

## GOETHE AND OLDER GERMAN LITERATURE

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IN March, 1832, only a few days before Goethe's death, Eckermann records the following statement: "As a human being and as a citizen the poet will love his fatherland; but the fatherland of his poetic powers and of his poetic activity is the good, the noble, the beautiful, which is bound to no particular province and to no particular country and which he grasps and forms wherever he finds it. In this respect he is like the eagle that hovers with far-seeing eye above all lands."

While these words of the poet may be regarded as expressive in a general way of his views on nationalism and patriotism, they are particularly applicable to his attitude on older German literature. In a period when his contemporaries were prostrating themselves in indiscriminating worship before the shrine of ancestral literature, Goethe remained coolly aloof from the popular cult. German or Italian, French or English, he regarded with unclouded judgment and chose with calm deliberation that which suited his immediate literary needs. Neither Oberlin nor Herder of the Strasburg period, neither von der Hagen nor Büsching of the heyday of romanticism was able to instill into the poet that unbounded enthusiasm for Germanic antiquity which inspired each of them. And yet the charge of utter indifference toward the writings of his ancestors cannot be brought against Goethe. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that he was at all times fully aware of contemporary research in the older field and that he gave these efforts his sympathetic support. In reply to a letter from Freiherr von Stein in which the latter asked him to become a member of the society which was to publish the *Monumenta Germaniae* he wrote: "Waren meine dichterischen und sonstigen Arbeiten zwar immer dem nächsten und gegenwärtigsten Leben gewidmet, so hätten sie doch nicht gedeihen können ohne ernsten Hinblick auf die Vorzeit." But when this same correspondent urged the necessity of systematic study of older literature Goethe replied: "Der Straszen und Fluszpfade sind unzählige und jeder geht seine eigenen." The two comments, regarded together, clearly show his view: the study of older German literature is not to be pursued for its own sake and there

is no merit inherent in the study as such. Its sole merit lies in the personal contact of the individual with it, in his ability to choose what is admirable and to make it his own. Or, much more aptly expressed in the poet's own words: "Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, erwirb es um es zu besitzen."

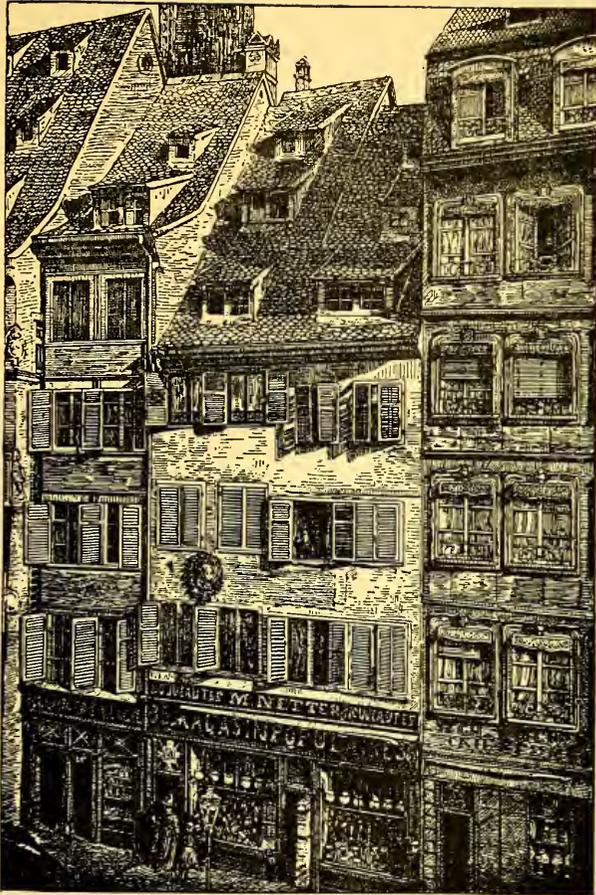
Goethe's earliest acquaintance with older German literature undoubtedly came in his childhood through the medium of the *Volksbuch*. His comments in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* upon "diese schätzbaren Überreste der Mittelzeit" give evidence of the impression which they made upon the mind of the child. With kindly humor he speaks of the "factory" in Frankfurt in which these books were issued: "eine Menge Schriften, die zwar in ihrer gegenwärtigen Gestalt nicht vortrefflich genannt werden können, deren Inhalt jedoch uns manches Verdienst voriger Zeiten in einer unschuldigen Weise näher bringt." In the same passage he mentions by name *Eulenspiegel*, *Die vier Haimonskinder*, *Die schöne Melusine*, *Kaiser Oktavian*, *Die schöne Magelone*, *Fortunatus*, and *Den ewigen Juden*. Strangely enough *Doktor Faust* is not named here. In "Noten und Abhandlungen" (Jubiläums-Ausgabe 5, 270) he minutely describes *Die Reisen des Johannes von Mantevilla* and in *Werther* the Magnetic Mountain from *Herzog Ernst* is mentioned. Other Volksbücher which are mentioned elsewhere in Goethe's works are *Das Volksbuch von Wagner*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Reisen der Söhne Giffers*. His comments on them are so vague, however, and in part so inaccurate that it is doubtful whether his acquaintance with them was more intimate than merely by name.

