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# Goethe's 'An den Mond' and the Lyrical Idiom of the German Evening Poem

Kenneth G. Negus

Und dennoch sagt der viel, der "Abend" sagt,  
Ein Wort, daraus Tiefsinn und Trauer rinnt  
Wie schwerer Honig aus den hohlen Waben.  
-Hugo von Hofmannsthal-

Goethe's 'An den Mond,' first published in its final version in 1789<sup>1</sup> is generally considered a culmination of his art of the lyric.<sup>2</sup> It also represents the first supreme achievement in the development of his special art of the evening poem during his thirties, the later phases being in his sixties (*West-östlicher Divan*) and in his late seventies ('Dämmerung senkte sich von oben...' and 'Dem aufgehenden Vollmond'). Like several of his most well-known evening lyrics, it is a moon poem.<sup>3</sup>

The poem also brings to fruition a century-old tradition of which the first prominent milestone was Paul Gerhardt's hymn, "Nun ruhen alle Wälder..." (sung by millions from childhood on, to this very day). This was followed by dozens of superb evening and night poems by Gryphius, Greiffenberg, Grimmelshausen ("Komm Trost der Nacht...") and others in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century the evening poem continued to flourish in the writings of Brockes, Klopstock, the *Hainbund* (especially Hölty) and Matthias Claudius ("Der Mond ist aufgegangen..."). When taken up by Goethe, an abundant vocabulary of poetic language had been established for the evening lyric, and much of this tradition reappears throughout his poetry. Yet, as will be seen, he not only adapted and modified this lyrical idiom, but gave to it as much as he had taken from it.

For Goethe, evening usually means the hours immediately following sundown, often **not** including sundown itself. Unlike his predecessors of the seventeenth century, he does not dwell so much on the time of coming home to rest after a hard day's work, as in that veritable archetype of German evening songs, Gerhardt's "Nun ruhen alle Wälder..." Frequently he uses "Nacht" interchangeably with "Abend." The reason for this, one might say, is that in Goethe's evening poems (as in those of the eighteenth century poets) interest had shifted almost completely from the setting of the sun to the rising of the moon. The latter is not even mentioned in Gerhardt's hymn.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of the moon as symbol in Goethe's evening poems, and in other works for that matter,<sup>5</sup> can hardly be overemphasized. His known moon lyrics span a full six decades, beginning with 'Die Nacht' (1768) and ending with 'Dem aufgehenden Vollmond' (1828). Almost always a more or less full moon is described, simply because this is its most impressive phase, when it is greatest in apparent size and also visible for the longest period of the evening hours. Goethe favored such hours for long, meditative walks.

A life-long student of the occult sciences, he was well aware of the complex astrological symbolism of the moon from an early age.<sup>6</sup> In this context, "Luna" is the mother, the wife, the beloved, the sister — in short, the archetypal

feminine symbol standing in complementary polarity with her male counterpart (father, husband, lover, brother), the sun. She is of silver, he of gold. She is related to the "element" of water, he to fire. She connotes constant inconstancy, the fluctuations of the wave-forms in nature and in human life, which recur in so many different forms throughout Goethe's writings, while he radiates the creative and life-giving power of his "element." Less obvious features of her symbolism include remembrance and meditation.<sup>7</sup>

Goethe showed great interest in the fact that at his birth the moon was just past the point opposite the sun.<sup>8</sup> He was, in other words, born "under a full moon." Great, indeed potentially dire significance was attributed to this configuration at the time. At least so he claimed in the opening passage of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, but with obvious irony. Often, however, he accepted some philosophical premises of astrology, to the extent that in his letter of December 8, 1798 he defended it against Schiller's obvious expressions of distaste in connection with the first scene of *Wallensteins Tod*.<sup>9</sup> Its primary value for Goethe as poet lay in its symbolism, as will be demonstrated.

The full moon, in which he took special interest, would be shown on the astronomical clock in his childhood home as an "opposition" between the sun and the moon — 180° apart on the framing circle of the ecliptic. It would appear roughly the same way on Goethe's birth chart, or "horoscope." The word opposition of course has negative connotations, and so it has been interpreted traditionally, especially by fortune-telling astrologers. Goethe, on the other hand, saw a potentially *benign* symbolic meaning in it:

So haben die Astrologen, deren Lehre auf gläubige unermüdete Beschauung des Himmels begründet war, unsere Lehre von Schein-, Rück-, Wider- und Nebenschein vorempfunden, nur irrten sie darin, dass sie das Gegenüber für ein Widerwärtiges erklärten, da doch der directe Rück- und Widerschein für eine freundliche Erwidernung des ersten Scheins zu achten. Der Vollmond steht der Sonne nicht feindlich entgegen, sondern sendet ihr gefällig das Licht zurück das sie ihm verlieh....<sup>10</sup>

And one might continue the sentence to the effect that the reflected light can shine benignly on the human being as well, "wie des Freundes Auge mild."

Perceiving the full moon completely therefore means also being aware of the "opposite" body, the sun. From there it is an easy step to a connotation of love and friendship. The suggestion of an "I" and a "Thou" is thus quite strong. Yet it remains a curious fact that such notions are not *explicitly* mentioned in Goethe's evening poems until rather late — in the *West-östlicher Divan*.<sup>11</sup> Only once in a major poem of the first half of his life does he refer obliquely to the brighter luminary in an evening poem — in the early "An den Mond" of 1769 or 1770 (entitled 'An Luna' in the 1789 version). Here he addresses the moon as "Schwester von dem ersten Licht," the "first light" being the sun. This phrase was apparently derived from French Anacreontic writers who referred to Luna as "la soeur du soleil."<sup>12</sup> This, however, is an exception in Goethe's early moon poems, for not until much later does he consistently refer to the sun and moon as two halves of a whole, as the masculine and feminine principles in union with each other.

