THE LYRICAL STRUCTURE OF GOETHE'S SECOND "WANDRERS NACHTLIED"

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I shall speak about the immediate subject of this lecture, Goethe’s second "Wandrers Nachtlied", one of his most famous poems, partly for its own sake and partly because it raises many questions concerning others of his poems, so I shall be using it to some extent as a springboard for comments on Goethe’s lyrical structures generally. It is regarded by many as one of the most exquisite lyrics in the language; a jewel, the quintessence of lyricism. It is not difficult to agree that it does have a mysterious, enchanting quality. It is heard and gone in twenty seconds, low-keyed but intense. Its author thought of it as a song, since the title denotes it as such, and that is the ultimate equation for lyric poetry. Some enthusiasts, trying to locate its quality of magic in its sounds, have virtually reduced it to a succession of "hingehauchte" vowels, based on "ah" and "uh" and "au", with rhyming echoes, which are praised as an example of the acoustic-poetic par excellence; it is, however, very difficult indeed to speak aloud effectively, though no one has ever said so.

Whether it is so lyrical as to be the paradigm for lyric generally is another question. Emil Staiger comes near to this position in his book on basic concepts of poetics, in which he illumines again the classical genre triad: epic, drama, lyric. Whilst adhering broadly to the classical and traditional scheme, he makes an important shift from the simple concrete notion of epic, dramatic, or lyric poem to more generalized notions of epic, dramatic, and lyric style. He opens his chapter on lyric style with the words: "Als eines der reinsten Beispiele lyrischen Stils gilt 'Wandrers Nachtlied' [the second] von Goethe", followed by a brief description of its melodic language.¹

One of the difficulties about trying to define what is lyrical is that you enter a rarifying process once you leave the loose,

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 14th March 1979.
practical meaning behind. Staiger is aware of this. He knows, and mentions, that ultimately every poem has its own individual form; it is poetic, or lyrical, in its own way, which is one reason, no doubt, why he turns his attention away from the individualized single poem to the possibility of at least finding some common quality amidst differences that would represent "lyrical style". This sounds good enough, perhaps, but in fact you end up, in generalizing, with a more and more rarefied notion, the very abstract "das Lyrische", and you reach a point where you have to go back to the feel of each individual poem, and start again. Sometimes we speak of a poem as "singable" in order to define its special lyricism. Supreme examples are the lyrics in Shakespeare's plays: "Full fathom five thy father lies", "Come away, death", "Take, o take those lips away", "Fear no more the heat o' th' sun", "Blow, blow, thou winter wind", etc. They are characterized by intense feeling, an evocative and often elusive language and imagery, and frequently by a refrain. In Goethe there are not many of this type, and the "Nachtlied" is certainly not one. "Gretchen am Spinnrad" might seem, on a quick association, to be related; yet, apparently a "song", it is also by substitution an utterance by a central person in the Faust drama about her situation; it is functionally precise and dramatic. We remember also the Mignon songs in Wilhelm Meister. "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen", for example, is functional to the story, but is certainly very lyrical. Another Goethe poem, overflowing with feeling, that comes to mind, is "Um Mitternacht". Here a refrain helps the musicality, but not through mere suggestive Lallen. The refrain, moreover, emotionally saturated though it is, is in this case strongly architectonic; it is the central column, the temporal focus, which organizes the meaning of the reminiscing poem. Another poem of strikingly lyrical effect is "Gefunden". But here again the lyrical is not allowed to take over completely and become quite liqueacious and vocalized; there is an implied moral, latent in the symbolism. The poem that comes nearest to the totally musical-atmospheric is "An den Mond", which leaves you very moved but unable easily to define the meanings.

\(^1\) See Appendix.
Having briefly suggested, by means of these warning references, some of the problems involved in focusing the nature of Goethe’s lyrical-poetic writing, let us turn to the “Nachtlied”.

It is a feature of this apparently so simple poem and its history that quite a variety of interpretations have been possible. Most are summarized and commented on in Wulf Segebrecht’s recent book which gathers together many documents, in fact pretty well everything that is known, about this poem: its genesis, its publication, the many different interpretations, its popularity, parodies on it, and the many problems that have arisen in connection with it. I propose to concentrate on three main interpretations in the following remarks, together with different ideas I wish to put forward myself; but a brief comment on two further views will be useful first, so that my own argument need not be interrupted in the middle.

The first of these holds that the poem in its essence expresses a pantheistic sentiment of the oneness of nature and human life. In criticism of this common view, subscribed to by many well-known scholars, I would say that the poem might possibly be seen as arising within a surround of pantheistic tendency, but cannot be said properly to be itself an expression of pantheism in its main purpose.

