, after this, their first meeting.

Goethe arrived in Weimar on 7 November. He was received as a welcome guest by Karl August and his family (but not by his court officials!), and much time was devoted to merrymaking: festivals, outings, skating parties (introduced by Goethe, and a first for Weimar), boar hunting, barn dances, and masquerades. There was serious concern that these pleasures would ruin the reputation of the young Duke, and indeed, of Goethe himself.

Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803) the first major poet of the German Enlightenment, and an early inspiration for both Goethe and Schiller, had been impressed with the young Goethe at their meeting in Frankfurt in 1775. He was so concerned at the turn of events in Weimar that he took it upon himself to send Goethe a stern reprimand. But Goethe wrote back, effectively telling him to mind his own business. In June 1776, less than a year after his arrival in Weimar, he was made a member of the Duke's Privy Council (again to the dismay the court officials!).

## **Weimar**

Karl August was an enlightened ruler, and believed strongly in a society organised for the good of all its members. He considered it his duty to provide an education for his subjects, which he hoped would enable them to become independent and responsible citizens. Acting on Goethe's advice he invited Johann von Herder<sup>11</sup> to Weimar to reform the educational system.

With the encouragement of Goethe, and the support of both his wife and his mother, Anna Amalia, Karl August transformed Weimar and nearby Jena into the most influential cultural centre of Germany during the Age of the Enlightenment.

With celebrated teachers such as Friedrich Schiller (who settled in Weimar in 1787, and was appointed professor of History and Philosophy in 1789), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (invited 1793), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (invited by Schiller in 1798), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (encouraged by Schelling in 1801), the Schlegel brothers Karl and August (invited by Schiller in 1796), the University of Jena was at the centre of German Idealism and early Romanticism, and was for a time the intellectual centre of Germany.

In spite of his benevolent nature, Karl August's marriage, entered into for purely dynastic reasons, was not a happy one. The Duke was father to several of his subjects in more ways than one. He acknowledged five children born out of wedlock by him (the first in June 1779). After his arrival in Weimar, it soon became part of Goethe's unofficial duties to ensure the welfare of the illegitimate children and their mothers.



*Duke Karl August. circa 1775.*  
Source: [research.britishmuseum.org](https://www.research.britishmuseum.org)

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<sup>11</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was a philosopher, theologian, poet and literary critic. Goethe and Herder had met in Strasbourg, where Herder was his teacher, and they became firm friends.

In 1776 Karl August set in motion work on reopening an abandoned copper and silver mine in Ilmenau. The mine had been closed in 1739, when problems with the supply and control of water needed to drive the waterwheels powering the pumps for the removal of groundwater had proved insurmountable. Financial, legal and technical difficulties delayed the opening for eight years, until finally, on 24 February 1784, the mine was formally opened with the dedication of the new Johannes shaft, and an official speech by Goethe.

The venture eventually proved unsuccessful, and in 1796, after another major underground flood, mining was abandoned. Problems with underground flooding could not be overcome, and the quality of the small amount of ore that was extracted was to be too poor to make the venture viable. Goethe later acknowledged that although the experience had left him out of pocket, the lessons he had learned had contributed significantly to his technical and scientific development and skills.

Soon after his arrival in Weimar Goethe met the woman who was destined to have a profound effect on his intellectual and emotional development.

### **Charlotte von Stein**

Charlotte von Stein (25 December 1742 – 6 January 1827) had been lady-in-waiting to the Duke's mother, Duchess Anna Amalia, since she was fifteen. She was an educated and cultured woman, and an incompatible match for her more roughhewn husband, the court's chief equerry, Freiherr Gottlob Ernst Josias Friedrich von Stein (1735-1793), whom she married at the age of twenty-two. The marriage was a political one, and unhappy from the start. She gave birth to seven children, of whom all four daughters and one son died. Only her oldest and youngest sons survived. She entrusted the youngest, Fritz (1772-1844) to Goethe as his personal tutor. Fritz moved into Goethe's house in 1783, living there until the latter's departure for Italy three years later.

