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Goethe's Elegiac Sabbatical

Abstract

Any effort to interpret Goethe's career according to a single, pre-existing pattern would obviously be misconceived. Not only was his literary career a vast, sprawling thing in itself, but it was thoroughly intertwined with several others, including those of courier, politician, diplomat, scientist and artist. Moreover, several of these callings interacted quite directly with his work as a writer. Even if we focus on Goethe's literary career in the narrowest possible sense, we cannot really speak in any simple way either of continuous Virgilian ascent through ever more elevated genres, or of Horatian retirement to an aesthetic *angulus*, or of any other model derived from the careers of Classical poets as the dominant lens through which to view Goethe's experience. And let us admit this at once: the evidence that Goethe himself modelled his own career upon any of these patterns is non-existent. In this respect he differs from Petrarch, Spenser, Marlowe, Milton and other poets who explicitly represent themselves as fashioning their careers after Virgilian, Horatian and Lucanian proto-types. All of this might seem to make Goethe an unpromising subject in the context of career studies.

Disciplines

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*Goethe's elegiac sabbatical**Joseph Farrell*

Any effort to interpret Goethe's career according to a single, pre-existing pattern would obviously be misconceived. Not only was his literary career a vast, sprawling thing in itself, but it was thoroughly intertwined with several others, including those of courtier, politician, diplomat, scientist and artist. Moreover, several of these callings interacted quite directly with his work as a writer. Even if we focus on Goethe's literary career in the narrowest possible sense, we cannot really speak in any simple way either of continuous Virgilian ascent through ever more elevated genres, or of Horatian retirement to an aesthetic *angulus*, or of any other model derived from the careers of Classical poets as the dominant lens through which to view Goethe's experience. And let us admit this at once: the evidence that Goethe himself modelled his own career upon any of these patterns is non-existent. In this respect he differs from Petrarch, Spenser, Marlowe, Milton and other poets who explicitly represent themselves as fashioning their careers after Virgilian, Horatian and Lucanian prototypes. All of this might seem to make Goethe an unpromising subject in the context of career studies.

I take the opposite view. To date, career studies have flourished particularly in contexts where ingredients such as imperial patronage, epic pretensions and a strong sense of Classical precedent are found. But it is reasonable to investigate the applicability of the method to other literary systems, whether contiguous to or widely removed from the homeland. And it is especially worth trying it on some hard cases. Goethe lived and worked well after the Renaissance and in a very different literary culture from those that obtained for Virgil, Horace, Petrarch, Spenser or Milton. He lived a different life as well. And yet some of the factors that informed earlier ages are visible in Goethe's relationship to princely patronage and in his distinctive, highly deliberate approach to Classicism, so that it seems worth looking for at least some common ground. In addition, the

singular course of his career makes it appealing as limit-case for this sort of analysis.

In this spirit I propose to examine the *Römische Elegien*, one of the principal literary remains of the period that Goethe spent in Italy from 1786 to 1788, which is widely recognized as a distinct and important episode in Goethe's protean career. Accordingly, I consider the episode as a kind of 'sabbatical' in the context of Goethe's career as a whole. This is perhaps a departure from the established paths of career studies, but I hope that my analysis will bear out the validity of the approach.

Let me begin with a brief syllabus. After surveying the most salient features of Goethe's biography I will summarize what scholars consider the main results of his Italian sojourn. I will then turn to my principal text, the *Römische Elegien*, first to contrast them with the *Italienische Reise* as a record of Goethe's Italian adventures, and then to elucidate their place in Goethe's career. In the course of this elucidation, I will have something to say about the specific Classical models that I believe are behind Goethe's self-conception as Roman elegist; and I will conclude with some observations about one model whose importance seems to me to be underappreciated.

GOETHE'S EARLY CAREER AND HIS ITALIAN SOJOURN

When Goethe went to Italy, he had been a major literary figure for over a decade, having gained precocious prominence with the phenomenal success of his novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* when he was only 25.¹ Lionized by German literary society as a leader of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and recognized as a figure of European importance, in 1775 – just a year after the publication of *Werther* – Goethe made the first of several mercurial moves that mark out discrete stages in his unconventional career. Despite or because of his early success, he found himself at a loose end.² Some change was necessary, and Goethe was torn between two

¹ For the general shape of Goethe's life in the period up to the conclusion of his Italian *permanenza*, see Boyle 1991. The evidence that establishes Goethe's movements in detail is assembled in Steiger 1982–96. I cite the text of Goethe's works and letters from the Frankfurt edition (Goethe 1985–), cited herein as *SW*. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² As he confesses for instance in a letter to C. L. von Knebel dated 14 April 1775: 'Leben Sie mich? – Ich! – falle aus einer Verworrenheit in andre.' *SW* 2.1: 446–7 (#363).

possibilities: a trip to Italy, which his father advocated and was willing to finance, and an invitation to join the court of Carl August, the young Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach.³ After some hesitation, in November of 1775 Goethe arrived in Weimar.⁴

This move represents a major reorientation of Goethe's activities. He was undoubtedly recruited to Weimar to advance the ruling family's cultural ambitions in accordance with policies laid down by Carl August's mother, the Duchess Anna Amalia.⁵ But his duties there were essentially bureaucratic. He was for most of his time in Weimar a member of the privy council, and he served various terms in other capacities – Director of Mines, Chair of the War and Highways Commissions, and, on an acting basis, Chancellor of the Exchequer.⁶ These are all posts of major administrative and even political responsibility, and for over ten years Goethe devoted himself very successfully to his governmental career. He did not entirely neglect his literary work: this same decade witnessed the writing of *Wilhelm Meister*, *Iphigenia* and other works, and culminate in an agreement with the Leipzig publishing house of G. J. Göschen to publish Goethe's literary works in an edition of eight volumes.⁷ But it must be emphasized that this first Weimar period was one in which Goethe's literary creativity and also his reputation did suffer. One critic wrote of him as early as 1781 that 'he has given what he has given; he is now as unfruitful for the public as the desert sand'.⁸ And for that matter, the eight volumes of collected works that were contracted with Göschen in 1786 and eventually published in 1789 consisted of previously published and unfinished works in about equal proportions. The edition thus had something of a memorial character, almost as a monument to promise unfulfilled. Goethe himself was well aware of this interpretation. As he wrote to Carl August at the end of 1786, 'When I decided to have my fragments printed, I regarded myself as dead.'⁹

In response to this awareness that his literary career had stalled, Goethe made a second decisive move, even more dramatic than the first. After a lot of preparation that he managed to keep obsessively secret until the last

³ For Goethe's evaluation of the alternatives see Boyle 1991: 210.

