

# Goetheophilia and Goetheophobia in early Victorian Britain

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“Goethe has formed, directly or indirectly, the thoughts of all strong and wise men since his time. Rousseau laid the foundations of whatever is just in modern social theories or laws; and the Americans, over a large surface of the globe, will cut wood where it needs cutting; but, as yet, the change they have wrought is fatal, and bitterly to be mourned.”

John Ruskin, 1875 (1)

“I knew nothing of Goethe when I put him with Balzac; but the intolerable dullness which encumbers the depth of Wilhelm Meister, and the cruel reserve which conceals from all but the intensest readers the meaning of Faust, have made him, in a great degree, an evil influence in European literature; and evil is always second-rate.”

John Ruskin, 1871 (2)

Portrait of Johann  
Wolfgang von Goethe by  
Weld Taylor, 1832

I am neither an expert in Victorian literature nor a historian; but I believe it is sometimes healthy to look outside of one's expertise in order to gain context and perspective. With regard to Goethe, my expertise lies in comparative morphology and his osteological works, including their interpretation by the British Victorian transcendental anatomists (3). In this study, I chose to take a step back from Victorian idealistic morphology, to try to understand other aspects of Goethe's impact on Victorian Britain. I was especially anxious to understand how readers in Britain were first exposed to Goethe's works and their reactions in the decades following his death in 1832. Moreover, I needed to have some insight as to why the early Victorians were so ambiguous about Goethe.

Goethe was the greatest German writer of modern times; innovative and brilliant, with the ability to produce works in every literary genre. He was also an able artist, an investigator in the natural sciences, a man of faith (with no clear religious denomination) and a self-declared "citizen of the world". So why was such a man a problem for some Victorians? What, using a modern idiom, was not to like? Considering Goethe's almost god-like status in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, it appeared rather strange that he was sometimes received by the British with respectful suspicion. Furthermore, the question is important for present day Goetheanists, because to understand the reactions of the Victorian public provides background and context as to the reasons why Goethe did not have the same impact in Britain as in Germany. This is despite the claims and expectations of writers such as Thomas Carlyle who, early in his explorations of German literature, regarded Goethe as something akin to a Hebraic prophet, a saviour of society, a pattern for society's future and the modern Man (4).

The relationships of the early Victorians to German literature, and to Goethe in particular, are complex. A complete analysis is beyond the scope of this limited study and more detailed accounts are cited throughout this text. What I hope to achieve here is to exemplify extreme Goethe appreciation and Goethe disapproval and to speculate on how they influenced the opinions of the general English readership. Two examples are compared: Thomas Carlyle (Goetheophile) and Wolfgang Menzel (Goethephobe), and I explore their particular impact on the conceptions of Goethe in early Victorian Britain.

The two quotes heading this piece are my narrative hook. They are from John Ruskin, who did not write very much about Goethe, but was certainly familiar with some of his writings. Ruskin demonstrates the intriguing tenor and Goethe – "doublethink", typical of some Victorians. However, in Ruskin it is particularly surprising because he was Thomas Carlyle's close friend, and Carlyle was an uncontested Goetheophile. Here, I explain why, despite their close friendship, Carlyle did not instigate similar Goetheophilic sentiments in Ruskin. I interpret this following David Francis Smith (5), who recognised the evolving trajectory of Carlyle's relationship with Goethe: from extreme idolisation and a view of Goethe as a saviour of society, to a more sober recognition of Goethe as a great writer and thinker, but not an active influencer of social reform. Significantly,

Carlyle's friendship with Ruskin was formed in the 1850s, during the latter, less heady phase of Carlyle's interest in Goethe.

## Thomas Carlyle

Next year (2024) is a significant year for Anglophone Goetheanists. It marks the 200th anniversary of the first English translation of Goethe's literary masterpiece *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (6). This was Goethe's second novel, published in 1795–96; an extensive saga of self-realisation describing Wilhelm Meister's rocky road to discovering meaning in life. Thus 1824 was a significant year for the popularisation of Goethe's literary works among English speakers, many of whom did not know German because it was not a subject widely taught in schools. The man behind this achievement was Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881).