Her meeting with Goethe towards the end of 1775 was the beginning of a deep friendship, unlike anything either of them had previously experienced. The girls and young women Goethe had been in love with before moving to Weimar, had been no match for his intellect. In Charlotte von Stein he found a kindred spirit, the likes of which he would not meet again. She immediately recognised his exceptional qualities, and he in turn her intelligence and distinguished demeanour. She had been thoroughly schooled in the conventions of courtly life, and over time was able to calm his youthful excesses. Much to the dismay of the citizens of Weimar, these excesses included boar hunting, sleepouts in the open, whip-cracking charges through the town centre on horseback, and generally carousing with the young duke's entourage – fairly normal behaviour for well-to-do young men at the time, but not considered



*Charlotte von Stein. After a self-portrait from 1790, engraved by G. Wolf.*



appropriate for the young Duke's personal tutor and role model. She became his muse, his source of inspiration, and was able to compensate for the loss he experienced when his sister Cornelia married in 1773, and moved out of his life.<sup>12</sup>

He dedicated many poems to her, or rather to "*Lida*", one of his favourite affectionate names for her. On 14 April 1776, only a few months after their first meeting, he wrote a poem addressed to their common destiny,<sup>13</sup> in which he expresses his belief that they had known each other in a previous life. "*Ach, you were in times lived through, my sister or my wife.*"<sup>14</sup> Goethe kept no copy and did not publish the poem himself.

In April that year he wrote to Wieland: "*I cannot explain the significance, the power, which this woman has over me, otherwise than by the transmigration of souls. Yes, we once were man and wife. Now we know about each other – concealed, in spirit haze – I have no name for us – the past – the future – the universe.*"<sup>15</sup>

Their relationship had an unusual beginning. Before they became personally acquainted, Goethe received a scissor-cut silhouette of an unknown woman. He was at the time working with the Swiss theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741 – 1801), exploring how a person's inner character might be revealed by their outward physiognomy. The work involved carefully cutting from black card profiled silhouettes, which they studied together, and attempted to interpret rationally, but often more or less as the mood inspired them.

Charlotte's physician, Johann Georg Zimmerman was a friend of Lavater's and collected silhouettes for him. It was through him that Goethe received from Lavater the profile of an as yet unknown woman, by which he was much impressed, as the comments he forwarded to Lavater in July 1775 show:

*'Firm, consistent,  
amenable,  
content in herself,  
affectionate,  
gentle and benign, imaginative, eloquent  
resilient, flexible*



Goethe with Silhouette, about 1778. Johann Ehrenfried Schumann (after Georg Melchior Kraus). Goethe Museum Frankfurt

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12 For more about Charlotte von Stein see <http://www.goethezeitportal.de/wissen/illustrationen/johann-wolfgang-von-goethe/frau-von-stein-und-kochberg.html>

13 'Why bestow on us the piercing vision?' (*Warum gabst Du uns die tiefen Blicke?*).

14 *Ach, Du warst in abgelebten zeiten, meine Schwester oder meine Frau.*

15 Letter to Wieland, Weimar, April 1776. <http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Briefe/1776>.

*benevolent.*<sup>16</sup>

Charlotte's husband had accompanied the young Duke to his wedding and had met Goethe when the entourage stopped over in Frankfurt. He later told his wife about Karl August's invitation, and as she was also in possession of a profile of Goethe (given to her by Zimmerman), she wrote an excited letter to Zimmerman about the prospect of meeting him.

They exchanged letters and notes ("*Billets*") on a daily basis, and saw each other more often than the strict protocols of the court might have tolerated had Goethe not been Goethe. Their friendship lasted until his abrupt departure for Italy in 1786. He had not taken her into his confidence about his Italian plans, and although he wrote a personal travel journal for her, she received no news for months, and felt betrayed – a betrayal Goethe failed to recognize. He returned from Italy in June 1788, and the rupture became final when he initiated a romance with Christiane Vulpius, a local 23-year-old woman, for whose family Goethe had arranged financial support in the past, and invited her to move in with him less than three months after his return.<sup>17</sup>

Charlotte's anger and grief over Goethe's betrayal was compounded by the death of her father in 1790, and of her husband after a long and difficult illness, in 1793. Fortunately, she was able to form a deep friendship with Charlotte von Lengefeld, Schiller's wife, and the comfort which Goethe was unable to offer during these difficult years was compensated by the wife of his best friend.