Goethe's evening poems preceding the first version of 'An den Mond' of the Weimar period, are numerous. Although leading upward to this supreme

Negus: Goethe's 'An den Mond' and the Lyrical Idiom of the German Evening achievement, several of them also have considerable merit of their own, and contain some important features not present in 'An den Mond.' This is true to a degree even of the earliest ones written in Leipzig — 'Die Nacht' and the above-mentioned 'An Luna.' They are perceptibly derivative, employing some of the clichés of the *Hainbund* such as those found in Höltz's evening lyrics. Yet there are also original touches, anticipating some of the best of his later evening poems.

'Die Nacht' provides a good example of slightly transcended convention:

Gern verlass' ich diese Hütte,  
Meiner Schönen Aufenthalt,  
Und durchstreich mit leisem Tritte  
Diesen ausgestorbnen Wald.  
Luna bricht die Nacht der Eichen,  
Zephirs melden ihren Lauf,  
Und die Birken streun mit Neigen  
Ihr den süssen Weihrauch auf.  
  
Schauer, der das Herze fühlen,  
Der die Seele schmelzen macht,  
Wandelt im Gebüsch im Kühlen.  
Welche schöne, süsse Nacht!  
Freude! Wollust! Kaum zu fassen!  
Und doch wollt' ich, Himmel, dir  
Tausend deiner Nächte lassen,  
Gäb' mein Mädchen eine mir. (HA I, 18)

The first stanza is painted in *clairobscur* ("Luna bricht die Nacht der Eichen"), with the moon, although mentioned but once, still a prominent feature of the landscape. Sensuousness pervades the scene, with "zephirs" running over the body, and the sweet incense of the birches in the air. The latter contrast with the dark oaks, adding to the light-and-dark effect.

But then comes a hint of the great lyricist of the future, at the beginning of the second stanza. In the first three lines, the various elements of the lovely evening have now combined to arouse a shudder, *not only in the poet, but also throughout the surrounding landscape itself*. Thus the soul and a Something out there merge, for the shudder has caused the soul to "melt" and in its "dissolved" state to combine with the landscape, which also "shudders." The poet and the external world momentarily are one. It is as if there were a watery substance present that makes the soul and the landscape soluble, thus creating a oneness with the cosmos from which the poet usually is painfully isolated. Such a separation can reflect the separation of lovers from each other. There is hope, however, in the subjective experiencing of union with nature that somehow parallels the hope at the end: "Gäb mein Mädchen eine [Nacht] mir." The accomplishment of this poem is, then, considerable for such a youthful poet. The only relatively slight weakness (compared to later poems) is that the water symbolism is not quite so strong as it might be, its only overt expression being in the verb "schmelzen."

The first stanza of 'An den Mond' (later entitled 'An Luna') evokes a different atmosphere from that of the above — one of elegiac melancholy, and more conventional in its obvious derivation from the *Hainbund*. The 'Schwester von dem ersten Licht' is in mourning, is "Bild der Zärtlichkeit in Trauer," and

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arouses despair. She also, however, brings the poet and nocturnal birds to life. In the second stanza, she becomes a source of light and a vantage point for viewing the sleeping beloved, and the poet is then identified with the moon. He then engages in erotic fantasy, followed by a playful and witty *pointe*, expressing self-irony. The sum-total seems altogether conventional, but a few details point clearly to later, more original features. In the beginning there is the strong suggestion of the male-female sun-moon analogy, discussed above. Then in line 3 (“Nebel schwimmt mit Silberschauer”) there is momentarily the aforementioned Goethean “shudder.” The water symbolism is more prominent than in ‘Die schöne Nacht,’ in that the fog is a form of water — it even flows! The climax, in a kind of wave-crest prepared for in line 3, comes at the beginning of the third stanza:

“Dämmlung, wo die Wollust thront,  
Schwimmt um ihre runden Glieder.  
Trunken sinkt mein Blick hernieder.”

The potential voluptuousness of the “water” emerges fully here. Whether the stanza as quoted here is to be preferred over the later version is debatable. It must be noted that the latter omits most of the passion that is latent in the first two stanzas. Here is the later revision:

“Des Beschauens holdes Glück  
Mildert solcher Ferne Qualen,  
Und ich sammle deine Strahlen,  
Und ich schärfe meinen Blick.  
Hell und heller wird es schon  
Um die unverhüllten Glieder,  
Und nun zieht sie mich hernieder,  
Wie dich einst Endymion.” (HA I, 421)

The substitution is, of course, much more sedate. The variation on the Endymion myth is also an intriguing addition to Goethe’s poetic language of moon poems. Yet something essential is lost as well — the release of the passion stored up in the beginning.

A new development occurs in the Sesenheim poem, ‘Es schlug mein Herz. Geschwind, zu Pferde!’ written in 1771, during the early *Sturm und Drang* period, and revised for 1789 and 1810 editions under the title ‘Willkommen und Abschied.’ It has a peculiar combination of motifs for a German evening poem: the rapid motion of a horseback ride over the evening landscape; the description of the beloved at the destination; then the departure in the morning. (In the earlier versions it is uncertain just when the departure takes place; later the added word “Morgensonne” makes it clear.) Otherwise the details of the two main versions are essentially the same.

The first two stanzas contain the description of evening:

“Es schlug mein Herz, geschwind zu Pferde!  
Es war getan fast eh gedacht.  
Der Abend wiegte schon die Erde,  
Und an den Bergen hing die Nacht;  
Schon stand im Nebelkleid die Eiche,  
Ein aufgetürmter Riese, da,  
Wo Finsternis aus dem Gesträuche  
Mit hundert schwarzen Augen sah.

Der Mond von einem Wolkenhügel  
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Die Winde schwingen leise Flügel,  
Umsausten schauerlich mein Ohr;  
Die Nacht schuf tausend Ungeheuer,  
Doch frisch und fröhlich war mein Mut  
In meinen Adern welches Feuer!  
In meinem Herzen welche Glut!"