The second interpretation, hinted at by Emil Staiger, followed by E. M. Wilkinson, and presented in a variant, more elaborate form by Segebrecht in the book referred to, seeks to establish that the poem is closely linked with Goethe’s geological views and expresses as its deepest meaning an order of nature, ultimately evolutionary. This is seen in the way it proceeds from the geological “Gipfel” to the botanical plant world of the “Wipfel”, on to the animal world of birds, and finally to the human; and this order contains within itself a range of intensity of “Ruhe”. The highest degree of quiet is in the sky above the

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2 Emil Staiger, Goethe I (Zürich, 1952), p. 503 ff.

hilltops, then in the mountains. It is compromised in living creatures, in whom rest is counterpointed by their vital mobility. But, and this apparently is the deeper significance of the poem, they too, birds and men, are nevertheless urged towards participation in the larger Quiet of sky and rocks, and indeed the whole cosmos, which is under the law of slow evolution and not of violence. Segebrecht claims that this reading is scrupulously "immanent". I find this hard to believe, since it is based openly on extraneous suggestive evidence, which he himself quotes, like Staiger before him, from Goethe's letters and studies in geology at the time. In the poem itself there is absolutely nothing to indicate that the "Gipfel" have so specialized a form as to arouse in a reader an immediate sense of geological processes. It seems also very weak to suggest, in a view based ostensibly on the profundity and breadth of Goethe's scientific knowledge, that he chose birds, and not only birds but little ones, to represent the animal kingdom in so important a conception. He was more natural and direct. And the elaborate harmonization of geological rest and human strife via a theory of evolution within the immanency of these twenty-four words seems a strained venture. More important still, it is, whether in the Wilkinson or the Segebrecht version, and whether intended or not, a despiritualization of the poem.

Looking now more closely at the text it seems to me important to remember that there is a title, "Wandrers Nachtlied". This tends to be forgotten because it appears so often in anthologies without its title. Or, when printed after its twin "Der Du von dem Himmel bist", which is never printed without title, it is headed "Ein Gleiches". Since this is an impossible title for reference, the poem has come to be more often than not referred to by its three-word first line, which is clumsy. The title, however, is absolutely essential to the poem, as we shall see.

The first six lines are a description of the fall of night as observed and felt on a clear summit amidst forested mountains. The eye of the traveller moves around the evening sky, aware of the stillness of the mountain tops; and the senses also, simultaneously, perceive the nearer tree tops as darkness comes. Here the stillness is created by the cessation of common sounds,
the wind dying away and the songbirds falling silent. It is an incredibly simple picture, but inevitable and definitive in its elements.

There is a break after these lines, marked by the imperative "Warte!", which is in sudden contrast to the descriptive present tense used so far. This raises problems to be looked at in a moment. In spite of the syntactical change it can be conceded that the rhythm, sound, and rhymes carry forward. Indeed, although the first six lines actually complete the descriptive section, they do not seem quite self-contained; they point to some other completion.

Now in connection with the expressive language of the first part of the poem the musical factor, although important, has in my view been overestimated in the scholarship of the subject in relation to the semantic aspect. In the aesthetics of lyricism it has become a well-worn truth, and especially as handled in the day-to-day teaching habits of "interpretation", that word-meanings in poetry belong mostly to the rational, logical functioning of language, whilst magical-acoustical elements determine essentially poetic effects. In this poem we have a remarkable example of how an overall emotional mood, impression, and effect is in fact created even more by verbal meaning than by rhythm and sound. The vowel "u", for instance, which even scholars like those referred to above have said expresses in its long, dark sound the stillness of nature, is useless except as part of the word "Ruh". If someone had heard Goethe on the Kickelhahn at nightfall uttering a long dark "u" sound they would scarcely have thought he was specifically expressing the stillness. On the other hand there is especially a group of verbs which, wonderfully brought together, create poetic sensuousness with their meanings alone. They are the "spüren" of line four, with the "kaum einen Hauch" of line five; the "schweigen" of line six, and the "warte" of line seven. As the poem approaches completion they are all gathered together and consummated in the "ruhest" of the last line. All of these strongly simple words describe sensations. Psychology speaks of sensation as the ultimate and irreducible aspect of sense-perception, a kind of elementary experience. The arresting
feature of the words cited is that they indicate sensuousness at
the very margins of consciousness, and at the edge of motion or
activity. "Spüren" is a word that indicates the lowest level of
being conscious of sensation; our word "feel" is much too
strong for it; we resort to "apprehend", or we say "to sense"
something. Here the word goes with "Hauch", the slightest
breath or motion of air, reinforced still further by the adverb
"kaum", "scarcely" a breath. There follows another word,"schweigen","equally at the margin of sensation. It can mean
either that silence obtains, or that it suddenly happens. Here
it means, I would say, that the birds fall silent; not that they are
silent yet, but that they cease to sing. It is activity, sensation, at
the point of dissolution. And then we come to the word
"Warte", and what is that in this refined area? "Warten" is a
verb; it indicates an action governed by intention; it is therefore
conative, there is will in it. Yet it is the most passive form of
intentional activity. Like the other words it is at the very
margin of activity and consciousness, at the point where they
lapse, relapse, collapse, into the state of rest. In this way each
carries in its semantic significance the ultimate theme of the
poem. Each in itself is a virtual metaphor of the whole.¹