There is no doubt that his love for Charlotte, expressed in many of the 1650 letters he wrote to her, especially during the early stage of their relationship, helped him overcome his crude and unsophisticated impulses, calm his emotional turmoil, and strengthen his character. Much more than a role model (he often addressed her as 'Angel'), she was the embodiment of an Eternal Feminine gradually drawing him away from the excesses of a man caught in the excitement of youth. In short, she helped him come to his senses.<sup>18</sup>

Years later, when the pain between them had to some extent been healed, Goethe wrote a short poem, 'Between both Worlds' (*Zwischen beiden Welten*). Like many of Goethe's poems, it is difficult, if not impossible to translate. Yet even in the attempt, it casts a light into the deepest recesses of Goethe's soul.

*To belong to only one,*

*to honour only one;*

*How it unites both heart and sense!*

*Lida! Joy of sweetest closeness*

*William! star of beauty's most commanding heights,*

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16 Letter to Lavater, 24 July 1775. In the letter Goethe is comparing the profiles of Charlotte von Stein and Marchioness Maria Antonia Branconi (1746-1793), and it is not clear which comments he attributed to which profile. In 1779 Goethe met Branconi in Zurich, and was as impressed with her as he was with Charlotte von Stein.

17 <https://freie-referate.de/geschichte/christiane-vulpius-biographie-lebenslauf>.

18 Almost nothing is known about Charlotte's feelings for Goethe. After they split up, she asked for all her letters to be returned, and burned them some years later.

*To you I owe what now I am.  
Days and years have passed,  
yet rests on those brief hours  
the full worth and flowering of my being.*<sup>19</sup>

### **Goethe plans a Retreat**

In the autumn of 1777 Goethe was in need of a complete break from the formalities of courtly life. He had accompanied Karl August to Eisenach where court was held throughout September. A painful tooth abscess had forced him to withdraw from all but the most essential meetings to the half-ruined Wartburg castle above the town.<sup>20</sup> Even after the infection had healed, he received permission from the Duke to avoid the political discussions whenever he felt the need. It was the first time Goethe had been on his own since his arrival in Weimar two years earlier, and he wrote to Charlotte von Stein: “*Here I am dearest, on high and marvellously well, singing psalms to the Lord who has delivered me from pain and constraints.*”<sup>21</sup> And to his friend Kestner he wrote: “*I am living on Luther’s Patmos, and find myself as well as he. And moreover, I am the happiest of everyone I know.*”<sup>22</sup> He had found the experience so invigorating, that he began to plan another retreat for himself.

His sister Cornelia (1750-1777) had died in July, aged just 26. He had always had a strong bond with her, one which he had taken for granted during his youth, but he made no secret of the fact that he missed her after her marriage in 1773. She had always been frail, and had not been able to regain her strength after the birth of her second child. He had not written to her for more than a year, and, having been unable or unwilling<sup>23</sup> to attend her funeral, he also needed time out to come to terms with her untimely death.

With his recent appointment to the Duchy’s Mining Commission, he - the poet and lawyer - felt the need to gain at least a basic understanding of the practical and technical aspects of mining. He therefore planned his retreat so as to incorporate a thorough reconnaissance of the mines and associated ore smelting works in the Upper Harz area.

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<sup>19</sup> *Einer Einzigen angehören, / einen Einzigen verehren, / wie vereint es Herz und Sinn!  
/ Lida! Glück der nächsten Nähe, / William! Stern der schönsten Höhe, / Euch  
verdank' ich, was ich bin, / Tag' und Jahre sind verschwunden, / und doch ruht auf  
jenen Stunden / meines Wertes Vollgewinn.* [https://www.via-regia.org/bibliothek/pdf/heft3435/appel\\_weibliche.pdf](https://www.via-regia.org/bibliothek/pdf/heft3435/appel_weibliche.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Wolf Engelhardt (2003) *Goethe im Gespräch mit der Erde*, Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, p 27.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Charlotte von Stein, Wartburg, 13 September 1777. Quotes from Goethe’s diary and his letters to Charlotte von Stein are my translations from <http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Briefe/1777>

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Johann Christian Kestner, Wartburg, 28 September 1777.

<sup>23</sup> Throughout his life Goethe was unable to face the realities of death, and chose not to attend funerals.



There was a third reason. After the huge success of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* Goethe from time to time received anguished letters from young men who were suffering from the so called Werther illness. Goethe found these irritating, and his response to such letters remains unknown, with one exception.