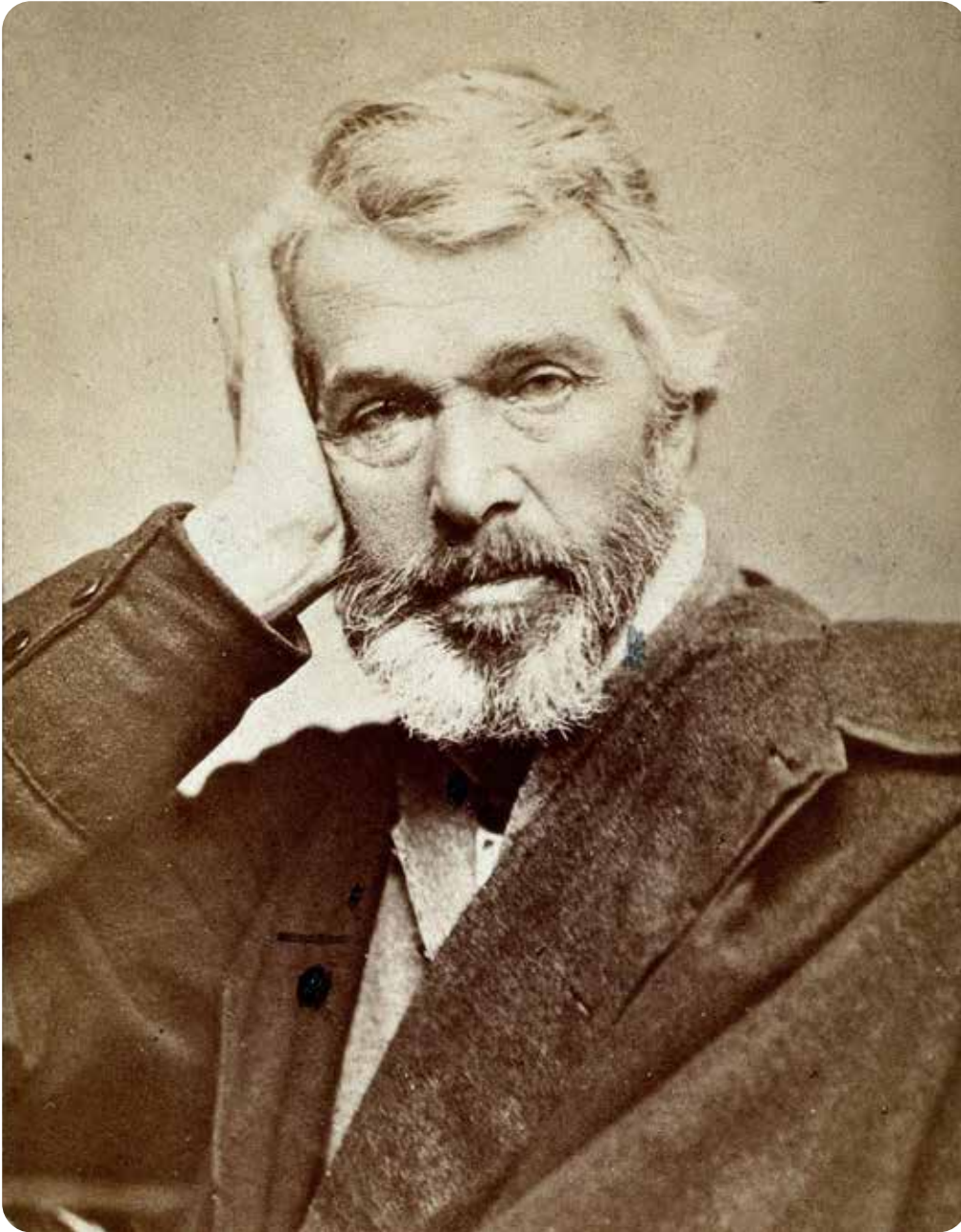
Carlyle was a very influential writer, historian and philosopher. What he thought and wrote mattered. George Eliot summed him up like this: "There is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived." (7).

Prior to 1824, there were few English translations of Goethe's works. Early examples included Lord Francis Gower's inaccurate 1823 translation of Faust I, much improved ten years later by Abraham Hayward (1833) (8). Fragments of translations of Faust I also appeared in a several periodicals (9) but Carlyle's painstaking and precise translation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* was the first complete and serious English version of a work by Goethe and introduced his literature to a large section of the non-German speaking British readership.

Thomas Carlyle was inspired to study German in 1819 because, as a student of geology at Edinburgh University, he wanted to read Abraham Gottlob Werner's mineralogical works in their original language. Later, Carlyle's knowledge of German was directed away from geology and served to make him the leading disseminator of German literature to an English-speaking audience. Despite this change of career, Carlyle maintained a passing interest in geology well into the 1840s but from the 1820s onwards, literature not science was to become his main occupation (10). Carlyle's essays, reviews and translations of Goethe were numerous, but ultimately limited to Goethe's literary works. As far as I know, he did not translate Goethe's scientific works.