*Die vier Haimonskinder* played a particularly important rôle in Goethe's youth. He introduced it as ritual to the "Rittertafel" of which he became a member in the Gasthof zum Kronprinzen in Wetzlar. Passages from this book were read as ceremonial in this strange fraternity which Goethe regarded as "fabelhaftes Fratzenspiel" but which other members took seriously as a sort of masonic lodge. In his own home names from this *Volksbuch* were affectionately applied to members of his family. As late as 1775 at the occasion of the visit of the Counts von Stolberg in Frankfurt, his mother is called Frau Aja after the mother of the Haimonskinder.

For fifty years before Goethe's time Straszburg had been one of the centers of Germanistic studies. Here Johannes Schilter and Johann Georg Scherz had pursued their work and had sown seeds

that were bearing fruit when the young Goethe arrived at the university. At the time J. J. Oberlin was at the peak of his fame and was engaged in editing for publication the monumental work of his predecessor Scherz, the *Glossarium Germanicum mediæ ævi*. Goethe himself tells us of the efforts of Oberlin and his colleague Koch to interest the young student in older German literature. But they were unsuccessful; at the time Goethe was so engrossed in his Shakesperian studies that he took no interest in their work. And yet, characteristic of the thoroughly practical manner in which Goethe always found and took what he needed, he was at this very time engaged in the study of Hans Sachs and of the source material for *Faust* and *Götz*. Before he went to Straszburg he had already become familiar with the *Lebensbeschreibung Herrn Götzens von Berlichingen zubenannt mit der eisernen Hand*, either in the edition by Franck von Steigerwald (Nürnberg 1731) or by Friedrich von Pistorius (Nürnberg 1737). At Straszburg his juristic studies, particularly in Pütter's *Deutsche Reichshistorie* and Möser's treatise *Über das Faustrecht* lent a new fascination to the *Götz* biography. It is quite evident, however, that even in this formative period of his literary life his interest and sympathy lay with *Götz* as an individual and not with the time in which he lived, a time which he later described as "einen Wust von Rittertum and Pfäfferei; aristokratische Anarchie, von Teufels-und Hexenwahn, von finstern Aberglauben erfüllt; in furchtbaren und grausamen Gottesurteilen schwelgend." While it is true that this conviction grew in him with age, there is no reason to believe that even the young writer of *Götz* cherished a great degree of admiration for the Middle Ages.

It was a very real affinity of character which drew the young Goethe to Hans Sachs and caused him to remain true to his affection for the old Meistersinger throughout his entire life. In Hans Sachs he found the ideal of "bürgerliche Dichtkunst" which he himself constantly strove to perpetuate. He explains in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: "Hans Sachs, der wirklich meisterliche Dichter lag uns am nächsten. Ein wahres Talent, freilich nicht wie jene Ritter und Hofmänner, sondern ein schlichter Bürger, wie wir uns auch zu sein rühmten. Ein didaktischer Realismus sagte uns zu, und wir benutzten den leichten Rhythmus, den sich willig anbietenden Reim, bei manchen Gelegenheiten." Goethe drew freely upon Hans Sachs' wealth of material, upon the picturesqueness of his