Friedrich Plessing (1749-1806) had been deeply moved by reading *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, had subsequently fallen hopelessly in love while studying at Leipzig University, and had become depressed. He had withdrawn from the world, and lived with his parents in the village of Wernigerode, where his father was a senior minister in the Lutheran church. In 1776 he wrote two long letters to Goethe, hoping to find healing for his soul from the source which he believed had originally infected it. Goethe had not responded to Plessing, but was sufficiently intrigued by the letters that he thought he would absolve himself from his feelings of guilt by paying the young man a visit.

In addition, he admitted later, he was very interested in seeing for himself the physiognomy of a young man in this particular soul condition. He was still working with Johann Lavater, and he wondered whether, and how, the deep grief expressed in Plessing's letters might be revealed by his outward physiognomy.

Goethe's retreat plans included a visit to Friedrich Plessing in Wernigerode.

### **Harz Journey Part 1: Wernigerode**

Goethe set out alone on horseback on 29 November in the midst of a "*stinging hailstorm*". He had received leave of absence from the Duke, but neither he nor Charlotte von Stein knew about his plans, possibly not even he himself. He had prepared himself for the journey by purchasing several books on the mining industry and history of the Harz region, yet there was great uncertainty in his soul. He took leave of Charlotte von Stein in a brief note written the same day: ". . . and say Adieu to Stein. I am in dark confusion about my thoughts. Can you hear the storm? It will whistle about my ears as well."

He travelled incognito using the name Weber, describing himself as an artist who had studied law. Understandably, because of his fame, Goethe preferred to travel unrecognized, in order to, as he explained it, "*chose the less costly garment, to use in conversation with strangers the more common expression, to act more carelessly than I am, in order that I might, if I may say so, place myself between myself and my appearance.*"<sup>24</sup> Conscious of his inner self and his outer appearance, Goethe was able (at times) to bridge the gap, yet keep apart, subjective experience and objective reality.

An outline of the journey is written in the journal he kept. He also wrote a long poem describing one particular aspect of the expedition (*Winter Journey in the Harz Mountains*). Charlotte von Stein was always in his thoughts, and he wrote to her every day, describing not only his experiences, but also his state of mind and innermost feelings. His letters make it clear that the "*extra-ordinary circumstances!*" (*allerbesondersten Umstände*) of his journey were symbolic, a metaphor for an inner journey.

He was often in the saddle at sunrise, noting the glorious colours of the dawn skies. It rained a great deal, and he complained about the cold and wet. With

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24 In a letter to Schiller, Weimar, 9 July 1796.

daylight lasting no more than eight hours during this time of year, he would usually arrive at his destination well after dark, guided by a courier with a lantern. On 2 December he wrote to Charlotte von Stein: *“If only you could see my delight; I’m like a child! Nothing is more adventurous than what is natural, and nothing is as grand as what is natural. Today, I sat on a crag – you should see it – where neither gods nor people were looking for me. I’m again sketching the whole day, but will bring nothing back, as usual. . . . It’s wonderful to sit on a horse with a valise, cruising about as if on a ship.”*

After three days he reached Elbingerode, and spent the whole of the next day in the nearby Baumann Caves. These well-known limestone caves were already a tourist attraction in Goethe’s time:

*“After a good night’s sleep, I rose early and, accompanied by a courier, was guided to the Baumann caves. I crawled through on hands and knees, and carefully observed the natural phenomena. Black marble masses, dissolved, and reconstituted as white crystalline pillars and surfaces, signified to me the ongoing life of Nature. And from my peaceful gaze there vanished all the fantastic images which are so easily created by a gloomy fancy for formless shapes.”<sup>25</sup>*

Goethe clears from his mind’s eye all such fantastic projections. He focuses on the geologically slow process of continually dissolving and precipitating limestone, and is thereby able to experience himself more clearly.

*“And so I experienced my own truth all the more clearly, and felt considerably enriched.”*

That evening he reached Wernigerode. He now needed an excuse to visit Plessing. The next day, having dined at the local inn, he enquired whether there were any young men in the village with whom he might spend an afternoon in conversation beside a warm fire. He was advised by the innkeeper to visit Plessing, who would surely appreciate a visitor, as he was not well, and had scarcely been seen since returning home to his parents from Leipzig.