¹ Translation into English breaks down completely on the attempt to reproduce
equivalents for the vowel and rhyme scheme of this short poem. It seems to me
that we can get a more natural English-sounding version of the general effect by
trying to render accurately the meanings involved, as analysed above. Nobody
to my knowledge has done this. For example:

Quiet lies the sky
On the hills around;
Tree-tops scarce murmur
In the dying air.
Sweet songbirds in the forest
Now cease their song.
Wait! do but wait,
and you too
shall rest,
shall sleep.

The "Ruh" of line 2 is extremely difficult to render. The word "Quiet",
however, as a personification, and used by Gray and Wordsworth in their poems,
comes very close in meaning, but it would not today work smoothly as a noun.
Altogether, some phrases of Wordsworth's lyrical language around 1798 are close
to Goethe's tone in the "Nachtlied".
Thus rhythm and rhyme are not by any means the only mainstays of lyricism here, as is so often mechanically repeated. Another important feature seems to me to be the falling rhythm or cadence. The simple, quite brief, sentences contain no dynamic, no complexity held in the suspense of syntax. Each begins, then quickly falls to a close. The words, the syntax, the poem, are stopping all the time in their brief course. Rhythm and syntax are thus a true, congruent mimesis of the natural and human event here evoked.

Now let us turn to the problem of the "Du" in this poem. Who is "Du", and who addresses this "Du"? The point can be focused by looking at the earlier "Wandrers Nachtlied". Here there is no doubt about the speaker, nor about the direct, simple form of prayer, nor about the direction of the address. The speaker is the Wanderer, at the edge of weariness, satiety, also of despair, and the address is to a kind of deity, a personification of sweet Peace. We observe that the note of despair is very strong; it transcends, strictly speaking, the weariness associated with journeying, so that the wanderer image in the poem is rendered symbolical much beyond the literal meaning.

In the second "Nachtlied" the question of who speaks and who is addressed is by no means so unambiguous. It can probably be assumed that many, if not most, readers take the poem as a straightforward utterance of the poet himself, that is, as Goethe expressing his feelings as he arrives at the summit of the Kickelhahn near Ilmenau and looks around. Segebrecht, impelled by the new Rezeptionsaesthetik, has gone so far as to establish that, for the interpretation of the poem, the primary Rezeptionssituation is that of a person actually arriving at the top of the Kickelhahn, exactly in Goethe's footsteps, and reading his lines as scrawled up on the wall of the shelter. A consequence for Segebrecht is that such a visitor to the Kickelhahnhütte becomes the "Du", the person addressed, in the poem; which, though logical for Rezeption, is not really convincing. But

1 This has not been decisively noticed except by Gerhard Storz; cf. his article "Vier Gedichte" in R. Hirschenauer and A. Weber, Wege zum Gedicht (München and Zürich, 1956), p. 126: "Dem Stillstand im Rhythmus entspricht der Wortgehalt 'Ruh'."

2 See Appendix.

whatever we think of this, the idea of a poet singing out his feelings does represent a common way of seeing poetry, and in Goethe's case it has been enormously reinforced by the twin ideas of "Bekenntnis" and "Erlebnisdichtung". It is quite specially influenced in connection with this poem by the known facts of its genesis, which give it indeed the aspect of a cliché for students of Goethe. So in the poem we hear Goethe meditating, talking to himself about the quietness as twilight falls, and then applying what he sees to his own weariness and anxiety, and drawing consolation from the promise of participation in nature's movement. It is perhaps the simplest way of reading the poem, at the naive level.

