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Goethe's Ghosts

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15: "Ja, Goethe über alles und immer!": Benn's "Double Life" in His Letters to F. W. Oelze (1932–56)

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"GOETHE ÜBER ALLES!" This phrase, with its thinly veiled allusion to the German national anthem, means that Goethe was more important than Germany. The emphatic slogan is to be found in Gottfried Benn's letter to Friedrich Wilhelm Oelze from 8 November 1950.¹ The correspondence between the two men had already been going on for eighteen years by this time. It began in 1932, the Year of Goethe, in connection with which Benn contributed an essay, "Goethe und die Naturwissenschaften" (Goethe and the natural sciences). It was first published in a special edition of *Die neue Rundschau* on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of Goethe's death, titled "Sonderheft zum hundertsten Todestag Goethes," which included contributions from Gerhart Hauptmann, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Ortega y Gasset. Seeing his essay in the company of such illustrious authors was an enduring source of pride for Benn.

This essay, which we now know hovers on the edge of being an act of "montage" plagiarism, so much impressed the highly educated merchant and expert Goethe aficionado Oelze that he dashed off a letter to the author. On 21 December 1932, Oelze received his first scant response from Benn. The initial contact through the medium of Goethe proved to be foundational and marked their entire correspondence of 749 letters written between 1932 and 1956, the year Benn died. Quite literally in fact: "Goethe über alles" also means that more than anyone else Goethe was the one that they most often spoke about—the index of names for the correspondence contains 94 entries for Goethe, and he pops up in quotes and allusions on many other occasions. This number is only slightly surpassed by a different name, one that, from the start, appeared to be connected to Goethe: Friedrich Nietzsche. For Benn, according to a 1950 essay, Nietzsche is "der weitreichende Gigant der nachgoethischen Epoche" (the far-reaching giant of the post-Goethe epoch).² There are 100 entries for his name in the index, but in terms of esteem he comes in behind Goethe, due to the letter

writers' ambivalence toward him. Thomas Mann trails in third place with only 39 entries.

These statistics are anything but coincidental, for they appear in the same proportions in Gottfried Benn's collected works. The index of names in the Stuttgart edition also shows Goethe and Nietzsche at the top of the number of entries. With 179 entries, Nietzsche comes in just ahead of Goethe with 165. Lagging way behind are Schiller with 52 and Heinrich Mann with 48.³

In this manner Goethe and Nietzsche, like a pair of opposite twins, never appear in the letters without each other and constitute the foundational pillars, nay, the patron saints and pillar-saints of a correspondence that spanned a quarter century full of extreme crises. They act as supports for everything else, even when they do not appear directly. They provide the measure for opinions and judgments. They make the oppressive weight of life under the Nazis bearable and legitimize the sharp diagnoses and sarcastic criticism of the times. On 22 March 1947 Benn writes, "Goethes Todestag, ein Ereignis, das ich nie ohne Rührung an mir vorübergehen lasse. Er—dies Geheimnis! Goethe u. Nietzsche, diese beiden: ihre Erscheinung, ihre Verse, ihre Aussprüche—ihre Vollendung—, diese beiden sind es, die ich anbetend in mir trage" (2.1:72; The anniversary of Goethe's death, an event that I never let pass over me without being moved. He—this secret! Goethe and Nietzsche, these two: their appearance, their verse, their expressions—their perfection—, I carry both of them adoringly inside of me). And in September 1949, when the Goethe essay was republished (Zurich 1949), Benn reinforced the sentiment in a hand-written dedication: "Ausgangspunkt und Grundlage unserer Beziehungen 1932 / Ihnen, lieber Herr Oelze, in neuer Fassung übersandt" (2.1:24; The point of origin and the basis of our relations in 1932 / Sent to you, dear Mr. Oelze, in its new version).

This dual cult is only surprising at first glance. Even though Ernst Robert Curtius stated in 1932 that "Germany today is in a constellation that is remote from Goethe,"⁴ and although Goethe clearly stood in Friedrich Schiller's shadow during the Nazi regime, Gottfried Benn had decidedly set out on a homeward journey back to the world of Goethe the "patriarch" after 1931–32. And Nietzsche was for him, as for so many of that artistic generation, one of the fixed stars in the spiritual firmament.