Goethe found his way to the Plessing home, introduced himself as an artist from Gotha, and was ushered into the living room. Gotha is not far from Weimar, and Plessing impatiently asked Goethe whether he knew anyone in Weimar, especially Goethe, to whom he had written two letters but had not had a reply. Goethe, apparently enjoying the subterfuge, talked about everyone he knew, except himself. After supper and several glasses of wine, Goethe did tell Plessing about Goethe, which he *“found easy”*, only slightly concerned that had Plessing had a bit more common sense, he would surely have been able to work out who was sitting in front of him. Goethe was then subjected to a solemn reading by Plessing of the first letter, in the course of which he found his physiognomic studies confirmed, in that *“the reader exactly fitted the reading”*.<sup>26</sup>

In an effort to help the young man out of his despondent ruminations, Goethe suggested a visit to the Baumann cave, but Plessing rejected the idea. He had been there already, and regretted the walk to the cave, which had not come up to

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25 Goethe dictated his reminiscences concerning Plessing in ‘Campaign in France, 1792’ between 1819 and 1822. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/17664/pg17664.html>.

26 *“Der Lesende passte völlig zu dem Gelesenen.”*

his expectations. According to Goethe's journal they did however go for a walk later that afternoon.

Goethe was not surprised. He had often experienced that people rejected the *"value of a clear reality against the murky fantasy of their gloomy imaginations."* Nor was he surprised when Plessing described the cave in terms which *"even the most daring stage set designer would have hesitated to use when designing the entrance to Pluto's realm"*.

They arranged to meet again the following day to read the second letter. But Goethe made sure to depart early, leaving a note apologizing for his hasty departure with the innkeeper to pass on to Plessing.<sup>27</sup>

The following day he rode out in *"dreadful weather"*. Hail, sleet, rain and storm. Everything was soaked and he barely felt rested after a good dinner and a 3 hour break. But he was pleased to tell Charlotte von Stein that he had succeeded in his *"adventure"*, just as he had imagined. She would be amused to hear it, but only she would be allowed to know about it; not even the Duke should be told: *"It is an insignificant tale, nothing, yet a great deal – only the gods know what they want, and what they want with us; their will be done. . . . I do not yet know how this odyssey will end. I have become so accustomed to being led on by destiny, that I sense no haste within me."*

The next day he revealed to Charlotte his alias. *"It is a strange feeling, wandering about in the world unrecognized, it feels as if my relationship with people and things is far more honest and open. I am called Weber, I am an artist who has studied law, or any kind of traveler. I behave very politely to everyone, and I am well received everywhere. I have not had any dealings at all with women. A pure peace and security surrounds me, and so far everything has worked out to my good fortune. The sky is clearing, there will be a strong frost tonight."*<sup>28</sup> He had tried sketching but achieved nothing, an *"incomprehensible"* situation. It was first quarter, but he wished for a full moon.

*"Lovely moonlight"* he wrote to Charlotte later that evening, *"everything covered in snow. You've probably realised that I'm in the higher hills, where the weather can change in a matter of hours."* He felt positive about his odyssey so far *" . . . except that I'm not coping with the loneliness. I used to do this better; I've spoiled myself with you; there are times when I wish I was at home."*

Next morning before sunrise: *"It's raining hard, and no one is travelling except those driven by need and urgent business; I'm driven on by strange thoughts. Adieu. Greet Stein for me."*

## Harz Journey Part 2: The Brocken

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27 Plessing later discovered the identity of his visitor. He visited Goethe in Weimar in 1778. They occasionally exchanged letters, in one of which (26 July 1782) Goethe apologises for his behaviour five years earlier, explaining that at the time he had been unable to do otherwise. Plessing went to Königsberg, studied under Kant, and followed a successful career as a philosophy professor in Duisberg, where Goethe visited him in 1792 on his return from the French Campaign.  
<https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/sfz96347.html>

28 Letter to Charlotte von Stein, Goslar, 6 December 1777.

The Brocken is the highest peak of the Harz mountain range, and at 1140 metres, the highest peak of Northern Germany, forming the watershed between the river Weser in the West, and the Elbe in the East.

During the days following his meeting with Plessing, Goethe visits the various mines and ore smelting works he had planned on his itinerary, as well as reservoirs holding the water needed to drive the underground machinery. On 7 December he remembers Cornelia's birthday. The following day a large rock dislodges from the roof of the tunnel he was walking through, landing just one step in front of him. He considers it a "*compliment from destiny*" that he was not injured.