Another possibility is that someone outside the scene, beholding it with sympathy, is addressing benevolently the tired wanderer implicit in the poem. The words are those of a superior, disembodied, almost abstract voice. It is either the mediating impersonal voice of "Poetry" or, raising the idea a degree higher, it could be the voice of a benign deity, a Godfather, or God-nature, giving blessing and consolation. Many readers may well take the poem, and its generated emotion, in this way. It is another comforting, uncomplicated way of reading it. All nature, in its nightly cycle, is falling to rest, and you are included in this vast natural movement, so that you must not fret, however weary; you, a part of nature, will also be at one with the process, and will find your rest. This is simple, quiet, and reassuringly expressed. Yet it does not, in that sense alone, make either a profoundly moving, or a keenly interesting, poem.

A third possibility, with more attractions, is that the voice of the poem is that of the Wanderer, the figurative head of it, addressing himself; which is far from being the same thing as Goethe speaking. The dominating image in the title clarifies the voice and the address and becomes more clearly the vehicle of figurative meanings. It is as well, in this connection, to remember what a "wanderer" was in the eighteenth century. He was a traveller, journeying from one place to another as a practical matter; or he was someone engaged perhaps on a

1 Details in Segebrecht, op. cit. pp. 24, 34 ff.
pilgrimage or a quest. Pantheistic, or idyllic, or picturesque conceptions were only just beginning to make Nature interesting for itself alone, or as a haven of escape from urban life, and it is true that Goethe was one of the first to pursue these attitudes. But a wanderer could not yet in general be viewed hedonistically as a carefree roamer, or a happy-go-lucky Taugenichts, or a Heine-esque journalist sightseer, or a Wandervogel or Jugendbewegter of the nineteen-twenties, or a modern hiker or camper. He had a journey to make, more often than not arduous. The frequent earlier use of “journey” as an image for life is based on this arduousness and hazard, the physical reality that made the image vivid. The image has long since gone silent and dead; we need now quite other images to release the aspiration to peace. So for this poem we have to some extent to revive consciously the context of “wandern” and “Wanderer”, in order to recover the metaphorical implications still very alive in them at the time of the poem.

It has been said, first by Fritz Strich, followed by E. M. Wilkinson and others, that there is no metaphor in this poem. In an essay called “Dichtung und Sprache” Strich argues that metaphor and the sensuousness in language are not the key instruments of poetic effects; language bare and simple, without figures of speech, can be poetic. He argues this because, he says, it is impossible for any poet really to define images so clearly that the readers see them in the same way; so imagery in language is not reliable, nor essential for poetic effect. He uses the lyricism of the “Nachtlied” as an example. Strich’s interpretation as a whole is by no means unattractive, emphasizing as it does the sense of a calm that gradually spreads and becomes complete, total, perfect, embracing everything, which we can easily agree is the direction of the poem. But it is wrong to say baldly that there is no metaphor, because he is really saying, for the purpose of his argument about language and the poetic, that there is nothing figurative at all. We can concede that there is no typical formal metaphor, as in the following:

Der Abend wiegte schon die Erde
Und an den Bergen hing die Naht;

1 In Der Dichter und die Zeit (Bern, 1947), pp. 55 ff.
a short passage in "Willkommen und Abschied" in which Goethe uses no fewer than six formal metaphors. Nevertheless, the Wanderer-image develops metaphorical power and character as it represents human weariness of body, emotions, and mind. By the time we reach the last words of the poem we cannot help but feel that the "ruhest" goes deeper than physical relaxation, and therewith we feel and know that the Wanderer figure also has generated more meanings than a traveller's desire to sit down. It may not be a formally correct metaphor but it is certainly a figure impregnated with the metaphorical. Moreover, much of the power of this poem lies not in its so-called quintessential song-language but quite simply in the archetypal character of its emotionalism, expressing as it does one of our profoundest recurrent surrender feelings.