⁴ Letter of C. M. Wieland to F. H. Jacobi, 10 November 1775, in Herwig 1965–1987: 1.167 (#323).

⁵ On the character of the court at Weimar see Boyle 1991: 223–9 and, on Anna Amalia, 241; more controversially, Ghibellino 2007.

⁶ Boyle 1991: 251–6. On Goethe's experience with the mines in particular see further below.

⁷ On Goethe's relations with the Göschen Verlag see Unseld 1996: 34–79.

⁸ Cited by Boyle 1991: 391.

⁹ 'Da ich mir vornahm meine Fragmente drucken zu lassen, hielt ich mich für *tot*' (letter dated 12 December 1786, *SW* 2.3: 190 (#40)).

minute, on Tuesday, 24 July 1786 he boarded a coach and quit Weimar for a vacation in Carlsbad, probably with the intention not of returning but of going on to a lengthy stay in Italy, as he in fact did.¹⁰ The trip was eventually sanctioned and largely financed by Carl August, though it involved no official duties whatsoever.¹¹ For most of the next two years Goethe travelled through much of the peninsula and through Sicily, enjoying two extended periods of residence in Rome. Then on Tuesday, 24 April 1788, after a series of delicate communications with Carl August, Goethe boarded the coach that would take him away from Rome – for the last time, as it turned out – and, after a journey that lasted two months, back to Weimar.¹²

The effects of this Italian sojourn on Goethe's life and art are well known. Most immediately, after a dozen years as courtier and bureaucrat in Weimar, the sheer freedom from official duties presented a welcome opportunity to advance a number of literary projects. Goethe took good advantage of this. But in some larger sense, the experience reoriented Goethe's energies and self-conception towards his true calling. He states this very clearly in announcing to Carl August his approaching return from Rome: 'I can truly say: in these one and a half years of solitude I have found myself again; but as what? – As an artist!'¹³ Nicholas Boyle's interpretation of this remark is convincing:

He is first and foremost an artist – by contrast with any other administrative tasks to which Carl August may choose, and is welcome, to direct him. Less politely: Goethe is willing to remain a servant of the state of Weimar, on condition that the primacy of his '*artistic*' vocation is acknowledged. And it is his time in Italy which has clarified what that vocation is.¹⁴

So the first point is that Goethe's Italian journey was a significant, though not a total, break with his activities of the previous decade or so. In general terms, it represents a turn away from the bureaucratic career that he had been following and a return to the life of poet and artist that

¹⁰ For the departure from Weimar see Steiger 1982–96: 2.664. It is unclear how definite Goethe's plans were even as he arrived in Carlsbad, where he celebrated his birthday with other members of the court. Certainly he confided his intentions to no one, even Carl August: see Boyle 1991: 391–7. Goethe begins the *Italienische Reise* with his stealthy departure from Carlsbad in the dead of night on Sunday, 3 September 1788 (*IR* 13–15; *SW* 15.1: 11–14).

¹¹ Boyle 1991: 394. ¹² Boyle 1991: 508–9; Steiger 1982–96: 2.664.

¹³ 'Ich darf wohl sagen: ich habe mich in dieser anderthalbjährigen Einsamkeit selbst wiedergefunden; aber als was? Als Künstler!' (letter to Carl August dated 17 March 1788, *SW* 2.4: 394–5 (#164)).

¹⁴ Boyle 1991: 491.

he had enjoyed before – or even to a closer approximation of the ideal artistic life than he had ever previously experienced. At the same time, it was an officially sanctioned and limited, if indeterminate, leave of absence from the official duties to which Goethe eventually returned, even if in modified form. In short, it was a sabbatical, and in every respect a notably successful one.

But there is an additional point. Biographers are agreed that one cannot account fully for the significance of Goethe's Roman *permanenza* without understanding certain developments in his personal life as well. It is universally held that Goethe, at the time of his arrival in Rome, was rather more inexperienced in sexual matters than one might have expected in a man of 37 years, and one who had lived for over a decade in the worldly court of a German prince who fancied himself an expert in this area. In Weimar, however, this aspect of Goethe's life was largely absorbed by an intensely platonic relationship with Charlotte von Stein, who was several years his senior and the wife of another court official.¹⁵ In this respect as well Rome represented a decisive change: it was there that from January to March of 1788 Goethe had an affair with a young Roman widow and so, it is generally believed, enjoyed the first experience of real erotic fulfilment in his life.¹⁶ The *Römische Elegien*, in the style of Classical Roman elegy, present themselves as the record of this affair. But the elegies were composed after Goethe's return to Weimar over a period of several years during which, crucially, he had begun what was to be a lifelong relationship with Christiane Vulpius.¹⁷ This relationship began almost immediately upon Goethe's return to Weimar, and the following year Christiane produced the first of the couple's five children (and the only one who survived past infancy). In 1806 they were married and they remained happily together until Christiane's death in 1816.

Goethe composed the *Römische Elegien* during the first years of his relationship with Christiane. It was a period during which he tried in a number of ways to recreate aspects of his Roman sabbatical. The liaison with Christiane, especially in its initial stages, seems to fit very well into this pattern. Scholars agree, therefore, that both Goethe's sexual initiation with his Roman mistress and what was to become his marriage with Christiane provide the essential biographical context within which the *Römische Elegien* are to be understood. And the effect of this sabbatical

¹⁵ Boyle 1991: 256–66; Lavater-Sloman 1960. ¹⁶ Eissler 1963 2: 988; Boyle 1991: 507.