## Carlyle's crisis

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the emergence of science and an increasing focus on mechanical explanations of the world. In consequence, many thinkers became concerned about the impact of a science-based society on ethics and morality. Carlyle was among them and while not wishing to reject his Calvinist



Thomas Carlyle  
(1795–1881), portrait by  
Elliott & Fry, c. 1865

roots completely, he felt the impact of science on religion and morality called for new ways of thinking. Reflecting on the increase in scepticism, Carlyle wrote “No fixed highway more; the old spiritual highways and recognised paths to the Eternal, now all torn-up and flung in heaps.” (11) Between 1815 and 1825, Carlyle suffered a bitter crisis of faith when he struggled with spiritual disillusionment, concerns about his professional future and issues of health. He was engulfed by doubt and spoke of “the dismallest Lernean Hydra of problems, spiritual, temporal, eternal” (12). The turning point came in July 1821, “during those 3 weeks of total sleeplessness” when he took solace by bathing in the waters of Leith (Edinburgh). As he “went down” to the waters to purify himself, both actually and symbolically, he experienced a sudden powerful “conversion”, a change of heart and mind that enabled him to take

“the Devil by the nose” and see a way forward (13). The impetus for this spiritual volte face came from his studies of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, and the literature of Novalis and Goethe. For Carlyle, these works presented hope for the future “a new Heaven and new earth” (14).

Especially in Goethe, Carlyle uncovered an alternative to materialism and scepticism. Goethe was proposing ideas that allowed human spirituality to flourish, while simultaneously setting aside outdated religious dogma. Goethe was for Carlyle a kindred spirit: a man who overcame dissatisfaction with old systems of faith and philosophy, and out of his own inner striving, recreated himself to progress positively to a better future. In 1837, in a letter to John Sterling, Carlyle wrote that Goethe was for him “a Gospel of Gospels and did literally ...save me from destruction outward and inward.” (15). Goethe was the pattern of Carlyle’s own Damascene experience, and he experienced an intense, dog-like gratitude towards him. Goethe was a beneficent Master and Carlyle felt himself to be his disciple. However, such hero-worship did not contribute to a fair, balanced judgment. David Smith (5) goes as far as to say that even in his translations, and certainly in his early essays and reviews, Carlyle presented a Carlylean Goethe not a true Goethe. Thus, one might conclude, that the first exposure of the English readership to Goethe was to an idealised version: a Goethe as recreated in the image of a grateful and enthusiastic Thomas Carlyle.

## Goethe as personal and universal saviour

The 19th Century was a time of political and social change: the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, cities were growing and whereas communication was improving through developments in railways and shipping, there was a concomitant loss of rural life. City pollution, slums, regimented factory hours and extensive poverty were all features of the new society, along with increased consumerism, materialism, and a general loss of religious feeling. It is no surprise that Carlyle saw his own personal crisis of 1820 reflected in the crisis of society and he conflated the two in his mind. Thus, he came to believe that in the same way that Goethe’s works had helped him, they could similarly communicate a message of hope for all of society. He wanted to show the British public how they too could be saved from a crisis of faith by Goethe’s works, which offered the way to a new social order filled with art, wisdom and optimism. In Goethe’s works Carlyle believed all men could find “The corner-stone of a new social edifice for mankind...”(16).

## The stages of Carlyle’s relationship with Goethe

Such extreme idolization of another human being is not sustainable and Carlyle’s intellectual response to Goethe had to change and evolve over time. The trajectory of Carlyle’s Goetheophilia began with a transient period of

extreme appreciation, segueing to a more equitable recognition of Goethe's genius and what he could and could not achieve for his readers. David Smith (5) identified clear stages in Carlyle's relationship to Goethe.

Pre-1820s: as Carlyle learned German and become familiar with its literature and philosophy, he came to believe that German culture could offer answers to his existential questions.

1820s onwards: Carlyle experienced Goethe as his personal saviour and developed feelings of gratitude, discipleship, and loyalty towards him.