Many Germans who did not consent and remained in opposition to the Nazis only began to find "Trost bei Goethe" (solace in Goethe) again in the period between 1933 and 1945. On this point Karl Robert Mandelkow, the historian of the German reception of Goethe, observes that, "Much of the written evidence of a covert opposition against the inhumane spirit [*Geist*] of the years 1933 to 1945 that has been handed down could be classified under what would become a slogan, seeking solace in Goethe, and eventually a marketable book title" (GiD 87). It was

in this vein that in 1938 Hans Carossa gave an unctuous Goethe sermon and the “inner emigrant” Frank Thiess rose to heights of hyperbole in 1946: “I contend, and I absolutely stand by this contention, that it was Goethe’s spirit [*Geist*] alone that prevented the total contamination and self-destruction of the German people” (GiD 135). This was around the time that Friedrich Meinecke advised postwar Germans to found Goethe communities in order to accomplish their inward transformation and catharsis. During this time also the poet was elevated to being “not merely a representative of a humanistic Germany but of the entire Christian Occident” (GiD 137). It would take the Germans another two decades before they were ready to respond to a reproach formulated in 1949, the hundredth anniversary of Goethe’s birth, by the Germanist Richard Alewyn, who had returned from exile. In a piece titled with a question, “Goethe als Alibi?” (Goethe as alibi?), Alewyn stated: “Between us and Weimar lies Buchenwald. There is no way around it.”⁵

In a refreshing and stubborn way, Gottfried Benn’s “one-sided dialogue” contrasts with these collective escapist and comfort-seeking tendencies from the period before, during, and after the war. Of course, there are similarities with and analogies to the Goethe cult of the “inner emigration,” but *his* conversation with Goethe seems to take place on a solitary island of intellectual spirits [*Geister-Insel*] inhabited by just two people. As usual, Benn’s views and judgments are more extreme and more radical than those of his contemporaries and his conservative correspondent. Oelze speaks as the educated Goethe enthusiast and custodian of tradition; Benn speaks as the productive, headstrong artist. But they mutually inspire and reinforce one another.⁶

Goethe and Nietzsche do not merely serve as safe havens for the two of them but also function as sites of resistance. Even in 1949 they did not join in with the chorus of Goethe festivities. The beloved and stereotypical connection to the German people was summarily cut off. As early as 7 October 1935, Benn wrote triumphantly, “Hat er nun eigentlich im völkischen Sinne gewirkt, Goethe? Keine Spur! Herrliche, haltende Erkenntnis von der Wirkungslosigkeit der Tiefe auf das Tägliche [. . .] hier ist es: die Isoliertheit des erwählten Geistes, dessen der leidet und spricht” (1:75–76; Did he act according to *völkisch* principles? No way! A marvelous, durable recognition of the inefficacy of profundity on the quotidian [. . .] here it is: the isolation of the chosen Spirit, of him who suffers and speaks). There is a feeling of triumph because Benn and Oelze recognize themselves as outsiders in this mirror, as isolated and suffering individuals, who secure their threatened and elite identities in hard times through conversation with Goethe and Nietzsche.

The very first mention of Goethe and Nietzsche in a letter of 2 August 1933 introduces them as intellectual heroes [*Geistesheroen*] who surpass everything else: “Im letzten [Brief], von gestern, aber steht das

Hervorragendste, das ich je in ihnen las, nämlich das über Goethe und Nietzsche. [. . .] Dieser Blick [über den Willen zur Macht], der alles umfasste, was sich in unserem Leben als Problem doch erst *herausstellte*—. [. . .] Das grösste Rätsel, das unbegreiflichste Phänomen! Gäbe es mehr als diese zwei im vorigen Jahrhundert, es wäre kaum zu ertragen” (1:29; In [your] last [letter] yesterday I read the most brilliant thing I have ever read in any of them, namely what you wrote about Goethe and Nietzsche. [. . .] This perspective [on the will to power], which encompassed everything that had only just been exposed as a problem in our life—. [. . .] The greatest mystery, the most incomprehensible phenomenon! If there had been more in the last century than these two [Goethe and Schiller], it would almost be unbearable). “Der soziologische Nenner, der hinter Jahrtausenden schief” (Sociology’s modifier, / behind millennia asleep) meant for Gottfried Benn here too, “ein Paar Männer, und die litten tief” (SW 1:174; a pair of men, / whose suffering ran deep).⁷