¹⁷ On Christiane see Boyle 1991: 537–40, 570–4 and *passim*. Goethe's relationship with her has been the subject of a number of studies including Klessmann 1993; Damm 1998; Keuthen 1999; Frühwald 2007.

was long-lasting: after returning to Weimar, Goethe was able to maintain a much better balance between the competing claims of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* and to reclaim his place of leadership in European letters.

THE RÖMISCHE ELEGIEN AND THE ITALIENISCHE REISE

Anything like a detailed account of the effect that Goethe's journey had on his literary output as a whole is well beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁸ Our main concern is with two works that were in fact largely written after the return to Weimar. One is the journal that Goethe kept during his journey, which was partially revised and ultimately published between 1816 and 1829 under the title *Italienische Reise*.¹⁹ The other is the collection of *Römische Elegien*, poems in elegiac couplets that Goethe began writing in 1788 and started fashioning into a cycle under the working title 'Erotica Romana' in 1790 or 1791, publishing them for the first time in 1795.²⁰ Both works provide illuminating, but not totally consistent, perspectives on Goethe's Italian sojourn.

The significance of the *Elegies* is acknowledged by all Goethe specialists. As Nicholas Boyle observes, this significance stems in large part from the appearance within the cycle of features never before seen in Goethe's poetry but common thereafter, all of which Boyle relates to a new poetic self-reflexiveness on Goethe's part.²¹ Indices of this self-reflexive quality include frequent references within the poems to their elegiac form; episodes dramatizing the production of distichs; the poet's apostrophes to his verse, in which he addresses the initial line of the distich and its partner as hexameter and pentameter, respectively.²² In a related move, it is clear that the protagonist of these poems is not merely the generalized 'I' of Goethe's previous lyrics, but that he is very emphatically a poet and most particularly the author of these very elegies.²³ And this poet-protagonist regularly draws explicit analogies between his own experience and that of the ancient love poets, inscribing this analogy within a more general comparison between the ancient and modern worlds.²⁴ All of these elements

¹⁸ Some of the more recent work on the subject includes Hoffmeister 1988; Zapperi 1999; N. Miller 2002; Block 2006; Buck 2008.

¹⁹ The early publication history of this work is conveniently reviewed by Thomas P. Saine in Goethe 1989: 5–7.

²⁰ Boyle 1991: 631–41. ²¹ Boyle 1991: 631–4. ²² *RE* 20.21 (*SW* 1.1: 437); cf. 5.16 (*SW* 1.1: 407).

²³ *RE* 5: 15–20 (*SW* 1.1: 407); 11 (*SW* 1.1: 413, 415); 13: 1–36 (*SW* 1.1: 417, 419); 15.31 (*SW* 1.1: 427).

²⁴ *RE* 3: 7–18 (*SW* 1.1: 399); 12.9–34 (*SW* 1.1: 415, 417); 13.19–24 (*SW* 1.1: 419); 15 (*SW* 1.1: 425, 427); cf. *Erot. Rom.* 17 (*SW* 1.1: 420, 422).

look forward to ideas that would become still more important in Goethe's later work and that would exert a broader influence on European literature generally. All, in addition, can be easily correlated with analogous features of Classical Roman love elegy.

The *Italienische Reise* agrees perfectly with the elegies in making antiquity a touchstone of Goethe's experience in Italy and in regarding poetry as a privileged medium by which to understand Italy as an ancient, symbolic space. In the elegies, for example, he revels enthusiastically in the inspirational quality of Rome (*RE* 5.1–2; *SW* 1.1: 405):

Froh empfind' ich mich nun auf klassischem Boden begeistert;
Lauter und reizender spricht Vorwelt und Mitwelt zu mir.

Gladly I find myself inspired upon Classical soil; past and present speak to me more clearly and charmingly.

The *Reise* offers a fascinating gloss on this form of inspiration. In a famous early episode of the *Italienische Reise* Goethe visits Lake Garda and (prompted by his guidebook) quotes Virgil's beautiful line in which he addresses the lake (*Geo.* 2.159):

Fluctibus et fremitu assurgens, Benace, marinis.
And you, Benacus, rising up with roaring waves worthy of the sea

Goethe's comment is that (*IR*, entry for 12 September 1786 (*SW* 15.1: 32)

Der erste lateinische Vers, dessen Inhalt lebendig vor mir steht und in dem Augenblick, da der Wind immer stärker wächst und der See höhere Wellen gegen die Anfahrt wirft, noch heute so wahr ist als vor vielen Jahrhunderten. So manches hat sich verändert, noch aber stürmt der Wind in dem See, dessen Anblick eine Zeile Vergils noch immer veredelt.

This is the first line of Latin verse whose content has come to life before me, and which is as true at this moment, when the wind is growing ever stronger and the lake is casting higher waves against the landing place, as many centuries ago. Many things have changed, but the wind still churns the lake, and the sight is still ennobled by a line of Virgil. (Goethe 1989: 28–9)

And without question in the *Journey* as a whole Classical poets serve as privileged interpreters of the landscape that Goethe was to explore over the next two years.²⁵ By the same token, in Goethe's elegiac project ancient Roman poets were to serve him as guides to the highly charged world of

²⁵ In Naples, for instance, Goethe looked back on his earlier visit to Sicily and commented that what he saw there made the *Odyssey* live in his eyes for the first time (*IR* 256 = *SW* 15.1: 345 (17 May 1787)).

erotic experience, into which Goethe was initiated along with the other mysteries of Italy and Rome.