At this point it is helpful to recall that Goethe works as often with what I will call oblique or quasi-metaphors as with straight ones. A good example is "Gefunden", mentioned already, one of the best simple lyrics, in an apparently naive tone. A love poem, it uses an implied simile; the action of merely plucking the flower of transient enjoyment is replaced by a solicitous action which leads to permanent life and fruitfulness; it is a simile for love as against lustful enjoyment. The simile is not expressed conventionally, as it would be if spelt out: "As when a flower is not plucked but carried home and replanted, so he did not destroy his love but took it and tendered it...". The flower is not a declared symbol; instead a delicate implication is given: "wie Sterne leuchtend, wie Augleyn schön", showing the subtle modulation from flower via shining stars to beautiful eyes, and thus to a loved woman. The action of taking possession and replanting stands for the act of commitment to love. Thus there is no explicit symbol, no formally defined metaphor, no formal allegory here, but symbolic, metaphorical, and allegorical elements are activated and relations of implied meaning estab-
lished, giving a passionate poem. Another example is "Wand-
ners Gemütsruhe". Here the first two stanzas make a general-
izing statement, simple and direct, about "Das Niederträchtige". Then Goethe suddenly conjures up an image, a wanderer figure, and makes his last stanza, by implication, into a metaphor for maintaining calm of mind against an irreparable evil. Still another example is the beautiful "Gingo Biloba". An exotic botanical image is here modulated through a scientific tease and transformed into a metaphor for the two-in-one of lovers. But again the figure is not given explicit linguistic formality; it exists subtly in relationships of meaning.

A similar obliquity can be found in another remarkable love poem in the West-östliche Divan, "Allgegenwärtige". Here the poet, instead of speaking in straight similes or metaphors, piling them up like Spenser or Shakespeare in their love sonnets, lists a series of naturally beautiful objects or effects and says that when he sees any of these he immediately "recognizes", as he has it, his beloved. He sees her in the tall, beautiful growth of a cypress, in the flattering, caressing waves of a pool, in the play of fountain jets, in the ever-varying forms of clouds, and so on. So here again we see, instead of similes in conventional form, a network of interweaving near-metaphor, rich and elegant, and ending with a play on Allah's hundred names, each of which—this is a final oblique simile—can also stand for the beloved, a perfect clinching of an already soaring conception. Finally we recall one of the most famous of Goethe's poems, "Selige Sehnsucht". In this instance the words are addressed in the first place to the auditors of the poet's voice, but also, in a second remove, to the butterfly itself, and then in the last stanza to another "du", which can only signify anyone at all who happens to be listening to the poet's voice and wisdom. Thus the whole poem rests on an implied metaphor, developed from an unformal-
ized simile: "You, reader, mortal human, are like the butterfly, aspiring to a higher existence."

Coming back now to the "Nachtlied", with these procedures of Goethe in mind, let us explore further the possibility that the "du" of the poem, in both line six and seven, is the Wanderer

1 See Appendix.
addressing himself. We can then interpret as follows. The Wanderer of the title is the starting point, the poem arising as he meditates on his surroundings. Looking around, responding to the fall of evening, he describes what he sees and feels, as twilight gradually blankets the senses and life approaches the quiet of night; for it is not night itself, as many have said, but its approach that is described; if it were night already the first line, which is visual, would be meaningless. Then the imperative of the seventh line, the admonitory "Warte nur!", changes the focus, which is well emphasized when an exclamation mark is printed here instead of a comma. The Wanderer now, going beyond his simple meditation, admonishes himself. He speaks out of a consciousness of his situation, and of himself and his state of mind. The evening landscape is no longer observed outside himself, but is seen and felt in relation to something inside himself, something that is not yet in fact quite in harmony with cosmic and natural happening. Those who like to see a totally unified mood in this poem, and those who read it as an expression of pantheistic feeling, overlook this pause in the rhythm, this emergence of a discrepancy. The person confronting the mountains and the evening responds to them because something is occurring in them that is not, or not yet, extended to himself. He himself is not tranquil, he is disturbed. The imperative, strengthened and loaded with the sense of the following "nur", is urgent: Wait! Wait!; or: Wait, only wait! Wait, be patient! You will soon be liberated from toil. From this point the effect of the poem depends on a contrast between the stillness of nature, now unfolding, and the human being with his tiredness of body and restlessness of heart, still to be borne a little longer. The meaning of "Ruhe" intensifies for the person who does not participate in it. If this wanderer were simply about to enjoy along with all nature, as some interpretations pretend, the same rest, why should he be admonished to wait? It is all happening now for the rest of nature; why not for him? The great and spreading effect lies in the enlargement of meaning in the last two lines, which brings out the person image and establishes the full metaphor of the arduous journey of life.

1 Cf. Segebrecht, op. cit. p. 57.
latent in the title. In this process the "ruhest" of the last line is complex and spiritual against the simple idea of the "Ruh" in the second line. The span of meaning extends to the resolution of anguish and conflict; some readers take it still further, so that it means the absolute peace of death, such are the vibrations of suggestion in the poem. Not everyone would go so far; but I doubt whether anyone would not feel the enlargement and spiritualization of the idea of rest into that of peace.¹

Thus the effect of the "Nachtlied" turns on an infra-metaphorical structure of its elements. Metaphor arises where one thing stands for another. Here the journey pairs with life, physical fatigue with weariness of soul, rest with peace, and consummating sleep with death. The device of the speaker uttering an admonition which is also a consoling promise focuses the transition to the spiritual and generates the figurative reverberations.