The first two lines, with all their turbulence, are a far cry indeed from the evening poems of the *Anakreontik* and Baroque, especially the earlier version of line two: "Und fort, wild wie ein Held zur Schlacht." Particularly striking is the contrast with those evening poems beginning with the onset of evening peace, quiet and rest: "Nun ruhen alle Wälder" (Gerhardt); "Ringsum ruhet die Stadt..." (Hölderlin's 'Brot und Wein'); "Der Mond ist aufgegangen..." (Claudius), etc.

Following the initial passionate outburst, there unfolds a series of richly suggestive images. "Der Abend wiegte schon die Erde," immediately after the near-frenzy of the first two lines, provides a contrasting background of rest, external to the poet's inner turmoil. It is, incidentally, a rare use of a lullaby motif — making Goethe in this respect somewhat atypical, in view of their frequent occurrence among others (Claudius, Brentano, etc.).<sup>14</sup> In the last five lines of the stanza, an ominous darkness envelops the landscape ("ein getürmter Riese," "Finsternis," "hundert schwarze Augen"). This pitch-black background provides, among other things, another contrasting setting for the moonlight, soon to be described. The "Nebelkleid" of the threatening oaks offers a barely perceptible suggestion of the "shudder," as described above, that man and nature experience in unison when enveloped by fog, in other evening settings. This oak is painted with the same dark connotations as in 'Die Nacht,' thus making it a special vocabulary word in Goethe's lyrical language.

The first five lines of the second stanza introduce the moon, presumably a nearly full one, but its full illuminating power is diminished by a "Wolkenhügel" and "Duft." This is a melancholy moon, again suggestive of the *Hainbund* type of elegy; it should be noted, however, that Goethe did not evoke this mood fully until the later version when it is "kläglich" rather than "schläfrig."<sup>15</sup> This is altogether consistent with the lines that follow, for the winds are "schauerlich" around his ear, and the final summation of this evening is: "Die Nacht schuf tausend Ungeheuer."

This is more than the elegiac melancholy of the *Anakreontik*, however. The hundred black eyes, the giant oak, the monsters lurking in the darkness comprise a *demonic* element in this night — one in which devils lurk in the shadows and perhaps not far off witches are imagined to be holding their celebrations. This combination of night fears makes the poem a polaric opposite of Gerhardt's 'Nun ruhen alle Wälder,' in which the night is totally restful and holy. (The only major German poet before Goethe who wrote fearsome night poems was Klopstock, but here it is not evil forces causing the terror, but a sense of being overwhelmed by the vastness of the starry firmament.<sup>16</sup>) Thus Goethe added a substantial set of themes to the traditional evening lyric in one of the major poems of his early manhood. He did not continue to develop them in his later evening lyrics, with the peripheral

The remainder of 'Willkommen und Abschied' is not relevant to our main concerns here. Two additional points should be noted, however. First, the internal turbulence experienced by the poet, along with an alienating fear of some aspects of the night, combine to *separate* man from the cosmos — a condition that is absent from previous German evening poems, with the possible exception of Klopstock.<sup>17</sup> The effect of this is to place the lovers of 'Willkommen und Abschied' on the blissful island paradise of a love-night. Such a situation stands in remarkable contrast to 'Mailed' (1771) in which a series of natural phenomena run in close parallel to various aspects of human love, thus *merging* man and nature. Secondly, 'Willkommen und Abschied' extends through the night and into the dawn, as in some important evening and night poems preceding Goethe's. Here there is no reference whatsoever to the hours between evening and dawn. The earlier tradition of the evening lyric frequently associated the night first with death, and then a later part of the night (or dawn) with resurrection and eternal life.<sup>18</sup> The final words here, however, are "lieben, Götter, welch ein Glück!" The cycle of evening-night-dawn is no longer, specifically, a mirror of the Christian doctrine of the transition from life to death to eternal life. Yet the dawn does complete the cycle, beginning with turmoil, which then changes into the calm and stability provided by the beloved, then into the culmination in an almost heavenly bliss caused by the recognition of personal fulfillment in love. This is a Faustian experience — an approach to the absolute, set off initially by a fiercely insatiable urge, in the presence of the forces of darkness. The dawn, as an appropriate symbol for the rapprochement to the absolute, readily recalls the opening scene of Part II of *Faust*. Thus we have here an ingenious combination of Goethe's individual creativity (in the Faustian motif) with the tradition of the German evening song.

The next stage of development of Goethe's evening poems is in the two 'Wanderer's Nachtlieder' of the early Weimar period. Here there is a swing of the pendulum to the opposite extreme of 'Willkommen und Abschied.' Now the evening is a time of sublime serenity:

#### WANDRERS NACHTLIED

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

#### EIN GLEICHES

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

The first poem was written in the winter (Feb. 12, 1776), the second in late summer (Sept. 6, 1780). The first is a prayer of yearning and supplication for "peace" ("Friede"), while the second anticipates a pleasurable "rest" ("Ruhe"). The first has a majority of bright vowels in the stressed syllable ("Himmel," "Leid," "elend," etc.); the second more dark vowels ("Ruh," "du," "Kaum,"

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 "Hauch," etc.). Such contrasting and complementary elements as these contribute much toward making this little pair of poems, as a unit, one of the major events in the history of the evening poem. It may well be that they were not originally conceived as a unit, and they therefore should be assessed as individual poems. Yet their intrinsic relevance to one another apparently impressed Goethe to the extent that he published them from 1815 on as 'Wandrer's Nachtlid' and 'Ein Gleiches.' Both poems, after all, are parallel in that they move from the heavens to earth, and at the end approach a total internalization of the peace and rest below that, at first, are found only above. Yet their differences are great.