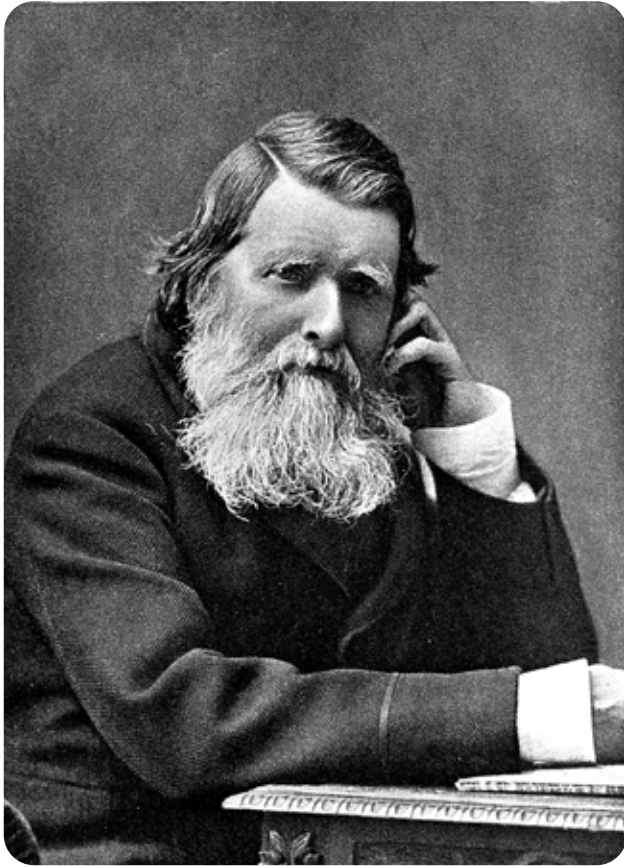
The late 1820s–1830s were optimistic times for Carlyle, as he explored the depths of Goethe's works, projecting his personal experience of them onto society and becoming convinced that Goethe could have a much-needed reforming impact there as well.

After the 1830s came a gradual settling into a more level-headed realization of Goethe's true greatness: as a polymath and man of letters, but with limitations. Goethe could beautify and elevate the “barren prose of the 19th Century” (17), but that, in itself, did not lead to a better human society. Carlyle finally realised that the needs of society were greater than anything Goethe could supply, and to expect more from him was an unfair illusion. Following the 1840s, all high hopes of Goethe as anything more than a personal saviour were set aside. Carlyle understood that where society needed moral guidance, Goethe provided poems, plays and novels which, whilst full of profound wisdom, did not offer the immediate solutions that are needed. Carlyle was left with the opinion that Goethe's way could perhaps work for a more advanced society in the future, but not for Victorian Britain where realistic, pragmatic solutions were needed (18).

Carlyle omitted Goethe from his *On Heroes* lectures because by then he had lost faith in the value of art as a heroic endeavour. At that time, he wrote “how can we sing and paint when we do not believe and see” (18) It was around this time that Carlyle met and befriended John Ruskin. Bearing in mind Carlyle's change of heart, it is perhaps less surprising that Ruskin was not swept up in the torrent of Carlyle's early Goethe worship. It may at least partially explain Ruskin's lack of enthusiasm for Goethe, as expressed in the two quotes heading this essay.

## Carlyle and John Ruskin

Many thinkers of the Victorian period felt the need for radical action to change the social conditions in Britain. John Ruskin (1819–1900) was such an individual. He was an English art critic, writer, polymath, political economist and early promulgator of environmentalism, sustainability, and the importance of traditional crafts. In the years following the 1850s, Carlyle



Portrait of John Ruskin (1819–1900) from photograph taken in 1882

and Ruskin struck up a close friendship, described as “One of the most powerful, sustained, and influential relationships between major literary figures of nineteenth century England.” (19). Several authors have commented on the incongruity of this friendship, which had the quality of a mentorship or even paternity between the older Carlyle and the younger Ruskin. In fact, the relationship between Ruskin and Carlyle was somewhat reminiscent of Carlyle’s own perceived relationship to Goethe.

Carlyle’s influence upon Ruskin was powerful. It was the cause of Ruskin’s shift in focus from problems of art to problems of society. All Ruskin’s opinions on political economy and social reform, were strongly influenced by this friendship and when he developed his ideas further, Ruskin always considered himself Carlyle’s disciple putting the inspiration of his Master’s doctrine into practice (19).