But in spite of all the pervasive and hyperbolic veneration and exaltation—“Sagen wir also: Goethe, die Vollendung” (21 November 1935, 1:88; Let’s just say: Goethe, complete perfection); “das aufgewachsene Wunder, das schöpferische Rätsel schlechthin” (6 February 1936, 1:105; a full grown miracle, *the* creative mystery); “bleiben wir schlicht bei den Worten des Grössten im Quartär” (29 March 1940, 1:233; let’s simply stick to the words of the greatest [man] of the Quaternary)—Benn and Oelze would go on to constitute a men’s quartet with the two other geniuses from the preceding centuries. Within this quartet they found themselves preserved, supported, and validated as if they existed in a parallel world, even during the most difficult and darkest years of the Nazi period.⁸ Certainly this was due in part to Gottfried Benn’s way of consistently bringing the two intellectual giants [*Geistesriesen*] down to earth for his correspondent with critical and sarcastic comments, whose shock value gave Benn a not-so-thinly-veiled pleasure. He was not intimidated by the classics and classicism, all the less so because he took on the role of the self-confident pupil in their correspondence, who would be led little by little through the complete works by the painstaking Goethe-expert Oelze. But most of all he was not intimidated because Goethe was never in his “possession”; instead, Goethe always gave him a new sense of “trepidation.” Many years later, in his “Vortrag in Knokke” (Lecture in Knokke, 1952), he noted critically, “Ich beginne die Auseinandersetzung über die Lyrik meiner Generation mit einem Namen, der die größte Erschütterung in Deutschland war, die es je gab—Goethe war nie eine Erschütterung, Goethe war immer ein Besitz—ich beginne mit Nietzsche” (SW 6:73; I begin the discussion of my generation’s lyric poetry with a name that was the source of the greatest trepidation in Germany—not Goethe, who was never a cause for trepidation, Goethe was always a possession—I begin with Nietzsche). But he himself admitted, “Wenn ich anfangen, etwas über

Goethe zu lesen [. . .] beginnt es immer mit Zittern. So sehr erregt mich immer wieder diese Erscheinung. Immer wieder die Angst, vor solche Überwältigungen treten zu müssen, denen man schlechterdings nicht gewachsen ist" (Whenever I begin to read something about Goethe [. . .] it always begins with trembling. Again and again his apparition stirs me up so. Again and again the fear of having to face such overpowering forces that one cannot possibly measure up to).⁹

Oelze kept him supplied with volumes of Goethe. He started by acquainting him with many poems, with *West-östlicher Divan* and *Maximen und Reflexionen*. (It was not until June 1950 that Benn commented on these: "There's great stuff in there" [2.2:42]; Benn would continue to speak of the *Reflexionen und Maximen* to the end of his life.) And Oelze drew Benn's attention to pivotal keywords and gave him provocative impulses. As late as 17 August 1948, Benn would write (and without false humility): "Einen Goetheaufsatz habe ich aber bestimmt nicht vor. Kenne den Altmeister nicht gut genug, ergötze mich nur privat an ihm" (2.1:152; I certainly don't plan on writing a Goethe essay. Don't know the old master well enough, just take a private delight in him). And on 19 June 1950, he confessed to his master Oelze, "Aber ich bin immer wieder überrascht, wie Sie namentlich Goethe immer wieder zu vertiefen wissen und meinen blinden Augen neue Gesichtspunkte nahe bringen. Ich bin an Ihnen gemessen sehr oberflächlich" (2.2:41; I am consistently amazed at how you repeatedly manage to reveal new depths in Goethe and present my blind eyes with new vantage points. Measured against you I am very superficial). But in their exchanges, his surfaces sparkled and flashed so much that his mentor must have had to rub the dazzle from his own eyes more than once.

Benn's critique of Nietzsche, at the same time a sort of self-critique, grew in proportion to his turn away from the Nazi regime. It surfaced boldly for the first time in his letter from 5 March 1937: "Dürer, Goethe, Beethoven, Balzac, alle! Was für ein positiver Jüngling ist eigentlich dieser Nietzsche darunter! Wie treudeutsch noch der Zarathustra u. alle diese Züchtungsphantasmagorieen! [. . .] Er hatte zu lange gezüchtet u. gewettert u. in S.A.-vorahnungen sich ergangen. Er hatte sich noch nicht sauber getrennt vom Sieg u. von der Macht und den Stuhlbeinheroen der Saalschlachtkämpfer; der lebenslange grosse Verrat des inneren Menschen, das war es, was zu Turin u. Jena führte" (1:165–66; Dürer, Goethe, Beethoven, Balzac, all of them! What a positive sapling Nietzsche is in their midst! How typically German even Zarathustra is and all these phantasmagoria of cultivated breeding! [. . .] He cultivated too long and fulminated and indulged himself in notions prescient of the S.A. He had not made a clean cut from victory and from power and the chair-leg-wielding heroes among the combatants in the meeting hall battles; the lifelong, grand betrayal of the inner individual, that's what it was that led to Turin and Jena).