The first poem is somewhat more traditional than the second in that it employs sharp contrasts between day and night motifs. Although not stated explicitly, it is clear that the four experiences of suffering mentioned in the poem are of the day: "Leid und Schmerzen," "elend," "des Treibens müde," and "Schmerz und Lust." It is equally clear that the more positive experiences are of the night: "stillest," "mit Erquickung füllest," and "Süsser Friede." As in Paul Gerhardt's hymn, the world comes to rest here, apparently after a particularly trying day of toil, pain and strife.

The striking effectiveness of the poem, in contrast to Gerhardt's, obviously comes in part from its succinctness. But it is moreso a matter of syntax and structure. Most prominent is the withholding of "Süsser Friede" (which identifies the "Der" of line 1) until the next to the last line. The poem also rises to its gentle but definite climax as a result of the division of the eight lines into two equal parts, with the final climax in "Friede" being anticipated with the sub-climaxes of "Himmel" in line 1, "stillest" in line 2 and "Erquickung" in line 4. These four "positives" are separated, however, by negatives. The "mood swings" of the poem can be graphed in the following manner:



Sound effects enhance these structural elements in a peculiar way. Bright vowels predominate, and among the consonants, there is emphasis on liquids and sibilants (soft and harsh, resp.). One would logically expect "dark" vowels to be salient in a night poem. But the key work here is the "bright" word, "Friede" — a light in the darkness. And this light is supported by the bright vowels at the peaks of the above diagram. Then, as highly effective contrast, the illuminating peace of the heavens is internalized and assimilated in the last line containing almost exclusively *dark* vowels, the most emphatic one being the final "Brust." The achievement of this evening poem, one might say, is in the internalization that comes about and is conveyed through the combination of the above wave-form and sound effects.

The second "Wandrer's Nachtlid" also moves from the heavens to the heart. The differences between the two poems, as evening songs, are nonetheless striking. The outstanding added feature is the landscape, with indications of the living beings inhabiting it. The poem is unfolded in four steps: "Gipfeln," "Wipfeln" ("im Walde"), "Vogelein," and "du." Thus the celestial "Ruh" has three definite stations along the way before reaching the human being, for it follows a descending path from hilltops to treetops to the birds of the forest to the human being. It is suggested that the whole cosmos, consisting of concentric spheres with man at the center, is coming to a state of rest,



particularly when one considers that the four stages of the poem — and how curious this is! — represent the four “kingdoms” of mineral, vegetable, animal and human (in that sequence). This same list can readily be associated with the earth, water, air and fire of the traditional sciences — thus rendering the symbolic cosmology of this tiny poem all the more complete and fundamental.<sup>19</sup> Yet the poem is utterly unpretentious. It contains no symbols, no similies or metaphors, as Wilkinson has pointed out.<sup>20</sup> It merely describes. Yet two of the most far-reaching structures of ancient tradition — the “kingdoms” and the “elements,” bestow far grander dimensions on it than its modest appearance on the page would suggest.

Also sound effects are used in a definite way. The rhyme scheme is slightly more complex than in the first “Nachtlied”: ababccdc. The main effect thereof is the suspense of the second half resulting from the “wait” for the final rhyme of the otherwise weak little “auch” which completes and punctuates the poem emphatically, leaving the “du” in a state of total rest. The rhyme scheme does not represent syntactical divisions as in the first poem, since there is a definite enjambement between lines four and five. The longest line of the poem, “Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde,” adds to the retardation of lines 5 through 8. It also contains sound effects that are a part of a musical structure of the whole poem. The “w” sound and its unvoiced equivalent “f” or “v” occur in “Vögelein,” “schweigen,” and “Walde.” This has been anticipated by “Gipfeln” and even moreso by “Wipfeln.” The climax of the sequence is the relatively emphatic imperative “Warte” in the following line.

Dark vowels dominate the poem, contrasting with the brightness of sound in the first “Nachtlied.” “Über allen Gipfeln” does, however, stress a few bright vowels, particularly the “Gipfeln/Wipfeln” combination, which forms alternating rhymes with the dark “Ruh/du.” There is the additional contrast in the one pair’s being a forward-moving feminine rhyme, the other a punctuating masculine one. This applies in part to the rhyming of the second half, but the “Hauch/auch” does not contrast so sharply with “Walde/balde” since the latter is a dark combination, as is the former. In the second half it is the whole line, “Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde” that provides the sound-contrast, not only by its length and emphatic alliteration, but also by its brightness in the “ie,” “ei” and “i” sounds, surrounded as they are by the “darkness” of lines five, seven and eight.

To sum up: “Über allen Gipfeln...” is a miracle among German evening songs, in that with eight short lines, Goethe reaches out into the infinity of the darkened sky; embraces heavenly peace; draws it to himself via the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdom; and at the same time plays a rich and varied word-music accompaniment, derived from certain “accidental” sound qualities of precisely the right words of the German language.

Also in the early Weimar years Goethe wrote the following poem:

#### JÄGERS ABENDLIED

Im Felde schleich' ich still und wild,  
Gespannt mein Feuerrohr,  
Da schwebt so licht dein liebes Bild,  
Dein süßes Bild mir vor.

Der wanderst jetzt wohl still und mild  
Durchs Feld und liebe Tal,  
Und ach, mein schnell verzaubert Bild,  
Stellt sich dir's nicht einmal?  
Des Menschen, der die Welt durchstreift  
Voll Unmut und Verdruss,  
Nach Osten und nach Westen schweift,  
Weil er dich lassen muss.  
Mir ist es, denk' ich nur an dich,  
Als in den Mond zu sehn;  
Ein stiller Friede kommt auf mich,  
Weiss nicht, wie mir geschehn.<sup>21</sup>

This poem represents a major transition in both Goethe's personal development and in his language of the evening lyric. Here the moon takes on roles and qualities that have previously been absent and that are characteristic of some of Goethe's most exquisite evening poems of his later years. These describe the evening setting as the territory of the lonely wanderer who seeks love and companionship, and finds them ultimately in symbolic features of the landscape, above all in the moon, which becomes a rich and complex embodiment of a feminine principle.