But despite Carlyle’s continued influence on Ruskin, he never turned his protégé into an incontrovertible Goetheophile. The quotes from Ruskin heading this essay are both from the 1870s, some 20 years

into their friendship and several years before Carlyle’s death in 1881. The quotes need some context and explanation. Neither is taken from an article about Goethe. In fact, Ruskin never wrote any articles on Goethe. The first is a quotation from Ruskin’s teaching catalogue (1). The catalogue comprises 300 works of visual art which Ruskin used for instructing undergraduates in his classes on the “Elements of Drawing”. Ruskin wrote notes to accompany the artworks and the quotation is found alongside an engraving of Bicester House by Michael Burghers (c. 1653–1727). It bears the title “Mr. John Coker’s Seat, at Burcester-King’s-end”. The catalogue with the engraving is now housed in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in the 5th Cabinet of Ruskin’s series (no. 59 in the 1st edition 1871; no. 109 in the 2nd ed. 1874). The remark about Goethe is within Ruskin’s discussion on the habits and feelings of the 17th Century upper middle classes, before “the great change in the temper of Europe was brought about by the irreligious literature of France and Germany, and the activities of America.” The 17th-century European middle classes (Ruskin believed) were “perfectly happy, virtuous up to their ideal of duty, and healthy in their influence on all around them,” while those of his own period had been morally corrupted by writers such as Goethe and Rousseau. The second quote is from a footnote to a discussion about the merits of Sir Walter Scott as a writer and comes from 1875. Curiously, Ruskin repeated the very same quotation twice, in two different works, which would suggest he felt compelled to re-emphasise his views on the matter (2).

Ruskin's attitude may seem puzzling considering the closeness of his relationship with Carlyle, however it can be explained if the development of Carlyle's own Goetheophilia is understood. Carlyle and Ruskin's friendship burgeoned following the 1850s, a time when Carlyle's hero-worship of Goethe had given way to a more moderate view. Furthermore, Ruskin could also have been under the influence of more widespread opinions about Goethe that had formed in Britain once Goethe's translated works had become generally known. No one, and certainly not Ruskin, ever denied that Goethe was a uniquely gifted writer. However, some British readers viewed Goethe's works as morally suspect and furthermore felt that Goethe did not offer his genius to the practical task of solving society's problems. Both these attitudes might well have generated the tenor of Ruskin's opinions on Goethe, as discussed in the next section.

## Mild British Goetheophobia

Too much indiscriminate glorification of an individual did not sit well with the Victorian etiquette of dignity and restraint. The British tendency towards balanced judgment balked at too much praise. Many felt that the extensive near idolatry of Goethe in Germany, which was also tangible in Carlyle's early works, needed to be balanced by a bit of British common sense. Praise of Goethe had gone too far and needed redressing.

According to Smith (5), it was a common opinion of early Victorian critics that "even if Goethe's genius and greatness are acknowledged, it is hard to find even one of his literary works that will stand up on its own as an undoubted masterpiece." Smith then goes on to say that even his admirers held "that Goethe's greatness was manifested in the whole rather than the parts, that his genius was something one felt through one's dissatisfaction with the particular work one was reading." This is a peculiarly Faustian way of approaching Goethe's works and there is much to be said for it. It explains how Goethe's works can be a continual inspiration and source of creative thought, as experienced by Carlyle. To read Goethe's works, to perceive their brilliance and to desire to understand the genius behind them through personal striving is indeed a fascinating way of creating a relationship with a writer. Carlyle understood this but many other Goethe critics did not. Instead, they judged Goethe's works according to the limited conventional criteria of what the Victorians considered poetry should be. And Goethe's works did not fulfil their expectations.

Perhaps a more insidious accusation hurled at Goethe, was that of immorality. Even early pre-Victorian admirers of German culture, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) recognised elements of moral turpitude Goethe's works. Coleridge, like others acknowledged Goethe's universal talent, but felt that "want of a moral life... (was the)... defect of his poetry" (20). Similarly, German scholar Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859) conceded Goethe's genius

as a writer but refused to endow him with any positive moral qualities (21). Reviews of Goethe's works by these, and other writers influenced especially those readers who only knew Goethe from reviews, criticisms, and the few translated works available to them.

The moral views of Victorian middle-class society were notoriously prudish. The 19th Century was a time of literary expurgation and "Bowdlerizing". The works of Shakespeare and English publications of the Bible suffered at the hands of the censors, and it is therefore unsurprising that the "continental values" in some of Goethe's works were considered immoral. Harold Perkin wrote in his "Origins of Modern English Society" that, between 1780 and 1850 the English had become "inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical" (22). For some of these "inhibited", "polite", "orderly" and "prudish" Victorians, the complex, metamorphic and transcendental writings of Goethe just did not resonate with their way of thinking.