The Goethean counterpoint appears in a more surreptitious and ironic manner through the keyword "abgefeimt" (wily, cunning, villainous), a fickle expression of refracted admiration. Its first use is in a letter from 21 October 1935: "Goethes Gedichte von Ihnen noch herrlicher. Sie liegen im Büroschubfach, immerzu lese ich darin. Kenne das meiste nicht. Wie weltmännisch, innerlich raffiniert, man könnte fast sagen: abgefeimt seine Weisheit ist. Ratschläge eines alten Kavaliers! Ganz unheimlich ministeriell repräsentativ u. für angehende Lebemänner" (1:81; The Goethe poems you sent are even more exquisite. They are in the bureau drawer. I read them incessantly. Not familiar with most of them. How cosmopolitan! How inwardly refined! One is tempted to say: How *abgefeimt* his wisdom! Advice from an old cavalier! Representative of a quite extraordinarily ministerial manner and for up-and-coming bon vivants!).

This strikes an erotic note, one with which Benn loved to irritate the sexually inhibited and intellectualized Oelze. "Goethe wusste es anders [as compared to Nietzsche on women in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*]. 17 Jahre den Betthasen als Verhältnis u. dann geheiratet vor Hofprediger Herder u. dem ganzen Hof—, immer gigantischer erscheint mir das" (Goethe knew otherwise [as compared to Nietzsche on women in *Beyond Good and Evil*]. A playboy for 17 years and then married by the Duke's preacher Herder and the entire court—that seems more and more colossal to me!). He had only just written, in more direct terms: "Wenn man gleich an den Beginn einer Beziehung den coitus setzt, giebt es keine Neurosen" (10 February 1936, 1:107; If you start a relationship with coitus right away, you prevent neuroses).

Benn himself was downright "abgefeimt" when he wrote Oelze a sentence apparently meant to calm him, "Wir brauchen uns nicht zu sorgen, ihn abgefeimt zu nennen, ebenso wenig wie es ihn oder uns kränkt, wenn er als Mahadö, der Herr der Erde, die Huren oder Huris beschläfert" (2 February 1936, 1:105; Our concern about calling him *abgefeimt* is unnecessary. Just as unnecessary as it is for us or him to be piqued if he, as Mahadeva, Lord of the Earth, were to sleep with all the whores or houris). Accordingly, he sees Goethe's "divinity" in three dimensions: corporeal, moral, and productive (16 September 1935, 1:71).

The adjective "abgefeimt" (in the sense of crafty, devious, knowing every trick in the book) appears frequently in Benn's letters in conjunction with Goethe's *Novella*, the *Campaign in France*, and *Elective Affinities*. He calls the *Campaign* "eines der reizendsten Bücher dieses Autors. Ein bischen Kavallerist, ein bischen Marodeur, ein bischen Hochstapler und immer aufs Charmanteste kameradschaftlich; [. . .] Und dann immer u. überall so reizend interessiert an guten Pasteten und Weinen u. netten Fräuleins—(natürlich: olympisch-verschlagen, aber doch mit deutlichem Privatbegehrt dazu!)" (1 January 1940, 1:225; one of the most fascinating books by this author. Part cavalryman, part

marauder, part imposter, and always companionable with the utmost charm; [. . .] And then always so delightfully interested in good pastries and wine and nice young women at every point—[naturally: devious in his Olympian way, but with a good measure of conspicuous private desire!]). His remarks on *Elective Affinities* do not fail either to make reference to the sensual and the corporeal: “Kennen Sie den Satz von unserem geliebten abgefeymten olympischen Urgroßvater aus seinen *Wahlverwandtschaften*: ‘es ist besser, nichts zu schreiben, als nicht zu schreiben,’—glänzend, dieser Höfling, der so gern gut ass und trank!” (2 March 1949, 2.1; Are you familiar with the sentence by our beloved, wily [abgefeymten], Olympian great grandfather from his *Elective Affinities*: “It is better to write nothing than not to write,”—brilliant, this courtier who loved to eat and drink so well!).¹⁰