On 9 December, the evening before his ascent, he writes Charlotte a long letter, more personal than any heretofore.

He is enjoying mingling unrecognised with the local people. He comments on the pleasure it gives him to observe ordinary folk playing their everyday roles. It provides a healthy correction to his tendency to fantasize. "*To mix with people who have simple, but definite, enduring and important trades. It's like a cold bath, which pulls one together after a bourgeois licentious fatigue.*"



View from the Brocken in winter

He senses a deep restlessness in himself which reminds him of the person he was in his youth, when no one could understand what was going on in his soul. He realises that during this time he lived under false pretensions – "*I can't express it now, I would have to go into detail – then I was unhappy, under pressure, felt gnawed at, mangled, or however you might choose to express it.*"

Now he's enjoying the kindness of the rural folk he's meeting; their indifference, their austerity and roughness. He concludes: "*the pretension to beat all pretensions is not to have one.*"

*"Dear Gold,<sup>29</sup> I have not found any rest, and tomorrow I will roam in unusual places, if I can find a guide through the snow."*

His surroundings are very beautiful. "*Mist is descending into light banks of snow clouds; the sun shining through, and the snow covering everything, restore again my feelings of happiness.*"

He had thought a lot about the Duke that day, and wishes him the opportunity to share in his own adventure, but realises that Karl August does not yet have the sensitivity for this, because "*he still enjoys too much changing what is natural*

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29 Another of Goethe's affectionate names for Charlotte was *Gold*.



*into an adventure, instead of realising that it only does one good when the adventurous becomes natural.*

He looks back to his illness 10 years previously, and remembers that during the crisis his mother, *in the depths of her anguish, had opened her Bible and found the words: 'Vineyards will once again be planted on the hills of Samaria, and the planting will be done to the playing of flutes.'* At that moment she found comfort, *in the words, and subsequently much happiness.*<sup>30</sup> After more brooding thoughts he ends:

*"You can see the kind of thoughts going through my head.  
May your love stay with me, and the love of the gods."*

On the morning of 10 December he arrives early at the forester's hut at the foot of the Brocken. Thick snow lies all about, and the mountain is shrouded in mist. Goethe attempts to persuade the forester to guide him to the summit – at the time an undertaking unheard of in winter. The forester protests, and Goethe's heart sinks, but the mist suddenly clears, and the forester agrees to guide him up.

That evening he writes to Charlotte:

*"What can I possibly write of the Lord with quills, what song shall I sing about him? At this moment when all my prose becomes poetry, and all my poetry becomes prose. It's not possible to tell with my lips what I experienced today; how shall I bring it forth with this pointy thing?"*

*"Dear woman; God is treating me as he did his saints of old, and I have no idea why. If I ask for a sign that the fleece be dry and the threshing floor wet, then it is so; and the other way around."<sup>31</sup> And more than anything, the maternal guidance to my desires beyond all expectation. The goal of my longing has been reached; it hangs from many treads, and many threads hang from it. You know how symbolic my existence is - - And the humility which the gods glorify in jest; and the reverence I have from moment to moment; and the most complete fulfilment of my hopes.*

*"I shall reveal to you (don't tell anyone) that the purpose of my journey on the Harz was that I wished to climb the Brocken; and now my dearest, I was up there today,*



Goethe's sketch of the snowclad Brocken. Source: <http://www.goethezeitportal.de/wissen/topographische-ansichten/orte-kultureller-erinnerung-brocken-harz-folge-ii-goethes-brockenbesteigungen.html>

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30 Goethe remembered the verses from Jeremiah 31:4,5: 'I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again, you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Again, you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit.'

31 Goethe is here referring to the biblical story of Gideon's fleece, told in Judges 6; 36-40.



*just like that, even though for the past eight days people had been telling me that it would be impossible. But the how, and above all the why, must wait until I see you again, as I would rather not write it down now.*

*“I said, I had a wish for the full moon – now dearest, I step outside the door, and there lies the Brocken in marvellous moonlight over the spruce trees in front of me, and I was there today, and offered on the devil’s altar dearest thanks to my god.”*

Now for the first time he tells her of his whereabouts: *“I am at the so called Torfhaus, a forester’s hut two hours from the Brocken.”*

The following evening he wrote: *“I returned from the Torfhaus early this morning over the Altenau, and told you lots of things on the way. Oh, I’m a talkative person when I am alone.”*

He then describes how he tried to persuade the forester to guide him to the summit. When it seemed at first that he would be unable to do so, he felt like the king (Joash) whom the prophet (Elisha) had told to strike the ground; but he did so with insufficient vigour, and therefore lost the battle.<sup>32</sup> Goethe was still, and prayed to the gods to bring about a change in the forester’s heart, and in the weather. And his prayer was answered.