So the similarities between these works are not negligible. But for our purposes the differences are much more striking. The *Römische Elegien* focus solely on Rome while the *Reise* follows Goethe through the length and breadth of Italy. In addition, the elegies, which adopt the most salient conventions of ancient love elegy, are notable for their literary formality and self-reflexivity, while the *Italienische Reise* gives the appearance of a diary narrating in real time Goethe's spiritual and intellectual reawakening. But the relatively unmediated appearance of the latter work is an illusion. The *Reise*, it is true, is based largely on letters that Goethe wrote and received during his Italian sojourn and on a journal that he kept at that time. But ironically, it is the collection of elegies that was published soon after the experiences that they purport to describe (even if scholars regard Goethe's domestic arrangements in Weimar as being equally important to his Roman affair as a context for interpreting the poetry); but the publication of the *Italienische Reise* was not complete until twenty-five years after the fact.²⁶ The end result is more memoir than a diary, and it is hardly in all respects a careful redaction of the original sources. Of its three parts, the first two were published in 1816 and 1817 and the third, which is much less finished than the first two, not until 1829. Altogether, then, the *Römische Elegien* and the *Italienische Reise* are very different literary records of 'the same' formative experience.

It is true of course that the author of the journal, like the author of the elegies, is a poet. But in the journal, Goethe the poet is basically trying to finish off projects to satisfy his publisher back in Germany.²⁷ In the elegies, poetic composition, enthusiastic love-making, and wilful self-fashioning join forces to produce nothing other than the elegies themselves. Crucially, the *Italienische Reise* makes no reference at all to the affair that is the subject of the *Römische Elegien*. Indeed, it contains much that is so foreign to the spirit of the elegies that one could wonder that they are the work of the same author. Conversely, there is nothing in the *Elegien* that recalls Goethe's official duties in Weimar, where he had been among other things, as I have noted, Minister of Mines. But in the *Italienische Reise* Goethe can never visit a place without remarking on its geological position, its wealth or poverty in mineral resources and so on.²⁸

²⁶ See n. 19 above. ²⁷ Entry for 8 September 1786 (*IR* 22 = *SW* 15.1: 24) and *passim*.

²⁸ The very first entry for 3 September 1786 (*IR* 13–15 = *SW* 15.1: 11–12) is almost programmatic in this regard.

Goethe was a man of almost limitless intellectual interests, but in this respect his behaviour seems obsessive, rather like that of the overworked court functionary that he actually was and almost as if he were unable, especially in the early stages of his journey, to unwind and begin to enjoy a long vacation. And even after six months in Italy, during his visit to Naples – which charms him as it does so many other northern visitors because it seems the perfect opposite of the cities that they know, and thus the most quintessentially Italian of places – even then, when he visits Herculaneum, he cannot keep himself from complaining about the way the site has been treated (*IR*, entry for 18 March 1787 (*SW* 15.1: 228):

Jammerschade, daß die Ausgrabung nicht durch deutsche Bergleute recht planmäßig geschehn; denn gewiß ist bei einem zufällig räberischen nachwühlen manches edle Altertum vergeudet worden.

A great pity that the excavation was not systematically carried out by German miners: for certainly the haphazard later digging has wastefully destroyed many a noble relic of antiquity. (Goethe 1989: 173)

In this as well as other ways the *Italienische Reise*, which represents the author as being in constant communication with friends back home, connects the two worlds of Weimar and Italy and treats the experience of life in both places in a more continuous way than do the elegies. The journal begins by recounting in detail every stage of Goethe's journey from Germany to Rome, thus establishing a sense of geographical continuity. In sharp contrast, the elegies open suddenly with the poet simply in Rome: how he got there is not important.²⁹ In the *Reise* Goethe takes with him everywhere many of the same concerns that were typical of his life in Weimar; in the elegies he cares about nothing other than love. In these ways it is the elegies much more than the *Italienische Reise* that establish Goethe's Roman *permanenza* as the life-altering experience that critics agree it was.

GOETHE AND THE ELEGIAC CAREER

Several clear indications situate the *Römische Elegien* within the larger, sprawling diversity of Goethe's career as an episode that conforms to what

²⁹ The theme of Goethe's nationality appears at *RE* 2.28 (*SW* 1.1: 397), where the poet calls himself a barbarian conqueror (but cf. 4.32 (*SW* 1.1: 405) where he is the captive); at 7.1–10 (*SW* 1.1: 410–11), where he contrasts the climate and atmosphere of Rome with that of the north; at 13.5–6 (*SW* 1.1: 417), where Love says that he has followed the poet into a foreign country; at 15.9–10 (*SW* 1.1: 425), where the poet refers to a coterie of fellow German expatriates.

we may call the canonical elegiac experience. In fact, we have Goethe's own observations about the place of the elegies within his career to date, and these observations belong to the textual history of the poems themselves. Here are the opening lines of the second elegy as they were actually published in 1795 (*RE* 2.1-4 (*SW* I.1: 397)):

Ehret, wen ihr euch wollt! Nun bin ich endlich geborgen!
 Schöne Damen und ihr, Herren der feineren Welt,
 Fraget nach Oheim und Vetter und alten Muhmen und Tanten,
 Und dem gebundenen Gespräch folge das traurige Spiel.
 Auch ihr Übrigen fahret mir wohl, in großen und kleinen
 Zirkeln, die ihr mich oft nah der Verzweiflung gebracht.
 Wiederholet, politisch und zwecklos, jegliche Meinung,
 Die den Wanderer mit Wut über Europa verfolgt.

Flatter all you want! Now I am finally safe! Fair ladies and you fine gentlemen of the *beau monde*! Ask about your old aunts and uncles and cousins, and let the unhappy game follow the elegant talk. And farewell to you too, who have often driven me almost mad with your social circles great and small! Repeat, politically and vainly, that opinion which the traveller angrily flees right across Europe.

And now here is the earlier, unpublished version of these same lines from the 'Erotica Romana' manuscript (*SW* I.1: 398, 400):

Fraget nun wen ihr auch wollt mich werdet ihr nimmer erreichen,
 Schöne Damen und ihr, Herren der feineren Welt!
 Ob denn auch Werther gelebt? ob denn auch alles fein wahr sei?
 Welche Stadt sich mit Recht Lottens der Einzigen rühmt?
 Ach wie hab ich so oft die törigten Blätter verwünscht,
 Die mein jugendlich Leid unter die Menschen gebracht!
 Wäre Werther mein Bruder gewesen, ich hätt ihn erschlagen,
 Kaum verfolgte mich so rächend sein trauriger Geist.