In 'Jägers Abendlied' the lovers are first depicted, in stanzas one and two, as seeking each other's elusive images while wandering about in the evening darkness. The third stanza then describes a Faustian kind of dissatisfaction, as in 'Willkommen und Abschied.' It is the final stanza that comprises the great step forward made by this poem. Here the beloved is not merely *suggested* by the moon, nor loosely *associated* with it; she is consciously *identified* with it. The result for the poet is inner peace. The abstract "Friede" of the first "Wandrer's Nachtlied" is here borne down to the poet by the light of the moon, onto which a loved woman has been projected.

This is one of the many expressions of the emotional tranquility that Goethe sought and sometimes found during the early Weimar period, largely under the influence of Charlotte von Stein. Therefore, although 'Jägers Abendlied' may have originally referred to Lili Schönemann, it still is highly relevant to the group of poems dedicated to Charlotte under the title 'Verse an Lida.' The culmination of this phase of his evening poetry is 'An den Mond':

Füllest wieder Busch und Tal  
Still mit Nebelglanz,  
Lösest endlich auch einmal  
Meine Seele ganz;  
Breitest über mein Gefild  
Lindernd deinen Blick,  
Wie des Freundes Auge mild  
Über mein Geschick.  
Jeden Nachklang fühlt mein Herz  
Froh- und trüber Zeit,  
Wandle zwischen Freud' und Schmerz  
In der Einsamkeit.  
Fliesse, fliesse, lieber Fluss!

So verrauschte Scherz und Kuss,

Und die Treue so.

Ich besass es doch einmal,

Was so köstlich ist!

Dass man doch zu seiner Qual

Nimmer es vergisst!

Rausche, Fluss, das Tal entlang,

Ohne Rast und Ruh,

Rausche, flüstre meinem Sang

Melodien zu,

Wenn du in der Winternacht

Wütend überschwillst,

Oder um die Frühlingspracht

Junger Knospen quillst.

Selig, wer sich vor der Welt

Ohne Hass verschliesst,

Einen Freund am Busen hält

Und mit dem genießt,

Was, von Menschen nicht gewusst

Oder nicht bedacht,

Durch das Labyrinth der Brust

Wandelt in der Nacht.

The first version of this poem, written about 1776 or 1777, was found undated among his letters to Charlotte. Accompanying it was a musical setting by Philipp Christoph Kayser (1755-1823), Goethe's acquaintance from Zürich who wrote music for several of his poems. The precise details concerning the choice of this musical setting are unknown — indeed, it apparently was first composed for another poem. (See HA I, 470.) We can at least assume, however, that this specific musical element was a prominent one in Goethe's mind from the earliest to the latest version. This is the text of the former:

Füllest wieder's liebe Tal

Still mit Nebelglanz,

Lösest endlich auch einmal

Meine Seele ganz.

Breitest über mein Gefild

Lindernd deinen Blick

Wie der Liebsten Auge, mild

Über mein Geschick.

Das du so beweglich kennst,

Dieses Herz im Brand.

Haltet ihr wie ein Gespenst

An den Fluss gebannt,

Wenn in öder Winternacht

Er vom Tode schwillt

Und bei Frühlingslebens Pracht

An den Knospen quillt.

Negus: Goethe's 'An den Mond' and the Lyrical Idiom of the German Evening

Selig, wer sich vor der Welt  
Ohne Hass verschliesst,  
Einen Mann am Busen hält  
Und mit dem genießt,  
Was den Menschen unbewusst  
Oder wohl veracht'  
Durch das Labyrinth der Brust  
Wandelt in der Nacht.

About a decade lies between the first and last version. The facts pertaining to the shaping of the poem in this period are scanty and ambiguous. Perhaps the most important unknown factor is the extent to which Charlotte von Stein participated in the creative process, for there is the tantalizing fact to reckon with that her very own version of the poem is extant — 'An den Mond. Nach meiner Manier' (HA I, 471). Scholars are sharply divided on the question of whether her poem was based on the earliest, or on the later of Goethe's version(s). If the former is true, it is possible that she contributed some major elements to the final version.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the facts of this matter may be, we know at least that Goethe considered the poem an appropriate statement to Charlotte, a confession revealing his deepest current thoughts and feelings about love and friendship, for it was sent to her, with manuscript and music both obviously prepared with care.<sup>23</sup> The extent to which Charlotte — or any other woman, for that matter — is significant for the later version, however, is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain. Thus, we leave the question open here. There is at least one outstanding certainty about the early stages of the poem: its close association with music, to which the patterns and logic of verbal discourse are often irrelevant. Furthermore, within the context of the language of German evening poems, some of the main problems of scholarly criticism, particularly pertaining to the genesis of these poems in their authors' lives, are of little or no interest.

A few observations about the differences between the two versions of 'An den Mond' are helpful at this point. First, the earlier poem uses the simile for the moon, "Wie der Liebsten Auge," whereas the later one has "Wie des Freundes Auge." Secondly, the poet in the first version is "wie ein Gespenst,/An den Fluss gebannt," whereas this demonic captivation (reminiscent of "Willkommen und Abschied") is totally removed from the later one. Third, the theme of reminiscence of past pleasure and pain, and its symbolization by the flow of the river are absent in the first version, but comprise a major part of the later one (stanzas 3-6). Finally, the definitive version adds the totally new element of the transcending power of poetry ("flüstere meinem Sang/Melodien zu") over the unsettling fluctuations of life. This is then followed by the final resolution (taken almost verbatim from the earlier poem) of friendship and the sharing of one's reminiscences of past experiences with the friend.