We have, then, as materials of the poem the following: an initial figure, the Wanderer, presented in the title; an evening scene, a landscape of hills, forests, and sky, simply described as the quiet of evening and night descends upon it; an evocation of human travail and yearning; and, finally, an admonition, and a promise of peace and rest. These features, and the general character of the poem, are thrown into greater relief by a com-

¹ Segebrecht has a good section on the different interpretations of "Ruhe"., with a sensible comment on how far variety of interpretation may in principle be admitted (op. cit. pp. 66-70). It is a strength of this poem that so many possibilities exist that cannot be flatly ruled out; they vibrate tremulously in the surround. It doesn't follow that just anything will go. A useful contrast is to be found in Christina Rossetti's lines in Up-Hill:

Does the road wind uphill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.  
Will the Day's journey take the whole long day?  
From morn to night, my friend.  
But is there for the night a resting-place?  
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin?  
May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
You cannot miss that inn.

Here a similar imagery to Goethe's—uphill road, long day's journey, extreme weariness and exhaustion—points more simply and clearly an intense degree of anguish and of desire for release in death.
parison with the opening lines of the splendid elegy "Euphrosyne". It is remarkable how closely the elements of this introit correspond to those of the "Nachtlied": the mountain tops, the failing light, darkness present already in the deeper valley, the Wanderer wearily urging himself on to a resting-place, and the open invocation to divine sleep, the friend of the traveller. But here everything is composed into a solemn description, with all the marks of the classical grand style, which has the function of setting the scene for the tragic disclosure to follow, the death of the young actress celebrated in the poem.

In our analysis we have noted a number of prominent structural features emerging, forms and devices which open up and carry the feelings and expressiveness. Such are the linguistic characteristics, the much praised musical-lyrical form, together with semantic and syntactical aspects put forward here. Then comes the presence of what I have called oblique or quasi-metaphor, built up as a network of references and relationships which, even if not metaphors in conventional verbal form, operate in a similar way. They set up dense reverberations of feeling, giving a depth and complexity of meaning remarkable in so short a poem. I should like to stress, though there is no time for elaboration here beyond the few examples given above, that the use of half-metaphor is a common and very original practice of Goethe.

There is, further, the compositional device of a persona, the Wanderer figure whose voice, person, and situation focus the theme; this must now be the subject of a few comments. It is indeed very noticeable to an observant critic how often Goethe uses a persona, a speaker or character not himself, to generate expression. The device may go so far as to be a dramatic monologue voice, or part of a semi-narrative method. But it is often simply a role voice. Goethe's poems, including some intensely lyrical ones, are swarming with drafts of personifications, of projected but not necessarily fully realized persons, symbolical or near-allegorical figures, who often loom against a wider background as figures with symbol or myth power. They are the speakers in poems which may take the sketchy or mo-

1 See Appendix.
mentary form of an exhortation, a dialogue exchange, a situation, a bit of story, a dramatic moment. Examples from many may be found in "Seefahrt", "Ilmenau", "Euphrosyne", "Amyntas", the "Zueignung", the "Pariah", the Hatem and Suleika poems of the "Divan", the "Wanderers Sturmlied", and even in "Heidenröslein". In the Mignon and Harfner poems, in Gretchen's songs, we also see figures speaking within a song form, though they may overlap here with fictional characters developed towards symbolic and mythical potency in the action of the dramas and novels in which they appear, their song-monologues being functional to the action. The general method, however, is essentially the same as that used in the independent poems mentioned. The figures themselves are of the same poetic kind, vehicles of feeling which is universalized as they are made to express it.

It is only a step from the intermediate figures to the fully-fledged characters of the verse dramas, but also to the host of secondary and minor persons in Goethe's various works. As a central poetic device, used over a wide canvas of realistic and fantasy forms, it provides the unifying and relating principle in his whole poetic phantasmagoria stretching from the naturalistic picture in novels and prose plays to the world of demons, mythical heroes, and supernatural beings in Faust, in minor poetic plays like Mahomet and Pandora and numerous others, as well as in ballads and poems. The shorter poems, with the use of the persona, even in the briefest form as in the "Nachtlied", generate figures who join the more elaborate constructions of larger works as symbolic agents of conflicts and values, in such a way as to contribute to a new mythology.