GOETHE'S RESIDENCE IN STRASZBURG

language, upon his easy command of rhyme and rhythm. *Pater Brey*, *Das Jahrmarktsfest zu Plundersweilen*, *Satyros*, the rhymed couplets in *Urfaust*, the character of Martha in *Faust I*, the Kaiserpfalz in *Faust II*, the entire concept of Ahasver in *Der Ewige Jude*, the Knittelvers, wherever it appears,—all these bear evidence of the influence of Hans Sachs upon Goethe. The poet's admiration of the old master is best summarized in the closing lines of *Hans Sachsens poetische Sendung*:

Den Eichkranz, ewig jung belaubt,  
Den setzt die Nachwelt ihm aufs Haupt,  
In Froschpfluß all das Volk verbannt,  
Das seinen Meister je verkannt.

It was Goethe who converted Wieland to an understanding of Hans Sachs and an appreciation of the popular humorous literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was he who induced Wieland to print Hans Sachs' *St. Peter mit der Geisz* in the *Teutscher Merkur* in 1776 and urged him to publish portraits and biographical sketches of the Meistersinger, of Sebastian Brant, Geiler von Kaisersberg, and others of their contemporaries. In fact the restoration of Hans Sachs to deserved public favor is due for the most part to Goethe's work. It is true, of course, that Salomon Ranisch, Abraham Gotthelf Kästner, and others had repeatedly called attention to Hans Sachs and his works between 1765 and 1770, but it required Goethe's energy and influence to accomplish his rehabilitation.

Goethe's acquaintance with Geiler von Kaisersberg dates back to Frankfurt and it is likely that through his sermons on the *Narrenschiff* he was led to Sebastian Brant. In Book VI of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* Goethe speaks appreciatively of Geiler and praises particularly his "kernige und volksmäszige Sprache." He admits his indebtedness to the great Straszburg preacher whose terse and trenchant style, he says, had a beneficial influence upon his own. Evidently, however, Goethe's admiration of Geiler did not extend beyond his language. In the discussion of Georg Daniel Arnold's play *Pfingstmontag* (1816) Goethe writes in *Kunst und Altertum*: "Sebastian Brant und Geiler von Kaisersberg sind ihren Ruhm und Ruf doch nur einer heftigen, alles miszbilligenden, beschränkten Denkart und einer schonungslosen Darstellungsweise schuldig. Jene hochgelehrten Doktoren lästern die mitlebende Welt. Einem

jeden armen Menschen wird seine Individualität, aus der er nicht herauskam, sein beschränkter Zustand aufgemutzt, seine Liebhaberei, die ihn einzig glücklich macht, verleidet und verkümmert." It is only natural that the tolerant and broadminded Goethe should find that he has very little in common with these martinets whose chief purpose in life was to supervise the lives of others.

By the same token, the tolerance and broadmindedness of Martin Luther commanded Goethe's respect. As early as 1773 he wrote: "Luther arbeitete, uns von der geistlichen Knechtschaft zu befreien." And as late as the eleventh of March 1832 he said to Eckermann: "Wir wissen garnicht, was wir Luthern und der Reformation im allgemeinen alles zu danken haben. Wir sind frei geworden von den Fesseln geistiger Borniertheit, wir sind infolge unserer wachsenden Kultur fähig geworden, zur Quelle zurückzukehren." The references to Luther in Goethe's works are far too numerous to recount. Without exception they are of the same tenor: admiration and appreciation of the man who had the courage and the inspiration to break the shackles of tradition and to reestablish the right of independent thought and of free speech. Beyond that there is not the slightest spiritual affinity between the two. Goethe, in his joyous, almost pagan self-sufficiency has no understanding for the deeper religious significance of the great reformer. On this point Goethe expressed himself to Riemer in 1817 (*Mitteilungen über Goethe*) in words that are almost humorous in their lack of understanding: "Unter uns gesagt ist an der ganzen Sache nichts interessant als Luthers Charakter und auch das Einzige, was der Menge imponiert. Alles übrige ist ein verworrener Handel, wie er uns noch täglich zur Last fällt."