With his expression “Olympian great-grandfather,” Benn brings to mind the aspirational artistic family tree, which he tailored to suit himself in a letter from 28 February 1938: Nietzsche “sah u forderte den höheren Menschen, aber es blieb eben nur der höhere, noch nicht *der hohe*, d.h. der spätere, noch mehr durch Leid der Erkenntniss u. vorbereitenden inneren Gefährdungen Gegangene. Der *Hohe* nun, der Enkel Goethes u. Nachkomme Nietzsches—, beider Erbe im Gehirn, sieht das Neuartige: die völlige Trennung beider Kreise” (1:183; saw and demanded the higher human being, but it was always just a higher one, not the one who was already on top, that is to say, the one who comes later, the one who has gone through the suffering caused by knowledge and the preparatory perils of inwardness. Now the one on top—Goethe’s grandson and Nietzsche’s descendant, the inheritor of both in his brain—he sees what is novel: the complete disjunction of both circles). He is referring here to the two spheres of “life” and “spirit” [Geist]. And the inheritor and grandson refer to Gottfried Benn himself, who called for this disjunction like no one else after his short entanglement with the “new state.” He lived out the disjunction that formed the basis of his “double life” *cum ira et studio* (with anger and fondness) in his letters to Oelze.

Goethe the “Olympian great-grandfather,” Nietzsche the nihilistic grandfather—it was thus that the grandson was able to see his reflection and recognize himself in them, both near and far, as objects of worship and yet at the same time familiar. It was thus that he constructed for himself an elite, intellectual [*geistige*] community based on tradition in a period that had ostracized him from the “people’s community” [*Volks-gemeinschaft*]—a personal reckoning of time, one that firmly established him as an artist and honored him as such. The more his rage increased, the more this ancestral line became indispensable to him in distancing himself from anything having to do with “life,” “history,” “the people” [Volk], and “reality” after the so-called Röhm-Putsch (30 June 1934).

Except in moments of great imperilment, Gottfried Benn’s appeals to the two patron saints diminished once the war was over, especially in light of his “comeback” and newfound fame. For example, at the start of the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, after rereading *Zarathustra* and shortly before the long-awaited publication of *Statische Gedichte*, he writes, “Für wen u. für was litt er so, bäumte er sich so auf, starb er, starb täglich hundert qualvolle Tode, unbekannt, völlig verlassen, arm, lächerlich für die Gegner, peinlich für die wenigen Freunde u. doch der grösste Mann dieses elenden Abendlandes. Ein furchtbares Phänomen” (2.1:143; For whom and for what did he suffer and rebel so? For whom and for what did he die, die daily a hundred agonizing deaths, unknown, utterly forsaken, poor, ridiculous to his opponents, embarrassing to his few friends, and yet the greatest man in this miserable occident. A terrible phenomenon). And then at the end of the same letter, after reading a few Goethe poems he was not yet familiar with, he writes in a hardly logical but typical manner, “Welche rücksichtsvolle Grösse, denke ich immer wieder! Alle übrigen Künstler wollen zeigen, wer sie sind u. was sie können u. sie dürfen das ruhig tun, denn ihr Rang u. ihre Qualität erschlägt niemanden u. raubt keinem den Atem—diese Grösse aber wäre tödlich, andern voll gezeigt u. ins Gesicht gehalten, sie musste sich dämpfen, sie brachte dies Opfer aus Humanität” (2.1:144; What considerate grandeur, I keep thinking to myself! All the other artists want to show who they are and what they can do and they are allowed to do so, for their rank and quality does not strike anyone dead or take their breath away—this grandeur, however, would be deadly were it fully displayed to others and held in their faces; it had to allay itself, a sacrifice made for the sake of humanity).

Benn allowed himself only one raving and downright pleasurable falling out with Goethe, which was inspired by *Novelle*, which Oelze had sent him at the beginning of 1936. In the letter of 27 January 1936, he reckons with the piece sarcastically for two pages and can hardly get enough of his own ironic commentaries: “Wirkt das nicht alles wie *Karikatur*? [. . .] Wilde Tiere brechen aus einer Menagerie aus u. alles verläuft harmonisch?” (Doesn’t this just all seem like *caricature*? [. . .] Wild animals break out of a menagerie and everything works out beautifully to a happy end¹¹)—“Der springende Punkt, der eigentliche Goethische Trick, seine infernalische Greisenbeschwörung, ist der Satz vom Löwen zum Schluss” (The explosive point, the Goethean trick itself, his infernal old man’s conjuring, is the line about the lion at the end)—“Geschwätz! Narrheit! Geheimratsbehaglichkeit (Haus am Frauenplan). So auch der Stil: welch Abrundungsbedürfnis! Welch Drang nach Füllung, Applanierung, Wattierung der Worte u. der Structur! Schaumig direkt! Goldig, goldlackbraun, alles ‘in Güte’” (1:103; Prattle! Foolishness! Privy council coziness (Goethe’s house on the Frauenplan). The style, too: this need to round off the edges! This compulsion to stuff, applanate, and wad words

and structure! Foamingly direct! Quaint, golden-varnished brown, everything, “will go well and peacefully”¹²).