The process under discussion is in Goethe the lever of objectivity; it puts his poems beyond subjective feeling or lyrical impressionism in their narrower senses. This tends to be veiled by the well-established habits of chronological study and by "Erlebnis" and "Bekenntnis" interpretation, which continues to be influential, as obviously in Segebrecht, even if the cruder methods have been discarded. Works are still seen

1 The problems arising in connection with the concept of "Erlebnisdichtung" have been discussed with exceptional skill recently by Marianne Wünsch in her book Der Strukturwandel in der Lyrik Goethes (Stuttgart, 1975).
in the first place very individually in relation to Goethe's development and his thought. If they are grouped, it is for the most part in view of well-marked period phases of style. One might have expected Emil Staiger, working from a baseline of aesthetic sensibility, to do something different, but his three-volume work, remarkable in so many ways, is in one respect a monumentalization of chronology, with an insidious annulling effect on centripetal insight into Goethe's imagination and its mechanics. An understanding of the Goethean procedures we have been discussing does, I would hope, help to restore the balance by liberating us from the constricting effect of looking too exclusively for the so-called Goethean "Augenblicke" of experience, his personalized epiphanies. The persona device replaces the voice of the poet with the voice of the role. In one of the "Divan" poems we know that Goethe playfully put the name of Hatem where the rhyme in fact requires his own name Goethe; nevertheless the role voices of Hatem and Suleika leave Goethe far behind as they render love mythical and universal.

Equally, the feelings about rest and peace in the "Nachtlied" go beyond identification with Goethe; they are those of the Wanderer, a mythical person. When we read Goethe's poems and fictions nowadays we do not, in my view, think of Goethe; we see alive in our memory the emergent figures of his projected world, the Wanderer, the Oriental poet, the girl-actress, the Hellenist in Rome, the Platonic lover, the solitary anguished sufferer, and so on. Perhaps I should sermonize and say we ought deliberately to focus in this way. Certainly I would not labour the point if I were not persuaded that this approach revitalizes Goethe today, when it is more interesting to see him as confronting the vistas and problems of human life than as a recorder of his personal neurology.

As I said before, if you glance rapidly through Goethe's poems you will be astonished at the number that use the persona device either in a full or partial form, in association with fragmentary or half-engaged dialogue or narrative, or in an incipient dramatic situation. Most of the finest ones do this. Nowhere is his virtuosity greater than in the extraordinary range of his inventiveness in its use. It is through this device above all that
he appears so distinctly as the great poly-expressive that he was, the feature that justifies comparing his scale of imagination, in human conflict and characterization, with the greatest. It ensures that his poems are not naive outpourings of feeling, sung by and for himself, but objective visions. It makes them into a pattern of humanity, extra-biographical and extra-personal; no mere documentation of one person and his obsessions but the wide world of aspiration, conflict, and elegy reflected back from a comprehensive imagination.

I started off from a poem that, in spite of its brevity, is one of the most famous in the repertory of Goethe and of German literature altogether. I do not think it a paradigm of absolute lyricism; the poems I have referred to or quoted, and others, are just as richly lyrical as the "Nachtlied". But it is without doubt a miraculous short poem, and it has had the power to touch off intense responses, in simple people as well as in connoisseurs. I have tried to do two things: first, to follow the irresistible urge to discover still something more of the secret of its mystery. It is an apparently simple poem, almost artless, transient, and yet concealing many layers of meaning in its metaphorical mesh, which gives its few short lines their brooding spaciousness. And, secondly, I have tried to show another aspect of the poem, which is that it cannot be seen just as an exquisite, isolated fragment of lyricism but should be recognized as a poem closely linked through its theme and method with some important recurrent features of Goethe's poetic composition throughout his work.

APPENDIX

Wandrers Nachtlied II
Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.
Wandrers Nachtlied I

Der du von dem Himmel bist,
Alles Leid und Schmerzen stillest,
Den, der doppelt elend ist,
Doppelt mit Erquickung fiillest,
Ach ich bin des Treibens müde!
Was soll all der Schmerz und Lust?
 Süßer Friede,
Komm, ach komm in meine Brust!

Um Mitternacht

Um Mitternacht ging ich, nicht eben gerne,
klein kleiner Knabe, jenen Kirchhof hin
Zu Vaters Haus, des Pfarrers; Stern am Sterne,
Sie leuchteten doch alle gar zu schön;
Um Mitternacht.

Wenn ich dann ferner, in des Lebens Weite,
Zur Liebsten musste, musste, weil sie zog,
Gestirn und Nordschein über mir im Streite,
Ich gehend, kommend Seligkeiten sog;
Um Mitternacht.