In the early Weimar period, both before and after the Italian journey, there is little evidence that Goethe took any interest in older German literature. The one product of this period whose ultimate source lies there is *Reincke Fuchs*. Goethe had long been familiar with Gottsched's prose translation (1752) of the Low German *Reinke de Vos*. His earliest mention of it is in 1765 in a letter to his sister Cornelia. In the following years there are repeated references, both direct and indirect to *Reinke*. There can be little doubt, for example, that the imagery in "Lilis Park" was suggested by the poem. In 1782 he read Gottsched's translation to Herzogin Anna Amalia. In the following year his interest was further

aroused by Everdingen's cycle of etchings illustrating the animal epic. The actual work on the poem was not begun until 1793 and it finally appeared in 1794. On account of several passages in Goethe's poem which are not present in Gottsched's translation but which have parallels in other Low German animal epics, it was long believed that Goethe had made a thorough study of the sources of these poems. It has been shown, however (M. Lange, *Progr.* Dresden-Neustadt, 1888) that the disputed passages can be traced to supplemental fragments published by Gottsched in 1757. To this might be added that *Die Historie von Reynaert de Vos, nach der Delfter Ausgabe von 1485*, by L. Suhl (Lübeck 1783), seems to be a much more immediate and likely source. The evolutionary process of Goethe's epic serves to illustrate the manner in which the poet assimilated his material over a period of years and made it entirely his own before utilizing it.

Soon after the year 1800 the movement for the popularization of older German literature took on quite unprecedented proportions. It is true, of course, that in the course of the eighteenth century a vast amount of older literature had been made accessible either by publication of the original or by modernized adaptations. Prior to 1750 practically the entire corpus of Old High German literature had already been printed while only a few scattered Middle High German monuments were published. It remained for Bodmer and Breitinger to point the way by their publication in 1748 of *Proben der alten schwäbischen Poesie des dreyzehnten Jahrhunderts. Aus der Manessischen Sammlung*. This small volume marks the beginning of popular interest in Middle High German poetry. In 1754 Professor B. C. B. Wiedeburg published excerpts from the Jenaer Liederhandschrift and in 1758-59, with the financial aid of the city of Zürich, Bodmer and Breitinger published practically the entire Paris Liederhandschrift under the title *Sammlung von Minnesingern aus dem schwäbischen Zeitpunkte*.

There can be no doubt that the gradual growth in popularity of the Middle High German lyric had a salutary effect upon contemporary literature. The Anacreontic mode which flourished in the sixties quickly lost ground and was replaced by poetry which began to approach the good taste and correctness of the older lyric. Hagedorn, Bürger, Gleim, and others began to write poems in frank imitation and even acknowledged their lack of originality in

the titles of their collections, as Gleim, *Gedichte nach den Minnesingern* (1773), and *Gedichte nach Walther von der Vogelweide* (1779). Goethe was not only aware of this movement but even wrote favorable reviews of a collection of Bürger's *Minnelieder* and of two volumes of *Bardendichtungen*. Beyond that he showed no interest at the time in Middle High German poetry.

In 1757 Bodmer published the second part of the *Nibelungenlied* under the title *Chriemhilden Rache und die Klage*. Aside from a rather cool review by Friedrich Nicolai in *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* II (1758), the literary world took no notice of the publication. Twenty-five years later Christoph Heinrich Müller, with the assistance of the aged Bodmer, published his huge *Sammlung deutscher Gedichte aus dem XII., XIII., und XIV. Jahrhundert* (Berlin 1784-1785). Ironically enough, in spite of Goethe's lack of interest, and in spite of the mutual antipathy between him and Bodmer, it was Goethe who helped to make Müller's edition possible by securing, at Bodmer's request, the manuscript of Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneit* from the library at Gotha.

Up to the end of the eighteenth century an individual's attitude toward older German literature had been largely a question of personal taste. After the beginning of the new century national and racial antiquity became a fetish to the romanticists. Poet and scholar alike worshipped at its shrine. The Schlegels, Tieck, Josef Görres, Clemens Brentano, von der Hagen, Docen, Arnim, Meusebach, Büsching, Heinrich von Kleist, Fouqué—to name all those who either in scholarly or in popular fashion concerned themselves with the literature of the Middle Ages would mean to name almost all German writers of the time. To exclude oneself from the general frenzy meant literary ruin for anyone less than a Titan.