He carved a sign in the window frame as a witness to his tears of joy, which he would have considered a misdeed to write, except to her. He couldn’t believe his luck until he arrived on the summit. *“The mist lay below, and the heavens were gloriously clear; and last night it was visible in the moonlight, and also dimly in the dawn light as I prepared to leave.*

*Adieu dearest. Greet Stein and the Waldners, but tell no one where I am.”*

In his diary he wrote: *“Early to the Torfhaus. Set out at quarter past ten. Quarter past one on the summit. Glorious, beautiful day. All around me the world wrapped in clouds and mist, up here everything peaceful. What is man that you are mindful of him.”*<sup>33</sup>

*Back again at four. Overnight with the forester at the Torfhaus. Left early at 7 over*



A view Goethe might have seen as he descended the Brocken.  
Source: <https://www.booking.com/hotel/de/waldschlapachenschierke.html>

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32 Kings II 13; 15-19.

33 ‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which you have ordained.  
What is man that you are mindful of him,  
And the son of man that you visit him?  
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,  
And You have crowned him with glory and honour.  
You have made him to have dominion over the works of your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet.’ Psalm 8; 3-6:

*the Altenau. Half eleven in Claustal again.”*

On his return journey he visits another important silver mine, a smelting works, and several reservoirs. Three days later he took the mail coach to Eisenach where he joined the Duke and his hunting party on 15 December. That evening his friend Knebel, who had joined the party with his tutee Prince Constantine, noted in his diary: ‘Goethe arrived. Good. He’s been in the Harz. His heart is wonderfully at ease, brought about by solitude.’<sup>34</sup>

### ***Winter Journey in the Harz Mountains***

Goethe started and completed the poem during his journey. On his second day of travel he spotted a hawk, circling high overhead in search of prey. As he himself was searching for his next move in life, he might well have considered this an omen. He later recalls that he conceived the first stanza of the poem immediately after his experiences in the Baumann cave, and composed the rest during the following days, as he reflected on his visit to Plessing, the guidance he had received on his journey, and his decisive experience on the Brocken. By the time he joined the Duke and his boar-hunting party at Eisenach two weeks later, the poem was complete. The whole poem is an allegory describing the contrast he experienced between the malaise of the unfortunate Plessing, and his own good fortune. Taken together with the intimate details described in his letters to Charlotte von Stein, it offers what I believe to be the key to his decision to remain in Weimar, at least for the foreseeable future.

Goethe’s thoughts as expressed in the poem are easy to follow, but some of the images used might need an explanation. The sparrows in stanza three are a reference to a commonly held belief, that unlike migratory birds, small birds survive the winter by hibernating under tree roots, holes in the ground, or even under water in swamps. But Plessing is denied any shelter for his soul. The brothers that hunt in stanza eight refer to the Duke and his companions, protecting the peasants against the destruction wrought by wild boar, and for whom the only weapons allowed were wooden clubs. The reference to the poet’s moistened hair must remain a mystery (was it a result of the almost nonstop rain?).

The awe-struck nations and ancestral spirits are a reference to the pre-Christian rites Goethe had read about in the local history book he had purchased before his



Portrait of an introspective Goethe showing him not in his usual confident Olympian pose, but as a mortal with questions, one not quite at ease with his situation.

Painted by G. Dawe in 1819.  
Goethe Museum, Weimar

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34 Quoted in Engelhardt, op. cit., p47

departure. The granitic “*devil’s altar*” mentioned in his letter to Charlotte was believed at the time to have been carved by primitive human hand.

The whole penultimate stanza is a prayer that the poet’s experiences on his Harz journey, reflecting his good fortune throughout his life, may somehow turn around Plessing’s misfortunes. Goethe ends by addressing the mountain directly, silent, withdrawn, yet nourishing the beauty of the world with the ore veins (or springs?) of the brothers beside him.