Benn’s deep-set resentment toward the lifestyle of the higher echelons of society in this “novella” (princes!) aside, the two conclusions he draws are nevertheless insightful. First, he uses Goethe as a pretense to come to terms with contemporary prose: “Und nun wird mir manches klar: die Herkunft ganzer Verlagsgeschlechter von dieser Novelle! 90% des Inselverlags, einschliesslich Herr Carossa u. Ihr Herr Schröder, auch Hofmannsthal kommen von ihr! [. . .] Zum Teufel alle diese Eunuchen!” (1:104; Several things have become clear to me now: this novella, the origin of entire generations of publishing houses! 90 percent of Insel Verlag, including Mr. Carossa and your Mr. Schröder, and Hofmannsthal, stem from it! [. . .] To hell with all these eunuchs!). This expletive proves it once again: Benn’s poetics are masculine and phallically oriented!

The other conclusion, the final defense of Goethe’s honor, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche’s poem “To Goethe,” is exceedingly typical for Benn: “Eigentlich ein Hund, dieser Goethe. Er wusste doch, dass er Schwindel treibt u. dass er rein aus eigenem Ruhebedürfnis u. Fernhaltungsdrang von allem Dämonischen so schrieb. Ich sagte Ihnen ja schon einmal: abgefeimt!” (Goethe was essentially a rat. He knew that he was putting on a hoax and that he only wrote that way out of his own need for peace and quiet and his compulsive containment of anything demonic. I said it to you once before: *abgefeimt!*). In a similar manner with regard to the birthday celebrations in 1949, he writes, “Und ich glaube, dass unser im Zeichen der Jungfrau geborene olympische Urgrossvater, den man in dieser Stunde feiert, zwar seine Zusammenbrüche gut verschleiern konnte, aber sie kannte u. von ihnen lebte” (28 August 1949, 2.1:237; And I believe that our Olympian great-grandfather, born under the sign of Virgo, who is being celebrated at this very hour, was certainly able to conceal his breakdowns well, but they were familiar to him and he lived off them).

Here Benn is following Thomas Mann’s Goethe interpretation, which he quoted in his essay, “Goethe and the Natural Sciences”: “Wer zweifelt, dass in Goethe Möglichkeiten einer Grösse lagen: wilder, üppiger, gefährlicher, natürlicher als die, welche sein Selbstbändigungsinstinkt zu entfalten ihm gestattete” (Who doubts that there are possibilities of greatness in Goethe: a greatness more savage, more extravagant, more dangerous, *more natural* than that which his instinct for self-discipline would permit to flourish).¹³ Benn even goes on to speak of Goethe’s “in der Anlage sicher nahezu malignen Macht” (SW 3:356; this great, indeed very nearly malign power, G&NS 53). The degree to which even here Benn is speaking of himself is betrayed by an expression that appears when he concludes the *Novella* correspondence with Goethe’s defender and friend Oelze in reconciliatory terms, calling Goethe “the

untouchable!” (2 February 1936, 1:105). Gottfried Benn considered himself an untouchable and a pariah his whole life.