Bis dann zuletzt des vollen Mondes Helle
So klar und deutlich mir ins Finstere drang,
Auch der Gedanke, willig, sinnig, schnelle
Sich ums Vergangne wie ums Künftige schlang;
Um Mitternacht.

Gefunden

Ich ging im Walde
So für mich hin,
Und nichts zu suchen,
Das war mein Sinn.

Ich wollt' es brechen,
Da sagt' es fein:
Soll ich zum Welken
Gebrochen sein?

Im Schatten sah ich
Ein Blümchen stehn,
Wie Sterne leuchtend
Wie Äuglein schön.

Ich grub's mit allen
Den Würzlein aus,
Zum Garten trug ich's
Am hübschen Haus.

Und pflanzt' es wieder
Am stillen Ort;
Nun zweigt es immer
Und blüht so fort.
WANDRERS NACHTLIED

Wanderers Gemütsruhe (Divan)

Übers Niederträchtige
Niemand sich beklage;
Denn es ist das Mächtige,
Was man dir auch sage.

Wandrer! gegen solche Not
Wolltest du dich sträuben?
Wirbelwind und trocknen Kot,
Lass sie drehn und stäuben.

Gingo Biloba

Dieses Baums Blatt, der von Osten
Meinem Garten anvertraut,
Gibt geheimen Sinn zu kosten,
Wie's den Wissenden erbaut.

Ist es ein lebendig Wesen,
Das sich in sich selbst getrennt?
Sind es zwei, die sich erlesen,
Dass man sie als eines kennt?

Solche Frage zu erwidern,
Fand ich wohl den rechten Sinn:
Fühlst du nicht an meinen Liedern,
Dass ich eins und doppelt bin?

In tausend Formen

In tausend Formen magst du dich verstecken,
Doch, Allerliebste, gleich erkenn' ich dich;
Du magst mit Zauberschleier dich bedecken,
Allgegenwärt'ge, gleich erkenn' ich dich.

An der Zypresse reinstem, jungem Streben,
Allschöngewachsne, gleich erkenn' ich dich;
In des Kanales reinem Wellenleben,
Allschmeichelhafte, wohl erkenn' ich dich.

Wenn steigend sich der Wasserstrahl entfaltet,
Allspielende, wie froh erkenn' ich dich;
Wenn Wolke sich gestaltend umgestaltet,
Allmannigfalt'ge, dort erkenn' ich dich.

An des geblümt. Schleiers Wiesenstephich,
Allbunbesterten, schön erkenn' ich dich;
Und greift umher ein tausendarm'ger Eppich,
O Allumklammernde, da kenn' ich dich.
Wenn am Gebirg der Morgen sich entzündet,
Gleich, Allerheiternde, begrüsst ich dich,
Dann über mir der Himmel rein sich ründet,
Allherzerweiternde, dann atm’ ich dich.

Was ich mit äusserm Sinn, mit innerm kenne,
Du Allbelehrende, kern’ ich durch dich;
Und wenn ich Allahs Namenhundert nenne,
Mit jedem klingt ein Name nach für dich.

Selige Sehnsucht
Sagt es niemand, nur den Weisen,
Weil die Menge gleich verhöhnet,
Das Lebend’ge will ich preisen
Das nach Flammentod sich sehnet.

In der Liebesnächte Kühlung,
Die dich zeugte, wo du zeugtest,
Überfällt dich fremde Fühlung
Wenn die stille Kerze leuchtet.

Nicht mehr bleibest du umfangen
In der Finsternis Beschattung,
Und dich reisset neu Verlangen
Auf zu höherer Begattung.

Keine Ferne macht dich schwierig,
Kommst geflogen und gebannt,
Und zuletzt, des Lichts begierig,
Bist du Schmetterling verbrannt.

Und so lang du das nicht hast,
Dieses: Stirb und werde!
Bist du nur ein trüber Gast
Auf der dunklen Erde.

(Euphrosyne)
Auch von des höchsten Grebergs beeistem, zackigen Gipfeln
Schwindet Purpur und Glanz scheidender Sonne hinweg.
Lange verhüllt schon Nacht das Tal und die Pfade des Wandlers,
Der, am tosenden Strom, auf zu der Hütte sich sehnt,
Zu dem Ziele des Tags, der stillen hirtlichen Wohnung;
Und der göttliche Schlaf eilet gefällig voraus,
Dieser holde Geselle des Reisenden. Dass er auch heute,
Segnend, kränze das Haupt mir mit dem heiligen Mohn!