Goethe had always resented mass movements in literature. When his *Götz* precipitated a flood of "Ritterdramen" from the Storm and Stress writers he quietly withdrew from the scene. When the contagion of "Wertherfieber" swept Germany he calmly disengaged himself from the movement which he himself had caused with nothing more than an indulgent smile for his imitators. And now, when the romanticists about him delved into the treasures of Germanic antiquity with all the fervor of their enthusiasm, the movement left Goethe cold, served, if anything, to increase his indifference toward older German literature. In his letters, reviews, and other recorded lucubrations of these years we find a crystallization

of his earlier views, now expressed with a clarity that permits us to understand his negative attitude. He speaks of the Middle Ages as "eine Zeit unseren Empfindungen ganz entfremdet und für uns ohne lebendige Bedeutung;—was sind ihre Werte auch anders denn die der Kuriosität?" In this respect he holds the standpoint of eighteenth-century Rationalism: a belief that national culture had made such enormous progress that the Middle Ages had nothing to give; and further, that human nature had undergone such radical changes that the individual of the eighteenth century could have nothing whatever in common with his remote ancestors. Again and again Goethe utters this same opinion, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the *Annalen* in his comments on von der Hagen's *Heldenbuch*: "Es gab nicht den angenehmen Eindruck, den wir bei Annäherung von Stammverwandten immer empfinden, hier hatte sich eine alles verwandelnde Zeit dazwischen gelegt."

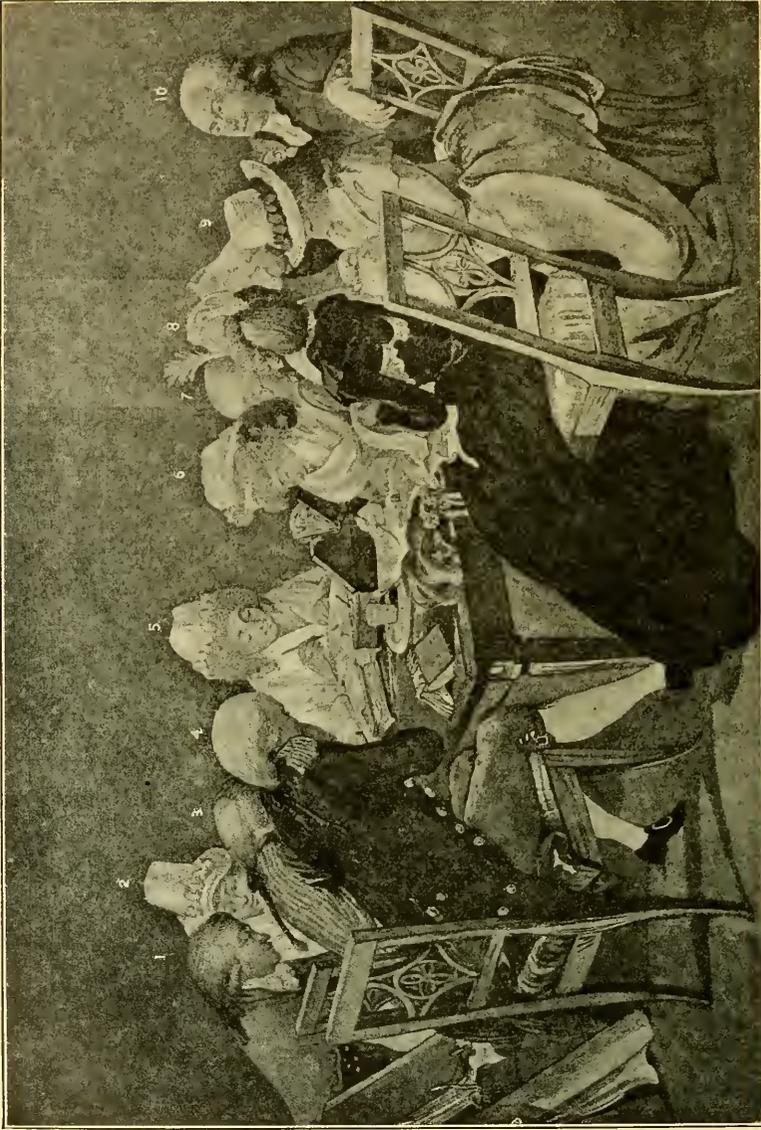
But again it must be admitted that Goethe was well informed regarding the activities in older literature and that he judged fairly. In 1806 he made a thorough study of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and reviewed it in a most favorable manner in the *Jenaische Literaturzeitung*. According to Arnim's and Brentano's own admission in 1810, Goethe's review of the first volume of their collection was of immeasurable aid in the planning of the second and third volumes.