Portrait of Wolfgang Menzel  
(1798–1873)

## Extreme Goetheophobia

One interesting source of Goethe criticism came from Germany itself. Wolfgang Menzel's work on *Die Deutsche Literatur* (1828) included fierce attacks on Goethe and this work. Even though this work was not translated immediately, it was nevertheless reviewed in British periodicals. For some readers it presented a refreshing contrast to German and Carlylean Goethe glorification, which placed him next to Homer and Shakespeare (Carlyle cited this in the Preface to his translation of *Wilhelm Meisters*; see citation 6). Menzel (1798–1873) was

a politically active German writer, poet, historian, and a severe critic of innovations in literature. He credited Goethe's poetic abilities, his mastery of literary form as well as his command of the German language. But whereas other Germans glorified Goethe, Menzel presented a talented writer who was at the same time irreligious, immoral, unpatriotic, passive in questions of politics, egotistical, sentimental, foppish and effeminate. Goethe, for Menzel, was the epitome of 18th Century corruption. His crusade against Goethe eventually focused on four main criticisms: lack of heroism, femininity, immorality, and un-Christian cynicism about organised religion (23).

Although Menzel wrote in German, his works were reviewed in England. George Moir (1800–1870) a Scottish author, German speaker, and Professor of Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University (1835 and 1840), wrote articles on German literature for the *Edinburgh Review*. Moir reviewed Menzel's work, and whilst not agreeing completely with his outright blasting of Goethe, he nevertheless picked up several points that seeped into the public domain and became the general opinions of many non-German readers in Britain. Moir's presentation of Goethe was a mixture of artistic recognition together with disapproval of his works on moral and ethical grounds. Criticisms of Goethe's moral standing and passivity in matters of social and political importance were high in Moir's writings but his reproval of Goethe is nowhere near as harsh as Menzel's. Nevertheless, they both agree that Goethe did not fulfil the obligations of a man of genius. Moir held that a gifted man has a duty to make active use of his gifts for the betterment of society. And by not using his talents appropriately, Moir believed that Goethe did harm. Instead of denouncing the social problems and vices of his age, Goethe observed and wrote poetry about them, thus passively beautifying wickedness and wrongdoing through his exquisite use of language, instead of instigating revolution and change. Moir (influenced by Menzel) believed Goethe took refuge in an ideal world of art and hid from duty. For Moir and Menzel Goethe ignored "the great interests of the time" and promulgated a "fanciful system of refined Epicurism" (24).



George Moir, photograph by Robert Adamson (1821–1848) and David Octavius Hill (1802–1870)

## Conclusion

This brief account of the British reception of Goethe highlights some views emerging in the decades following Thomas Carlyle's early translations of his works. Through undertaking this study, I hoped to clarify John Ruskin's attitude to Goethe, which, bearing in mind his friendship with Carlyle, was altogether surprising and intriguing. Ruskin's sentiments can be explained when the broader context of societal influences, as well as the timing of his friendship with Carlyle, are taken into consideration, as I have shown.

Carlyle successfully introduced Goethe's works to a wide audience of the non-German speaking Anglophone public. At the same time some of Carlyle's early writings suggested a cult of personality which many Victorians found

awkward. Carlyle urged society to adopt Goethe as a role model but did not count on the influences of Victorian prudery and reserve, and Goethe's reputation in Britain did not take shape in the way Carlyle wanted. Instead, the British readership formed their opinions on moralistic grounds, judging Goethe's personal life, character and ethics and disapproving of his pantheistic celebration of nature and his Manichaeian explorations of taboo subjects.

It is now 200 years since Carlyle introduced Goethe to English speakers. Social attitudes have changed, and Goethe is no longer judged on his morals or his ethics. Goethe's works, both literary and scientific, are slightly more familiar to English speakers and certainly understood in greater depths. However, Goethe remains a "niche" discipline and many of Goethe's essays, especially in the sciences, remain untranslated, being considered merely a subject of study for historians and specialists. Nevertheless, amongst those specialists there are those in both Britain and America, who openly recognise the worth and inspiration that Goethe's ideas can provide in the present day. They, like Carlyle, judge those ideas to be universally important. It is very much up to those of us who believe in the timeless value of Goethe's works to do what his Victorian critics berated him for not doing; that is to say, to work with Goethe; to find what is relevant in his exquisite literature and science and to perform a "metamorphosis" of ideas, such that novel, practically applicable concepts can take shape. However, it must not stop there. Whatever arises from such work must then be actively channelled into the creation of a better society.

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