Gottfried Benn introduced the transhistorical aesthetic sense of time after Goethe and Nietzsche in his Goethe essay, a reckoning with the hated nineteenth century, its hostility toward art, and its “Wahrheit der Suppenwürzenpromethiden” (SW 3:377; the truth of the garnish-bearing Prometheus). Nietzsche appears here as the only coequal advocate of Goethe: “Darwin neben Goethe setzen, heisst die Majestät verletzen, majestatem genii” (SW 3:379; To put Darwin beside Goethe is lese-majesté, majestatem genii, G&NS 59). On the last pages of the essay he celebrates him as the great, occidental representative of the expression “One last time,” all the while projecting his childhood place of longing: “Noch einmal die ungetrennte Existenz, der anschauende Glaube, die Identität von Unendlichkeit und Erde, noch einmal das antike ‘Glück am Sein’” (SW 3:382; For a last time unified existence, intuiting belief, identity of infinity and earth, for a last time the ancient bliss of being alive, G&NS 60)—“und dann die Zivilisation” (and then civilization), the “progressive Zerebration” (progressive cerebration), and “Nihilismus” (SW 3:382; nihilism, G&NS 60). In other instances, the measurement of time becomes more precise and pointed: “Von Homer bis Goethe ist eine Stunde, von Goethe bis heute 24 Stunden” (SW 3:166; From Homer to Goethe is an hour, from Goethe to today 24 hours). And with another turn of phrase (with which Jane K. Brown would concur): “In ihr [der goetheschen Existenz, anlässlich einer furiosen Etüde über *Faust II*] ist die Antike und das Barock in einer Realität noch da, die heute, in einem echten mutativen Prozess erloschen, als abgelebt betrachtet werden muss” (29 July 1948, 2.1:149; Antiquity and the baroque are still to be found together in one reality within it [i.e., Goethean existence], which today can only be considered as decrepit, having terminated in a truly mutative process).

In this manner, Benn again marks the proximity and distance between himself and Goethe. Benn draws the distant Goethe close to himself with his favorite quotes, poems, and parodying quips—“Gestaltung, Umgestaltung—unser Kulturkreis in Konkursverwaltung” (22 July 1954, 2.2:212; Formation, transformation¹⁴—our cultural sphere in bankruptcy litigation). Nietzsche, who was close to him, he kept at a distance. His letter from 16 September 1935 is exemplary of this tension: “Dort [bei Goethe] das unverkennbare, durch 80 Jahre geleitete, sich selbst leitende Glück u. hier [bei Nietzsche] doch die Verdammnis, u. am Anfang stand der Mangel, aus dem soviel gemacht werden musste u. nie durch Metamorphose, immer durch Schäden u. Frost und Wunden” (1:71; [With Goethe] there is that unmistakable happiness that accompanied and guided him through 80 years. [With Nietzsche] there is perdition, and in the beginning was the lack, out of which so much had to be made

and never through metamorphosis, always through loss and frost and wounds). Benn casts Goethe as his dream image of the artist again and again; Nietzsche is the self-image that he calls upon mostly when he is in need. After the publication of *Selected Poems* in April 1936, while the Nazi press and the “bourgeois circle” savaged him, he writes, “‘Entgleisung’ höre ich von mehreren Seiten. Das Ganze: Ecce homo ist eine einzige Entgleisung!” (21 May 1936, 1:118; “Derailment,” I hear from many sides. The entirety: Ecce homo is an absolute derailment!).

But Goethe and Nietzsche form a high tension area within which, at any time, sudden polar reversals but also convergences are possible. A Goethe appears in the guise of a suffering Nietzsche. A Nietzsche appears rounded to Goethean perfection. As in the Nietzsche essay, the two are again and again weighed against each other.

Thanks to his letters to Oelze and in the medium of the Oelze letters, Gottfried Benn led a “double life” in more ways than one: a divided existence in “life” and in “spirit,” as military doctor and as poet (letter writer), and in Goethe’s reflection and in Nietzsche’s.

With fondness, as if it were a signet or a final seal, he quotes Goethe at the end of his letters. In his last letter written from the garrison in Landsberg an der Warthe,¹⁵ Benn, undercover, orders the “unpublished Rönne file” for Oelze just before escaping the Soviet Army, prescient of the possible downfall. The quote is especially impressive: “Willkommen Väter! Euch grüsst Orest” (22 January 1945; My fathers, hail! Orestes salutes you).¹⁶ A “grandson’s” stoic salute to his “fathers” Goethe and Nietzsche!

And then in a final mysterious card to Oelze, written at the time when Benn was already in death’s shadow, the correspondence fades out with a conciliatory *Faust* allusion, “Jene Stunde [. . .] wird keine Schrecken haben, seien Sie beruhigt, wir werden nicht fallen wir werden steigen—” (16 June 1956; 2.2:267; That hour [. . .] will not have horrors, rest assured, we will not fall we will rise—).¹⁷ The line is at the same time a revocation of the last stanza of his poem “Roses”:

Wahn von der Stunden Steigen
 aller ins Auferstehn,
 Wahn—vor dem Fallen, dem Schweigen:
 wenn die Rosen vergehn.