Now ask all you want, you will never get near me, you fair ladies and you fine gentlemen of the *beau monde*: did Werther really live? and it was all really true? In which town did dear Lotte actually live? Alas, how often I've cursed those foolish pages that spread my youthful sorrow abroad! Had Werther been my brother and I had killed him, his unhappy ghost would hardly have haunted me so vengefully.

The published version alludes vaguely to the tedious niceties of the society that Goethe has left behind, and to the refuge offered him by his unpretentious mistress, who knows nothing of her lover's former life. What emerges clearly from the variant is that Goethe, while composing the elegies after his return to Weimar, looked back on the Italian sojourn as an escape not only from his bureaucratic duties at court and the jejune

social rituals that they entailed, but from his earlier literary reputation as well. The *Werther* phenomenon, as I noted before, greatly oppressed him; and in the light of his complaints about this oppression, the refuge that he finds in the bosom of his beloved takes on a significant metaliterary aspect. The move to Rome and to elegy amounts to a metamorphosis by which the author of *Werther* recreates himself as a poet of love in the mould of the ancient elegists.

There is more. A number of scholars have explored the generic and intertextual relationship between the *Römische Elegien* and Classical love elegy, and it is well known that Goethe incorporates most of the specific motifs that define the genre.³⁰ One of these involves the name of his mistress, whom he calls Faustine (*RE* 18.9, *SW* 1.1: 429). Many scholars think that this is the real name of the woman with whom Goethe actually had his Roman fling – namely one Faustina di Giovanni Antonini who, like the Faustine of the elegies, was a young widow who had a son.³¹ But whether or not this is so Goethe follows the ancient convention of giving the beloved a name laden with literary significance. Propertius and Tibullus (in his first book of elegies) followed the founder of the genre, Cornelius Gallus, whose works did not survive antiquity, by giving their mistresses names that allude to cult titles of Apollo, the god of poetry (Cynthia, Delia and Lycoris, respectively). The proto-elegist Catullus, and Ovid, the last member of the elegiac canon, opted for names, Lesbia and Corinna, that allude to two of the great women poets of Greece, Sappho of Lesbos and Corinna of Thebes. Goethe takes a different and more self-referential tack.³² Faustine's name gestures not to models from the past or to external literary ideals but to what would become the poet's masterpiece, his *Faust*. Many precise details regarding the long genesis of this work cannot be established with confidence, but for our purposes the main outlines of the process are clear enough.³³ It is certain that Goethe had conceived the idea of a *Faust* at least ten years before his Italian journey. A nearly complete play that was never published, conventionally known as the *Urfaust*, exists in a manuscript that was written down about two years before Goethe's flight to Rome. While

³⁰ There is, as one might expect, a long tradition of investigating Goethe's sources. Some of the principal studies include Bronner 1898; Klingner 1956; Wimmel 1958; Luck 1967; Rüdiger 1978 and 1984; Neumeister 1985; Ammer 1990; Althaus 1994; Appel 1998.

³¹ *RE* 6.6, 27–8 (*SW* 1.1: 407–9).

³² Cf. Boyle's remarks on the self-referentiality of the elegies, n. 21 above, and see further Schweling 1964.

³³ For details see Hamm 1997.

in Rome, he came up with a new plan for the work, one that involves Mephistopheles presenting Faust with different experiences upon which he, Faust, would pass judgement; and the text of the play as written, probably, within a year of Goethe's return to Weimar speaks of 'a new career' that will take Faust from low life to high life as represented by his relationships with Gretchen and Helena, respectively.³⁴ This version of the play, published in 1790 as *Faust: ein Fragment*, was being put into final form just at the time when Goethe was working on the 'Erotica Romana', which would become the *Römische Elegien*. So, from these relationships, it seems more than reasonable to infer into the *Römische Elegien* a measure of self-consciousness concerning their importance to the development of Goethe's literary career.

Indeed, by piecing together the clues that I have just been discussing, one could almost construct a quasi-Virgilian *cursus* that would explain Goethe's career as a progression from *Werther* to the *Römische Elegien* to *Faust*. The phrase that Virgil uses to describe himself as author of the *Eclogues* is *audax iuuenta*, 'youthfully bold', or 'precocious' (*Geo.* 4.565), and this would certainly be apt for the author of *Werther* as well. The *Georgics* has often been seen as a transitional work, as have the *Römische Elegien*. And of course *Faust* as the poet's masterpiece answers very well for Virgil's *Aeneid*. But any invocation of the Virgilian *rota* merely confirms my earlier point about the inadequacy of prefabricated schemes. The Virgilian model of ascent cannot fully capture the dynamic of Goethe's struggle to find his way from *Werther* to *Faust*. Virtually absent from the Virgilian model, for instance, is the important notion of a turn towards antiquity, very evident in Goethe's representation of the elegies as something different from his *Werther*. And this is to say nothing of Goethe's astonishingly diverse literary activity in other genres. But the idea that I want to stress is that the *Römische Elegien* were crucial to his development because the elegiac genre – in its form, in its characteristic concerns and in a sense by virtue of its curious nature as a simultaneously closed and unclosed genre – gave Goethe the opportunity in effect to enjoy a complete career as an elegiac poet in a comparatively brief episode within a long and multiform literary life; and that it was this possibility that made his elegiac sabbatical both an antidote and a stimulus to the various other life-projects in which he was engaged.

The alternative openings of the second elegy link Goethe's Roman *permanenza* and his elegiac project to the theme of escape, whether from his

³⁴ *Faust* I: 2072 (SW 7.1: 88).

earlier literary reputation or from the demands of the society in which he lived. But as I have said, the biographical record makes it very clear that escape from his official duties at court was a crucial factor as well. All three factors are linked, but it is the first and third, literary reputation and bureaucratic duties, that are most relevant to the idea of Goethe's career. The elegies do not allude directly to the third element, duties at court. But the genre of elegy itself embodies this theme in such a way as to make it, in effect, a constitutive element of the ancient genre and one that echoes throughout Goethe's work as well.