In the same year, 1806, Goethe's attention was drawn to the *Nibelungenlied*. Of all Middle High German monuments this one seems to have made the deepest impression upon him and seems to have occupied his thoughts frequently. In the *Annalen* of 1807 he wrote: "Ich kannte längst das Dasein dieses Gedichtes aus Bodmers Bemühungen. Christoph Heinrich Müller sendete mir seine Ausgabe leider ungeheftet, das köstliche Werk blieb bei mir liegen, und ich, in anderem Geschäft, Neigung und Sorge befangen, blieb so stumpf dagegen wie die übrige deutsche Welt." This is Goethe's first mention of the great Middle High German epic and it is something of a shock to learn that for twenty-five years—it was in 1882 that Müller sent it to him—he had had it in his possession without becoming acquainted with it. It was von der Hagen's edition that aroused Goethe's interest and for a period of more than a year he worked over it intermittently. He read it to the ladies of the "Mittwochkränzchen," he made a list of the characters, he wrote little sketches about its history, its geography, about its customs. The appearance of Simrock's translation of the *Nibelungenlied* further

stimulated Goethe's interest. It was his intention to review this publication and for the purpose he assembled his scattered collectanea. The review was never published but the first draft is preserved (Jub. A. 38, 126 f.). Here he wrote: "Die Kenntniss dieses Gedichtes gehört zu einer Bildungsstufe der Nation. Und zwar deswegen, weil es die Einbildungskraft erhöht, das Gefühl anregt, die Neugierde erweckt, und, um sie zu befriedigen, uns zu einem Urtheil auffordert." It was his opinion that the material of the poem is extremely ancient but the treatment comparatively modern. These facts served him as explanation of numerous discrepancies. The world of the *Nibelungenlied*, he said, was an absolute world, subject only to its own laws and not guided by any superhuman agencies. In this respect it differed from the world of Homer, in which all human activities were supervised and directed by the gods. He calls the poem "classic," because its characters, like Homer's, are "gesund und tüchtig." The problem of the religious background of the epic engrossed him particularly. He regarded it as "grundheidenisch" and found that the Christian cult had not the least influence. Heroes and heroines, he said, went to church only to quarrel. In conclusion he expresses the conviction that the content of the *Nibelungenlied* should be re-worked into a mighty prose epic, "so dasz der Gehalt in ganzer Kraft und Macht vor die Seele träte und dem Geiste von einer neuen Seite zur Erscheinung käme." That he himself did not undertake this work does not surprise us.

Quite different, but entirely characteristic was his reaction to Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich*. In 1807 Büsching presented his edition of this epic to Goethe and the latter tells us that he made an honest effort to read it. But he was forced to lay it aside, repelled by the, to him, disgusting spectacle of a loathsome disease as the central motivating element and of a spineless hero willing to accept the blood sacrifice of an innocent child upon the altar of a horrible and cruel superstition. With a shudder he says that merely to touch the book inspired him with a fear of contagion. We are reminded of his famous verdict: "Klassisch ist das Gesunde, romantisch das Krankhafte."

In the years 1807 to 1810, according to his own statements, Goethe devoted himself to more serious study of older German literature. We do not know the nature of these studies; Goethe vaguely speaks of "Minnelieder." It is likely that it was in these years that he became acquainted with Wolfram von Eschenbach.