The first version is much simpler and structurally more sharply defined than the final one. It consists of six stanzas, organized syntactically and imagistically in three divisions of two stanzas each. The first division describes the "descent of peace" through the "Nebelglanz," the release of the soul, and its union with the moonlit landscape. The second portrays the inwardly turbulent poet in his captivation by the river, which indicates the extremes in the ebbs and flows of nature, as well as a demonically threatening

night, as noted in the earlier version, is a "dark" vision of a close union with another human being, with whom a walk through "das Labyrinth der Brust" is shared. The first section describes an inner and outer state of peace; the second turbulence; the third synthesis ("Selig," but wandering through "das Labyrinth der Brust"). Again, as in the 'Wandrer's Nachtlieder,' the movement is from the sky downward, ending in the "Brust," but in this case making a detour along the way to describe the state of simultaneous unrest and bondage to the river. Also exclusive to the first version is the sharply contrasting polarity of the gentle, fluid light of the moon and a heart of fire (cp. 'Willkommen und Abschied').

A few small differences in wording yield additional insights. The first line, "Füllest wieder's *liebe Tal*" (later "Füllest wieder *Busch und Tal*") conveys an intimacy and folksy ingenuousness, as well as a brightness of sound, not present in the opening of the later version. (Yet the strophic pattern, very common in the folksong, remains.) As for the "unbewusst" and "wohl veracht" in the last stanza of the earlier version, one could argue that they say somewhat more than the blander "nicht gewusst" and "nicht bedacht." The former are probably a better description of mankind's general attitude toward unsettling tours through the inner labyrinth. A final observation to support some degree of merit of the earlier version (without claiming its superiority) is that it is far more singable to Keyser's music than the final one, partly because of the latter's excessive length for such a short melody, and partly because the earlier one can be more definitely interpreted by the singer's voice due to the clarity of differing moods of the three two-stanza divisions.

In the definitive poem, the sharp delineations and contrasts of the earlier one are blurred — which is not to say that it is a less artful poem. On the contrary, a new and quite definite structure emerges here: one of successive continuity from stanza to stanza. The parts flow into one another by virtue of the fact that the end of each stanza anticipates the next.<sup>24</sup> Analyzing the poem by grouping stanzas together, as with the first version, leads only to bewilderment. The first and second stanzas do comprise a unit in a way, but then stanza three returns to the inner experiencing of the moonlit landscape, as does stanza one, thus providing alternation between the internal and the external — and also making one through three a unit as well! Then in stanza four there is a return to externalities, this time not to the heavens, however, but to the river flowing by. Again there is alternation from the outer ("Fluss") to the inner ("ich," continuing through stanza 5); and then again in six ("Rausche, Fluss" and "meinem Sang"). In a way this rounds off a unit consisting of stanzas four through six, in that it is completed by the characterization of the river, as musical accompaniment to his song. This latter idea, however, is expanded in stanza seven to include the whole range of experiences suggested by the extremes of overflowing and destructive turbulence in winter, and of the calmer life-nourishing flow of spring. (In the earlier version the contrast was a more definite one: between death and life.) Thus, another unit emerges, consisting of stanzas four through seven, in spite of the rounded-off thought in four through six. The last two stanzas then form a sharply defined unit, as already described for the earlier version.

The final poem, then, is structured — if one can call it that — according to a complex wave pattern of varying ebb and flow, and of interlocking alternations between the inner and the outer — all of which is suggestive of the "Labyrinth der

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inexorable flow of time, especially as it is recognized in the reminiscence of past happiness and unhappiness. This is conveyed largely by means of a complex set of images, combining (1) musical and other auditory metaphors; (2) water symbolism; and (3) a cumulative polarization of various opposites.

The past is experienced musically with the *Nachklang*... froh und trüber Zeit." A series of three more auditory perceptions reinforces this "hearing" of the past: "So *verrauschte* Scherz und Kuss"; "*Rausche*, Fluss"; and finally the culmination in "*Rausche, flüstre* meinem Sang/Melodien zu." (Italics mine) The stanza from which the last example is taken stands out, appropriately, as the one with the greatest predominance of dark vowels. Thus a musical accompaniment to the poet's reminiscences is played not only by the sound-qualities of his words, but also by evocation of the rushing sound of the river. So prominent is this feature of the landscape that it would not be inaccurate to expand the title of the poem to include "und den Fluss." In fact, the direct address indicated by the word "an" actually applies more to the river than to the moon, for only the first two stanzas are said to the latter, whereas four (stanzas four through seven) are directed to the former.

The "element" with which we are dealing here is, of course, water, a substance that in its usual liquid state defies attempts to grasp and shape it.<sup>25</sup> Its symbolic use for the inexorable "river of time" is well-known as a universal symbol, as well as one found throughout Goethe's writings. There are often connotations of life-nurturance and cleansing purity. Its undulance, especially in the oceans, suggests the rhythmic ebb and flow common to many phenomena in both human life and in nature. Not the least among these "cycles" is that of symbolic death, rebirth and regeneration, as in the baptismal rite, and the ritual "funeral" service of Freemasonry.

There is a special Goethean element here, however, in the suspension of time, whereby past, present and future are merged into one another, almost to the point where, as Goethe says in his later poem, "jeder Schritt ist Unermesslichkeit" (HA I, 357). All events become simultaneous in the poem's brief moment of meditation.<sup>26</sup> We observe the paradoxical static-dynamic image of a river that combines flow with immobility, and see its reference to the human problem of time, and a momentary solution, in its contemplation *sub specie aeternitatis*.

An even more typical Goethean element is then combined with this simultaneity, represented by the river, namely **polarity**. The whole middle section of the poem abounds with polaric opposites: froh/trüb (l.10); Freud'/Schmerz (l.11); Nimmer froh (l.14)/Scherz-Kuss-Treue (l.15 f.); köstlich (l.18)/Qual (l.19); and finally Winternacht (l.25)/Frühlingspracht (l.27). Thus a major point of each of stanzas three, four, five and seven is a polarity. Oscillations between other kinds of opposites have been noted in stanzas one through three as well.