(SW 1:227)

[Delusion of the hour climbing
 of everything in resurrection,
 Delusion—before falling, the silence:
 where the roses pass away.¹⁸]

—Translated by Japhet Johnstone

Notes

¹ *Briefe an F. W. Oelze*, 3 vols., ed. Harald Steinhagen and Jürgen Schröder (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1977–80). Subsequent references to this work are cited in the text with the date of the letter and the volume, book (when relevant), and page number. Here 2.2:76.

² The quotations from Benn’s works refer to *Sämtliche Werke: Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ed. Ilse Benn, Gerhard Schuster, and Holger Hof. Subsequent references to this work are cited in the text with the abbreviation SW followed by the volume, book (when relevant), and page number; here SW 5:198. The English translation is by Matthew D. Lund, “Nietzsche after 50 Years,” *New Nietzsche Studies* 4, no. 3/4 (2000–2001): 127–37; here 127.

³ Christian M. Hanna has shown that “reflections” of Goethe are evident from early on in Benn’s work. See “‘In deine Reimart hoff’ich mich zu finden’: Spiegelungen Goethes im Werk Gottfried Benns,” *Benn Forum: Beiträge zur literarischen Moderne* 1 (2008/9): 25–46, ed. Joachim Dyck and Christian M. Hanna. See also Wolfgang Butzlaff, “Gottfried Benn und Goethe,” *Jahrbuch der deutschen Goethe-Gesellschaft* 103 (1986): 235–56; and Herman Brackert, “Zu Gottfried Benns Goethe-Bild,” in *Festgabe für Ulrich Pretzel*, ed. Werner Simon et al. (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1963), 289–300.

⁴ Quoted in Karl Robert Mandelkow, *Goethe in Deutschland: Rezeptionsgeschichte eines Klassikers*, vol. 2 (Munich: Beck, 1989), 72. Subsequent references to this work are cited in the text with the abbreviation GiD with page number.

⁵ Quoted in *Goethe im Urteil seiner Kritiker: Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte Goethes in Deutschland*, 4 vols., ed. Karl Robert Mandelkow (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1979), 4:335. [Translation W. Daniel Wilson, “‘Humantätssalbader’: Goethe’s Distaste for Jewish Emancipation and Jewish Responses,” in *Goethe in German-Jewish Culture*, ed. Klaus L. Berghahn and Jost Hermand (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), 156.]

⁶ For a typical Goethe commentary by Oelze, see the appendix to Benn’s letter from 15 November 1936 (1:421–22).

⁷ Translation by Karl F. Ross: “And Yet, with Swords at the Ready,” in *Gottfried Benn: Prose, Essays, Poems*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York: Continuum, 1987), 209–10.

⁸ Christian Hanna, who does not address the place of Nietzsche in the correspondence, speaks of an “almost twenty-four-year long ménage à trois, due to all those years of standing under the sign of Goethe as the common guiding star” (Hanna, “Spiegelungen,” 36).

⁹ *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 13 (1969): 114.

¹⁰ As usual Benn does not quote accurately: “Und doch ist es in manchen Fällen [. . .] notwendig und freundlich, lieber nichts zu schreiben, als nicht zu schreiben” is what Charlotte really says (“And yet in many instances,” Charlotte answered, “it is the kind and necessary thing to write nothing rather than not write at all”). *Elective Affinities*, trans. Judith Ryan, in *Goethe: The Collected Works*, ed. David E. Wellbery [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988]: 98.

¹¹ Benn, "Wolf's Tavern," trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, in *Gottfried Benn: Prose, Essays, Poems*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York: Continuum, 1987), 40.

¹² The final quote here is from Goethe, *Novella, Elective Affinities*, trans. Victor Lange, in *Goethe: The Collected Works*, ed. David E. Wellbery (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 278.

¹³ This line can be found in *Goethe und Tolstoi*, as well as in *Goethe als Repräsentant*, and in chapter 7 of the exile novel *Lotte in Weimar*. Benn, "Goethe and the Natural Sciences," trans. Iain Bamforth, *PN Review* 23 (1997): 53. Subsequent references to this translation are cited in the text as G&NS.

¹⁴ This an allusion to *Faust*, line 6287.

¹⁵ Today Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poland [Translator's note].

¹⁶ Translation based on Anna Swanwick's lines: "My fathers, hail! / Orestes, last descendant of your race, / Salutes you." *Iphigenia in Tauris*. act 3, scene 2.

¹⁷ Translation by Steven Lindberg, "'To Oelze' on Gottfried Benn's Farewell Lines to His Friend," Carsen Dutt, *New Literary History* 36, no. 4 (2005): 641.

¹⁸ Translation by Richard Block.

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