We can begin to get at this aspect by considering a very well known acknowledgement of Goethe's generic indebtedness and pressing it for its careerist significance. The fifth elegy, which expresses the most intense perception in the entire collection of the relationship between presence in Rome, Classical learning and erotic fulfilment, ends with a vignette of the god Amor holding a lamp that softly illuminates the lovers in their embrace (*RE* 5.19–20 (*SW* I.1: 407)):

Amor schüret indes die Lampe und denket der Zeiten,
Da er nämlichen Dienst seinen Triumvirn getan.

Amor tends the lamp and recalls the times when he did the same service for his own Triumvirs.

The imagery of this passage virtually conflates the emblematic 'mirror' and 'lamp' that M. H. Abrams uses to suggest the difference between Classical and Romantic *imitatio*.³⁵ For Goethe, Amor's lamp illuminates a realm of natural experience that was, to him, previously obscure. At the same time, he revels in the fact that his erotic adventures are also reworkings of highly overdetermined, conventional subjects that had been the defining material of Classical love poetry. But the reference to Love's 'triumvirs' is also of great significance. By the word *Triumvirn* Goethe alludes to the phrase *triumviri Amoris*, a flourish of Joseph Scaliger, and Goethe's use of it here has been taken as an acknowledgement of his principal elegiac models.³⁶ Quite apart from the specific identity of these *triumviri* (a point to which I shall return), I see no evidence that Scaliger coined the phrase with any ulterior purpose. It was, as I say, a rhetorical flourish, an imaginative and slightly elevated way of saying 'the three principal love poets of ancient Rome'. But to connoisseurs of the kind of generic posturing that was so dear to the Roman elegists, and so perhaps to Goethe

³⁵ Abrams 1953.

³⁶ On this phrase see Bernays 1899. Goethe also uses it at *IR* 386 (*SW* 15.1: 515) in an address given on the occasion of his induction into the Arcadian Society on 4 January 1787.

himself, the phrase is capable of meaning much more. A *triumvir* is of course, in ancient Roman terminology, a member of a board of three appointed by the government for some specific purpose. But the word gained a defining resonance from the activity of a specific board of three, Caesar Octavianus, Marcus Antonius and M. Aemilius Lepidus, who in 42 BC became *iiiviri rei publicae constituendae* – something like ‘commissioners for the establishment of public order’. These *triumviri* wielded extraordinary powers, quarrelled and bargained, and made war upon one another, until one of them, Octavian, got the better of his colleagues and became the sole leader of the Roman state for the remaining forty-five years of his life. From this historical episode the word *triumvir* acquired its associations with extraordinary power, and did so in the context of the turbulent transition from Roman Republic to Roman Empire – which happens to be the setting in which the genre of elegy took shape as well.

These points might have little relevance to my argument were it not for the fact that the relationship of poetry to power was a stock theme of ancient elegy. Permutations in the treatment of this theme are many and complex, but a few general tendencies can be stated. In ancient elegy, the poet wields no political power. He has in effect renounced political ambition altogether. He maintains his relationship to at least one powerful man, who is his patron, and generally supports this patron's career, which involves joining the patron in support of the *princeps*, Caesar Augustus; but the poet is concerned to represent his own career as one of abandonment with respect to political power and even as the anti-career of enthrallment to a whimsical beloved – who is herself a woman, probably foreign-born and definitely from a lower social class, and therefore absolutely devoid of political power herself.³⁷ In short, the elegiac career is the total antithesis of a Roman political career. The canonical ancient elegists are all clear and insistent on this point.³⁸

So, even if Scaliger did not have these ideas in mind when naming his erotic *triumviri*, I think we can be open to the possibility that Goethe found in this phrase something more attractive than the opportunity to quote a great philologist. The paradoxical, almost oxymoronic formulation

³⁷ On the elegiac *puella* see Lilja 1965; S. L. James 2003 and the essays in Part 1 of Wyke 2002.

³⁸ The Roman elegists consistently represented their poetic calling as an anti-career. Catullus in several poems speaks disparagingly of his experiences serving as part of a praetorial *cohors* governing the province of Bithynia (see especially Poems 10 and 28). Tibullus contrasts his life with that of military men, particularly his patron Messalla (1: 1.53–6, 75–9, 3.81–2, 6.43–6, 10.29–34, 45–52, 2: 6, 4.14–16). For an effective point of entry into the question vis-à-vis Propertius see Gale 1997. Ovid speaks of how, at his father's insistence, he took the first steps towards an official career, but abandoned it for poetry (*Trist.* 4.10.17–40).

triumviri Amoris – men of power in a field of powerlessness – speaks to Goethe's situation immediately before, during and after the period of his *permanenza*. When he left Weimar, Goethe was at the apex of his political power. As acting president of the privy council, he was the highest authority in Weimar after the prince himself.³⁹ He renounced this position to go to Rome, and before returning to Weimar he negotiated with his own 'Augustus', Carl August, an agreement that would relieve him of any regular and continuing responsibilities of the sort that he had previously fulfilled.⁴⁰ He did rejoin the privy council, however, which (I note in passing, for whatever it may be worth) happened to be a board of usually three, though sometimes four, men.⁴¹ And it was at this point that he wrote the elegies that look back to his experience in Rome.

It thus seems to me possible that Goethe found in Scaliger's arresting phrase something that spoke to his own complex attitude towards his dual careers as poet and politician. But in any case, I think it certain that he was attracted to the elegiac genre in part by the generic inheritance that involves these themes. The tenth elegy expresses the typical elegiac attitude towards such things: the lover in his private obsession with erotic matters rules a kingdom greater than mighty empires and is a fit object of envy by the likes of Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, the kings and princes of France and Prussia (*RE* 10.1–3 (*SW* 1.1: 413)):

Alexander und Cäsar und Heinrich und Friedrich, die Grossen,
Gäben und hälften mir gern ihres erworbenen Ruhms,
Könnt ich auf eine Nacht dies Lager jedem vergönnen.