The final polarity of the above list — "Winternacht/Frühlingspracht" — embraces the greatest sphere, extending as it does into natural phenomena. It strongly suggests that human life swings back and forth as do all things in the natural world, especially as in the annual seasonal cycle (with the diurnal cycle also indicated with the mentioning of night). Such an interplay of opposites is far different from that which is so basic to the German Baroque, in which there

is generally an unresolved, often static, tension between opposites. In Goethe's writings, opposites represent the peaks and troughs of cycles, which can be represented nowadays in their purest form by the sine wave on an oscilloscope. Such a wave remains stationary on the screen, yet it reveals the form of a moving phenomenon. The contemplation of both the river and these various cyclicities has the effect of stopping time. These two features of the poem culminate together in stanza seven: the flow of time is shown to be subject to the laws of seasonal cyclicity, whereby each present cycle is identifiable with every other one — past, present and future. The cycle is a circle manifesting itself in wave forms, as the sine wave is the mathematical translation of a circle.

It is well-known that one of Goethe's most ubiquitous categories of symbols was that of cycles, ranging from the year, to the day, to the two most directly observable ones in ourselves: breathing and the heart-beat.<sup>27</sup> For the development of human beings, specifically for the unfolding of the self, the particular cyclicity involved here is that of "Verselbsten" and "Entselbstigung" — the alternating integration and disintegration of the self, as explained in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.<sup>28</sup>

Nothing more than a walk over a moonlit landscape is the occasion for all this insight, wisdom and poetic experiencing — indeed, for a kind of magic, in that the laws of time and space are temporarily suspended. Goethe creates of this experience a complex imagery and a word-music that approach the maximum potential of the symbolic meanings of the various features of the scene. He accomplishes this with nearly every device of the poetic language of the evening-song tradition, plus much of his own invention, within the confines of nine four-line stanzas. Only two main features are more fully developed in other poems: sound effects (which reach their peak of sophistication in the "Wanderers Nachtlieder"); and the fully conscious use of the moon as a symbol of the archetypal feminine, in "union" with the sun as archetypal masculine, as previously discussed. Instead, the union here is generalized to an asexual I-Thou.

The main accomplishment here in the context of the history of the German evening poem lies in the magical merging of the "Seele" and "Herz" with the landscape, by means of the illuminating solvent that the moon — Klopstock's (and Goethe's) "Gedankenfreund" — pours over the earth. This "water" is then actualized in the water of the river, which ingeniously reflects and unifies movements and patterns in the poet's life and in nature. It also harmonizes opposites, as described above, so that this evening poem is neither exclusively the melancholy elegy of Klopstock and the "Hainbund," nor exclusively the comforting hymn of faith and tranquility of earlier tradition: it is both and more.

It represents one of the stages, probably numbering no more than a dozen or so in Goethe's life, in which he successfully summed up his experience, both external and internal, and shaped it into a poetic creation that is simultaneously unique, typically Goethean, and traditional. In the poem, the individual achieves near-perfect sovereignty (though a friend is needed), through willing and amicable detachment ("ohne Hass"). He absorbs the landscape into the self and thus concretizes "das Labyrinth der Brust" — a separate inner world approaching the dimensions and complexity of the outer

Negus: Goethe's 'An den Mond' and the Lyrical Idiom of the German Evening world. This represents a pinnacle of self-fulfillment, of individuation, effected by a profound and intense union with the evening, and conveyed by one of the richest conceivable lyrical idioms.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Text according to the *Hamburger Ausgabe*, I, 129 f. Further references to Goethe's works will be primarily to this edition, and indicated by "HA."

<sup>2</sup>The bibliography for this single poem and closely related matters is immense. The most helpful items for this article were: Wolfgang Schadewaldt, "Mond und Sterne in Goethes Lyrik: Ein Beitrag zu Goethes erlebtem Platonismus," in: *Goethe und die Tradition*, ed. Hans Reiss (Frankfurt a/M: Athenäum, 1972), pp. 59-83; Harold Jantz, "Goethe's Lyric, 'An den Mond': Its Structure and Unity," *GQ*, 26 (1953), 25-32; Emil Staiger, *Goethe*, 2 vols. (Zürich und Freiburg i. B.: Atlantis, 1952/1956), I, 331-336 and II, 326; and Werner Danckert, *Goethe: Der Urgrund seiner mythischen Weltanschauung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1951), esp. pp. 147-151. For additional bibliography see HA I, 471 f. and Schadewaldt, p. 82 f.

<sup>3</sup>For discussion of this particular symbol in the German lyric see Schadewaldt. One of the fullest, yet concise discussions as a universal symbol can be found under "Moon" in J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library: 1962).

<sup>4</sup>Eighteenth-century German poets were moon-struck to an extent that was unmatched before or since. Aside from Goethe's lyrics, the milestone showing this shift in emphasis to the moon in the history of the evening lyric was Claudius, "Der Mond is aufgegangen..." — which nevertheless was obviously derived from Gerhardt's "Nun ruhen alle Wälder." There are extensive verbal correspondences; yet Gerhardt does not mention the moon! Claudius' adaptation was recognized over a century ago by Daniel Jacoby in an article that is still of interest: "Paul Gerhardt und Matthias Claudius," *Archiv für die Geschichte deutscher Sprache und Dichtung*, 1. Bd. (1874), 381-384.

<sup>5</sup>See Schadewaldt, p. 60 f.

<sup>6</sup>During Goethe's childhood an astronomical clock was acquired by his family. On it he could follow the current planetary, sun and moon positions in the Zodiac; see *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, end of Book 4 (HA IX, 162). It is well-known that he studied the occult sciences, including astrology, during his convalescence from 1768 to 1770: see *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Book 8 (HA IX, 338 ff.; also Danckert, pp. 147-151). Interest in the occult continued in many forms throughout his life: see the *Goethe-Handbuch* (new and old) under "Aberglaube," "Alchemie," "Astrologie," "Mystik," "Geheime Gesellschaften," "Geheimnis," and "Okkultismus." But a word of caution: it is highly doubtful that Goethe "believed in" these things in a literal sense. The whole matter is fraught with ambiguities. As a vast and rich source of symbolism, however, their value is unimpeachable.