THE CIRCLE OF THE DUCHESS AMELIA

Water color by Kraus

1. Meyer 2. Henriette v. Wolfskeel 3. Goethe 4. Einstedel 5. Anna Amelia 6. Elise Gore  
7. Charles Gore 8. Emilie Gore 9. Frll. v. Göchhausen 10. Herder

Apparently he read Wolfram's works carefully, if not appreciatively. He mentions him only once and that once in connection with the Flemish painters whom Wolfram had praised. That Goethe was familiar with Gottfried von Straszburg is entirely unlikely and that the Middle High German lyric poets were more than mere names to him we have not the slightest evidence. We know that Wilhelm Grimm spent the month of December, 1809, at Weimar. Goethe calls him "einen ganz hübschen, in seinem Fache ganz fleisigen Mann," and says in the *Annalen* for 1809 that Grimm's presence in Weimar brought him a deeper appreciation of Germanic antiquity. At Wilhelm Grimm's request Goethe loaned Jakob several Minnesänger manuscripts from the Weimar library and in the following year he expressed mild pleasure at Grimm's prose translation of the *Edda*. But it seems that the Grimms were not very deeply impressed with Goethe's enthusiasm for Germanic antiquity. In a letter to Jakob on November 20, 1815, Wilhelm considers it inadvisable to tell Goethe anything definite regarding their Märchenplans and warns his brother not to send Goethe a copy of his newly published *Armer Heinrich*. He probably remembered Goethe's reaction to Büsching's edition of the same work.

After these years of so-called intensive study of older German literature and of repeated contact with leading scholars in the field, we are inclined to wonder where and how Goethe utilized this material. The only immediate precipitate was the *Maskenzug* of 1810, written in honor of the engagement of Prinzessin Karoline. In this mask appear numerous characters from older literature: Brunhild, Siegfried, König Rother, Ortnit, many unidentified Minnesingers and courtly poets. In stately procession they descend from the heights of the Wartburg to pass in review before the august assemblage of royalty. Charming as this mask may be, perfect in its every artistic detail, it is nevertheless a disappointing residue from the greatest literature that German genius had produced before Goethe's own time.

The closing years of Goethe's life brought him no nearer to the true spirit of older German literature. After 1815 he seems to have abandoned all effort to draw on it. The mask of 1818, his last one, and the romantic portions of *Faust II*, have assumed the outward form of the Middle Ages but they have nothing of its content.

There is nothing mysterious about Goethe's inability to understand and to interpret the Middle Ages. A man who is essentially

a realist, an optimist, and a free thinker can have little sympathy for a period of chaos, of hopeless fatalism, of spiritual bondage. All his instincts drove him away from the German Middle Ages to the placid ideal of classical Greek antiquity. In addition to these factors of character there can be no doubt that the emphasis of his early education in the classics made the Greeks much more vital and real to him than his own ancestors. Goethe was always primarily a visual thinker; he thought in pictures and not in abstractions. In this connection his comments on the *Edda* are worthy of note. At an early age he had become familiar with the Norse myths and later through Herder with the text of the *Edda* itself. The Straszburg *Ephemerides* give evidence of his intensive study of the *Edda*. Concerning it he wrote in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: "Alle diese Dinge, so wert ich sie hielt, konnte ich nicht in den Kreis meines Dichtungsvermögens aufnehmen; wie herrlich sie mir auch die Einbildungskraft erregten, entzogen sie sich doch ganz dem sinnlichen Anschauen, indessen die Mythologie der Griechen, durch die grössten Künstler der Welt in sichtliche, leicht einzubildende Gestalten verwandelt, noch vor unseren Augen in Menge dastand. . . . Was hätte mich bewegen sollen, Wodan für Jupiter and Thor für Mars zu setzen und statt der südlichen genau umschriebenen Figuren Nebelbilder, ja blosze Wortklänge in meine Dichtung einzuführen?"

In these words we may find the key to Goethe's apparent indifference to Germanic antiquity. Not only Wodan and Thor were phantoms and empty sounds to him, but everything that lay farther back than the liberating act of the Reformation. He had no understanding for the hopeless fatalism that made possible the stoic death of Hagen; none for the blindly superstitious spiritual devotion that made possible the salvation of Hartmann's Heinrich. And so Germanic antiquity remained for him always a forbidden field, from which he was permitted to pluck here and there a word, a character, an idea, but never an iota of its spirit.

Was Goethe aware of this inability? It is not likely. And yet he places into the mouth of his favorite character the words:

Mein Freund, die Zeiten der Vergangenheit  
Sind uns ein Buch mit sieben Siegeln.