Alexander and Caesar and Henry and Frederick, the great ones, would gladly give me half of their fame if I could grant them to lie in this camp for one night.

Before closing, I want to return as promised from the connotative to the denotative range of the expression *triumviri Amoris*. In one sense it is not important to whom exactly the phrase refers. The *Quellenforscher* have shown that Goethe's Classical models go well beyond any three ancient love poets whom one might care to nominate. If we ask about the poets whom Goethe actually names in the elegies, we find that there are three, but that they are Propertius (*Erot. Rom.* 16.19, *SW* 1.1: 422), Horace (*RE* 15.28, *SW* 1.1: 425) and Lucretius (*Erot. Rom.* 16: 13, *SW* 1.1: 422). Propertius of course is a canonical elegist; more on him in a moment. Horace is a love poet, but not, as it were, a full-time one and in any case not an elegist at all; and the particular passage of Horace that Goethe seems to

³⁹ Boyle 1991: 307.

⁴⁰ Boyle 1991: 267–8.

⁴¹ Boyle 1991: 238, 252.

have in mind is from the *Carmen Saeculare* (11–12), one of Horace's least erotic compositions. As for Lucretius, commentators point to his recommendation that any sexual urges be satisfied before they get out of hand (*De Rerum Natura* 4.1063–7), but this occurs in the context of a diatribe against love, which is not encouraging for anyone who would see Lucretius as a presiding genius in the *Römische Elegien*; and, of course, like Horace, he is not an elegist. Many others could be named to whom Goethe alludes not for purposes of establishing the elegiac ambience of the cycle, but his conception of antiquity, while centred on elegy, expands far beyond the normal boundaries of the genre; and of course, though it sounds paradoxical to say it this way, aficionados will recognize this as a tendency of Classical elegy itself.⁴²

So who are these *triumviri*? Clearly they are in some sense none other than who Scaliger says they are – not Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid, the three surviving elegists of Quintilian's canon, but Catullus, Tibullus and Propertius – a grouping that makes perfect sense when we consider the textual history of these poets. Their rather slender collective output made inclusion of all their works within a single volume very common, both in manuscripts and in printed books, at least from the later middle ages onward.⁴³ The more voluminous productions of Ovid stood alone.

But from our perspective, which is the interpretive history of the *Römische Elegien*, the results of this historical accident have been unfortunate. From an early date there has been a consensus that Goethe's most important elegiac model is Propertius. There is no difficulty in mustering evidence, internal and external, to lend credibility to this theory. In particular, Propertius' first book, his *Monobiblos*, which he purports to have written as a means of coping with the effects of his virtual enslavement to Cynthia over the course of the preceding year, is probably the closest parallel we have from ancient elegy to Goethe's record not of enslavement, but of fulfilment in his relationship with Faustine during his last months in Rome. Moreover, as we have seen, Propertius is the only one of the Classical elegists whom Goethe names in the *Römische Elegien*. To speak of external evidence, Schiller in his essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*

⁴² The tendency is especially notable in Ovid (see e.g. S. J. Harrison 2002 and Farrell 2003) but it is clearly a feature of earlier elegy as well, most obviously perhaps in respect of the aetiological focus of Propertius' fourth book and of certain poems of Tibullus (J. F. Miller 1982).

⁴³ Scaliger himself in fact published a one-volume edition and commentary (entitled *castigationes*) on all three poets in 1577, though he was not the first to do so: see Grafton, 1983: 161–79. The tendency to group these poets together is abundantly illustrated in the materials catalogued and described in Butrica 1984.

hailed Goethe as the German Propertius; and Goethe himself in his elegy 'Hermann und Dorothea' referred to Propertius as an inspiration for the *Römische Elegien*.⁴⁴ This assessment has become traditional, and in much of the secondary literature the centrality of Propertius to Goethe's conception of elegy is simply assumed.⁴⁵

One effect of all this has been to obscure the importance of Ovid to the *Römische Elegien*. In one sense, this has been a non-problem: again the *Quellenforscher* have done their jobs and have uncovered a wealth of Ovidian material in these poems.⁴⁶ But when we regard the *Römische Elegien* from the particular angle of Goethe's career, Ovid assumes a greater importance than he might from the perspective of genre criticism. Ovid, though a canonical elegiac poet, was also more than that; one might say that he was also a distinctly non-canonical elegiac poet whose career conformed to established patterns, which generally involve some sort of generic differentiation, more than is true of Catullus, Propertius and Tibullus.⁴⁷ Thus Ovid's potentially larger relevance to Goethe's conception of his own career starts to come into focus. If we regard the *Römische Elegien* as, in effect, an entire elegiac career, then it is probably adequate to think of Propertius as Goethe's chief conceptual model. If we regard the elegies as part of a more extended career that both began some

⁴⁴ Schiller 1962: 465 and SW 1.2: 198, where Goethe goes on to mention Martial as the model for the *Venetian Epigrams*. But the issue of Propertius seems to me less than straightforward. Schiller's point is very much implicated in his argument about the two categories of poetry that are at issue in his essay. For him, both 'The Roman and the German Ovid' (i.e. Friedrich Manso, author of *Die Kunst zu lieben* (Berlin 1794)) belong to the camp of the sentimental poets, while 'the Roman and German Propertius' (i.e. the Goethe of the *Römische Elegien*) belong to the naïve camp. Both passages, then, have to be read not merely as data concerning how Schiller and Goethe both saw the latter in his relationship to ancient elegiac models, but also as contributions to an ongoing discussion between the two on the nature of poetry and on Goethe's poetry in particular. Relevant here is the fact that the *Römische Elegien* were first published by Schiller in his journal *Die Horen* (1795), but not without the excision of two poems (3 and 17 in modern editions) that Goethe had wanted to include, but that Schiller regarded as coarse and offensive to common decency (letter to Körner dated 20 July 1795 in Schiller 1969: 13). The literature on the relationship is large; see (e.g.) Martin 1949 and Oberlin 2007.