<sup>7</sup>For further details see Cirlot, under "Moon."

<sup>8</sup>See *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, HA IX, 10.

<sup>9</sup>HA, Briefe, II, 360 f. See also Schiller's letters of Dec. 4, 11 and 25 (the last one to Iffland).

<sup>10</sup>From *Entoptische Farben*, "Paradoxer Seitenblick auf die Astrologie," *Gedenkausgabe* XVI, 808-810.



- <sup>11</sup>For example, the University of Dayton Review, Vol. 15, No. 3 [1982], Art. 5, 'es, er vermähl- te...'; and probably (by analogy) in 'Vollmondnacht' (HA II. 84.) The best example in *Faust* is in lines 8285 ff.
- <sup>12</sup>See note to the poem, HA I, 421.
- <sup>13</sup>The association of the moon with death constitutes a large element of its symbolism in mythology and tradition. See Cirlot, p. 205.
- <sup>14</sup>The lullaby, perhaps the best-known type of evening lyric among folksongs has its greatest representation in the eighteenth century in the poems of Matthias Claudius. These charming cradle songs apparently have not received the attention they deserve, particularly by the nation that favors such lyrics and related types so much. Consider such examples as Brentano's "Wiegenlied;" Brahms' famous lullaby; "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht;" and many others.
- <sup>15</sup>This lamenting moon, often associated with death, appears in *Faust*, l. 386 ff.: "O sähst du, voller Mondenschein./Zum letztenmal auf meine Pein./den ich so manche Mitternacht/An diesem Pult herangewacht..." In *Werther* it is a primary feature of the landscape and symbolism of the gloomy Ossian passages (HA VI, 82: 10-13; 109:3-6; 111: 20-24; 112: 32-36; 114: 3-6 and 14-16)
- <sup>16</sup>A list of only the most important of such poems by Klopstock is substantial: "Die Ges tirne" (esp. the last three stanzas), "Die Welten," "Der Tod," "Dem Unendlichen," "Der Vorhof und der Tempel" and "Die Erinnerung." It should be noted, however, that Klopstock's night terrors are frequently overcome by exhilarating thoughts about immortality and eternity.
- <sup>17</sup>The main example would be Klopstock's "Die Welten," especially the end.
- <sup>18</sup>For example, Gerhardt's "Nun ruhen alle Walder..." and Gryphius' *Abend.* Grimms-hausen's "Komm Trost der Nacht, o Nachtigall" moves from day to night to morning, but does **not** explicitly develop this symbolism. Claudius' 'Abendlied' has traces of this cycle and symbolism (with the theme of eternal life in the second to the last stanza), but does not mention dawn. Klopstock's 'Die frühen Gräber' is at least suggestive of the three-stage cycle.
- <sup>19</sup>The poem, even more curiously, presents the four elements (as they correspond to nature and man) in a *reversed hierarchy* from that of tradition, which more logically places mineral (earth) at the bottom and man (fire; "the divine spark") at the top of Creation. See one of the many representations of the cosmos as consisting of concentric spheres, for example in Will-Erich Peuckert's *Astrologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), p. 190.
- <sup>20</sup>Elizabeth M. Wilkinson, "Goethe's Poetry," *German Life and Letters*, N.S., 2 (1949), 316-329. "There is in it not a simile, not a metaphor, not a symbol. Three brief simple statements of fact are followed by a plain assertion for the future." In line with our discussion thus far, however, we would qualify this statement to the effect that there is an underlying, albeit subtle, *symbolic structure and sequence* — but whether by design or not is impossible to say.
- <sup>21</sup>HA I, 121. The poem was originally published under the title 'Jägers Nachtlied' in 1776, and revised as 'Jägers Abendlied' for publication in the *Schriften* in 1789.
- <sup>22</sup>The most important ones would be in her fourth and fifth stanzas, which would have become Goethe's fourth and third, resp.
- <sup>23</sup>See the reproductions of both in Julius Wahle's *Gedichte Goethes an Frau von Stein*, in *Schriften der Goethe-Gesellschaft*, 37 (1924), 6th and 7th facsimiles.

<sup>24</sup>See Negus: Goethe's 'An den Mond' and the Lyrical Idiom of the German Evenin

<sup>25</sup>Water as traditional symbol is well summarized in Cirlot, 345-347.

<sup>26</sup>See Jantz' discussion of Goethe's thoughts on the merging of past, present and future in the stream symbol, p. 25 f.

<sup>27</sup>Cycles are dynamic interactions of polarities, the best scholarly discussions of which are probably Karl Vietor's in *Goethe: Dichtung, Wissenschaft, Weltbild* (Bern: Francke, 1949), pp. 265-469, esp. p. 467, *et passim*; and Danckert, pp. 371-400.

<sup>28</sup>End of Book 9. It should be stressed that "Entselbstigung" is by no means an altogether negative phase of development: "...genug, wenn nur anerkannt wird, dass wir uns in einem Zustande befinden, der, wenn er uns auch niederzuziehen und zu drücken scheint dennoch Gelegenheit gibt, ja zur Pflicht macht, uns zu erheben und die Absichten der Gottheit dadurch zu erfüllen, dass wir, indem wir von einer Seite uns zu verselbsten genötigt sind, von der andern in regelmässigen Pulsen uns zu entselbstigen nicht ver-säumen" (*HA IX*, 353). And in *Der West-östlicher Divan* we find:

"Im Atemholen sind zweierlei Gnaden:  
Die Luft einziehn, sich ihrer entladen.  
Jenes bedrängt, dieses erfrischt;  
So wunderbar ist das Leben gemischt.  
Du danke Gott, wenn er dich presst,  
Und dank' ihm, wenn er dich wieder entlässt."  
(*HA II*, 10)