Goethe made minor changes before he first published the poem in 1789. I have based my translation on the original version.<sup>35</sup>

*As the hawk aloft  
On lowering daybreak cloud  
On gentle pinions gliding  
Searches for prey,  
May my song hover.*

*For a god has  
Predetermined  
For each his course;  
Which the fortunate man  
Runs fast and joyfully  
To his journey’s end.  
But he whose heart  
Misfortune has constricted,  
Struggles in vain  
To break from the bonds  
Of the brazen thread,  
Which the bitter shears  
Cuts only once.*

*Into wintry thickets  
The coarse beasts crowd,  
And with the sparrows  
The rich have long since  
Sunk themselves into their swamps.*

*Easy it is to follow the carriage  
Which Fortune guides,  
Like the leisured entourage  
On better roads  
Behind the Prince’s retinue.*

*But who is it walks apart?  
His path is lost in the undergrowth,  
Behind him the shrubs  
Close, and he’s gone,  
Engulfed by desolation.*

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35 In Engelhardt, op. cit. p 34. Other translations may be found in *Selected Poems*, edited and translated by Christopher Middleton (1983) Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers, Boston, pp 66-71, and in John Whaley (1998) *Goethe Selected Poems*, J. M. Dent, London, pp 38-43.

*The flattened grass rights itself.*

*Oh, who shall heal the pain  
In whom balsam became poison,  
Who drank loathing  
From the fullness of love?  
First despised, now a despiser,  
Furtively devouring  
His own worth  
In meagre self-indulgence.*

*If in your book of psalms,  
Father of Love, there sounds  
One note his ear can hear,  
Revive with it his heart!  
Reveal to his beclouded gaze  
The thousand fountainheads  
About him, as he thirsts  
In the desert.*

*You, who gives joys that are many,  
To each his overflowing measure:  
Bless the brothers that hunt  
On the tracks of the boar,  
With the youthful excess  
Of a cheerfully murderous obsession;  
Belated avengers of wrongs,  
For years resisted and held off  
In vain, by peasants with cudgels.*

*But wrap the solitary man  
In your clouds of gold!  
Until the rose blooms again,  
Surround with winter green  
The moistened hair,  
Oh Love, of your poet!*

*With your gleaming firebrand  
Lighten his way  
Through fords by night,  
Along perilous trails,  
Across barren fields;  
Laugh into his heart  
With the thousand coloured daybreak;  
Carry him high above  
The biting gale.  
May winter streams plunge from the crags  
Into his psalms,  
And may the fearful summit  
Become his altar of most loving thanks -  
Snow covered crest  
Which awe struck nations  
Wreathed with ancestral spirits.*

*You stand with unexplored entrails,  
An open secret,<sup>36</sup>  
Over the astonished world;  
And gaze from clouds  
Upon her kingdoms and her glory,<sup>37</sup>  
Which you water from the veins  
Of your brothers beside you.*

### **Postscript**

Goethe's knowledge of the Brocken and surrounding hills found literary expression in the Walpurgisnacht scene in *Faust I*, but the inspiration he received on 10 December manifested most clearly in his scientific work.

The atmospheric colours Goethe experienced during sunrise and sunset (when it wasn't raining) contributed not insignificantly to his overall Harz experience. The sun was setting as Goethe walked down from the Brocken, and he was fascinated by the phenomenon of coloured shadows ("*one imagined oneself in a magic fairy world*"). He writes about the experience in paragraph 75 in Book 1 (Didactic Section) of his *Theory of Colours* published in 1810.

The inner certainty Goethe felt on the summit is beautifully described in his best known geologic treatise, *Granite II*, written in 1785. He made two more trips to the Harz region, both undertaken in a completely different spirit – field trips intended to explore the geology of the region. Although there are large granite boulders strewn about on the Brocken, these by no means explain the vision described in *Granite II*, and his conviction that granite was the primal rock (*Urgestein*) from which all other rocks are derived. But that is another story.

Maarten Ekama Spring 2021

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36 *An open secret*, one of several possible translations of "*Geheimnißvoll offenbar*". This is the first time Goethe uses the phrase, to describe a concept he considered essential to his later scientific work. He used the phrase to express that although certain natural phenomena present themselves as mysterious or secretive (*geheimnisvoll*), they only do so to reveal (*offenbaren*) hidden relationships.

37 Matthew 4:8: 'Again, the devil takes him up into an exceeding high mountain, and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them.'