⁴⁵ In his assessment of Goethe's models, Boyle (1991: 591–2) follows the majority in emphasizing the role of Propertius: he notes that Goethe studied the elegiac form with Knebel, 'who was translating Propertius at the time', and that 'it is no surprise that he should have been reading, and no doubt looking for models in, Catullus and Propertius, and probably Tibullus and Ovid's amatory poetry too' (emphasis mine).

⁴⁶ Specifically or characteristically Ovidian are: the dialogues with Amor (*Am.* 1.1, *Pont.* 3.3), the motif of writing in wine on a tabletop (*Am.* 1.4.17–20, 2.5.17; *Ars* 1.569–72; *Her.* 1.31–6, 17.87), the motif of the *magister amoris* (*Am.* 1.4, 2.19, 3.1, 3.4, and the erotodidactic works as a whole), not to speak of the many myths that Goethe mentions, many of which occur in the *Metamorphoses* but not in surviving love elegy.

⁴⁷ Cf. Farrell 2004.

time before the elegies and continued long after them, then Ovid may be more relevant.

On the other hand, perhaps we should regard Goethe as having adopted a more restrictive conception of ancient elegy than Ovidian exuberance and experimentation would allow, and thus of Ovid rather than Propertius as casting his particular spell over not the elegies, but the *Reise*. As a final thought along these lines, consider the way in which Goethe frames Part 3 of his memoir – one of the relatively scarce indications of careful revision in this part of the work. The epigraph is taken from Ovid's *Fasti*: it is the prayer that Romulus pronounces for the welfare of the city that he has founded.⁴⁸ Even more resonant is the conclusion of the work, perhaps its most famous passage, in which Goethe wanders about the ancient city under a full moon, finding his way to the Colosseum, where he goes over his entire stay in Italy, a process that 'being felt deeply in my agitated soul, evoked a mood that I might call heroic-elegiac, out of which an elegiac poem began to take form' (Goethe 1989: 497–8: *in aufgeregter Seele tief und groß empfunden, erregte eine Stimmung, die ich heroisch-elegeisch nennen darf, woraus sich in poetischer Form eine Elegie zusammenbilden wollte* (SW 15.1: 596)). It would be natural to try to relate this remark to the *Römische Elegien* themselves, which so closely identify Goethe's Roman *permanenza* with this specific poetic form; but *heroic-elegiac* does not seem very apt as a description of the erotic cycle. It would make more sense to think here of the *Fasti*, where the relationship of the heroic and elegiac modes, or of heroic content to elegiac form, is a pervasive theme; and the epigraph that I cited previously may also point in this direction. But Goethe immediately follows up this remark about the heroic-elegiac mood by asking,

Und wie sollte mir gerade in solchen Augenblicken Ovids Elegie ins Gedächtnis zurückkehren, der, auch verbannt, in einer Mondnacht Rom verlassen sollte. *Cum repeto noctem!* seine Rückerinnerung, weit hinten am Schwarzen Meer, im trauer- und jammervollen Zustande, kam mir nicht aus dem Sinn, ich wiederholte das Gedicht, das mir teilweise genau im Gedächtnis hervorstieg, aber mich wirklich an eigner Produktion irre werden ließ und hinderte; die auch, später unternommen, niemals zustande kommen konnte. (SW 15: 596)

And how could I not recall Ovid's elegy at these very moments, for he too was banished and was about to leave Rome on a moonlit night? *Cum repeto noctem!* – his recollection far away at the Black Sea, where he was sad and miserable – kept

⁴⁸ *longa sit huic aetas, dominaeque potentia terrae, / sitque sub hac oriens occiduusque dies* (*Fasti* 4.831–2; IR 275 = SW 15.1: 373).

recurring to me, and I recited the poem, which in part I remembered exactly. But actually it only interfered with and hindered my own production, which, although undertaken again later, never came into existence. (Goethe 1989: 498)

Goethe's memoir then concludes by quoting a passage from the Ovidian poem that has crowded Goethe's own heroic-elegiac effort out of his mind. The poem in question is *Tristia* 1.3, which for its Virgilian reminiscences comparing Ovid's final night in Rome with Aeneas' final night in Troy, might well be considered heroic-elegiac in mood.⁴⁹ Remembering that Goethe published this memoir many years after his Italian journey, the idea that an Ovidian experience of elegiac eroticism followed by exile from the site of those pleasures presents itself as another factor of relevance to our assessment of Goethe's elegiac career.

To conclude: the biographical data suggest to most critics that Goethe's excursion to Italy represents both a break in his bureaucratic career and a readjustment of the balance between his official duties and his literary ambitions. On this basis, I have argued that the excursion helped bring about a redirection of Goethe's literary *representation* of his career. One of the most direct literary results of this excursion, the *Römische Elegien*, takes advantage of the ancient genre's potential to embody in literary form qualities antithetical to the life of a responsible civic or court official, whether in Augustan Rome or in eighteenth-century Weimar. These antithetical qualities were essential to the success of Goethe's Italian sojourn. But Goethe also took advantage of the elegiac poet's capacity to fashion himself as someone who deliberately rejects other literary genres and the entire way of life that he takes them to represent, both in the form of overt comments on the course of Goethe's career, as in the original opening of Elegy 2 with its jaundiced comments on *Werther*, and in their manipulation of elegiac conventions, such as the name of the beloved Faustine and elegy's constitutive rejection of political careerism. And finally, I just raise the possibility that Ovid, the only one of the canonical Roman elegists who might be said to have led a career that was not entirely elegiac, and one in which erotic elegy as strictly defined plays a more circumscribed role – that Ovid might be an important model for Goethe's design of his own brief elegiac career. In a broader sense, in keeping with my opening remarks, I hope to have contributed as well to a small expansion of career studies as a method of literary history.

⁴⁹ Goethe first makes the connection between Ovid's departure and his own in a letter to Herder dated 12 December 1788 (#221, *SW* 2.3: 452). On this motif see Huskey 2002 and Putnam 2010.