

Germany's Bard

GOETHE: His Life and Times. By Richard Friedenthal. Illustrated. 561 pp. Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company. \$8.50.

By WALTER KAUFMANN

WHAT is better is not necessarily good, and even the best may be dreadful—for example, the best restaurant in a town. Richard Friedenthal has not merely given us the best biography of Goethe in English, which might be faint praise, but a very good book indeed. For those who want to know something about Goethe's life, works and personality, this is the book to read.

Lesser poets in different countries are generally comparable with each other, at least in a rough way. But Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe are not at all like each other or like anyone else. Homer is the name we give to the authors of the two most magnificent epics of the Western world — and that is all Homer is; that is enough. There is no biography left over. Dante's significance is largely linked to a single masterpiece, but he also confronts us, every inch, as an individual. His life and personality are well documented. Shakespeare remains something of a mystery as a person, although his times are known thoroughly; his importance is entirely a function of his works, and a large number of these are the best of their kind in the whole vast realm of English literature.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's impact in Germany is quite as much a function of his personality as of any of his works, and his biography is therefore much more important than biographies of poets and artists generally are.

Germans prize his novels as an aspect of his many-sidedness and associate them, like his many superb poems, with particular stages in his development. It would be odd to know any of his major works, including his best lyrical poems, without knowing approximately when they were written. "Werther," for example, was the storm-and-stress masterpiece of Goethe's twenties, which inspired suicides all over Europe; the conversations with Eckermann bring to life the old Goethe; and "Faust" was written over a period of 60 years and reflects his entire development.

Writing Goethe's biography is difficult because the main points are part of any decent German education, and the literature on every episode is considerable. Mr. Friedenthal has solved the problem beautifully. His knowledge of the lit-

erature, not only about Goethe but about the whole period and its social conditions, is admirable, but he manages to get along without footnotes and without in any way flaunting his amazing erudition. The book reads well and presupposes no previous knowledge of the subject, but every chapter also contains a good deal that will be new even to experts.

Mr. Friedenthal, formerly a German editor and writer, emigrated to England in 1938, was naturalized in 1947, and in recent years has edited "Letters of the Great Artists" as well as works on Handel and Leonardo. The Goethe book was published in German in 1963. "The English version—it is not a mere translation from the original German—is the result of very close collaboration between my friend John Nowell and myself," the author tells us in a Postscript, "although I would like to emphasize the predominant share he has taken in the work." It does not read like a translation, except for the Goethe quotations. There are few quotations from the works and almost none from the poetry, but many from let-



From "Goethe."
Goethe at the age of 42.

ters, well chosen though not always well phrased. But Goethe is exceptionally difficult to render in English: Rilke is easy by comparison.

The author's attitude is duly respectful but worlds removed from idolatry and never stuffy. He has no axe to grind but is often mildly ironical, especially on Goethe's letters about his loves. Freedom from worshipfulness and the sparse style enhance Goethe's greatness, which is communicated, for example, through letters that report the impression the young Goethe made on his contemporaries before he became famous. The large cast of minor characters is fascinating, too: many of the writers of the period are brought to life for us, occasionally in intriguing vignettes that occupy no more than a page. There are also eight pages of illustrations, a brief chronology, a bibliographical survey and a good index. In sum, this is not a great book—it does not sing or sizzle—but a singularly rich and rewarding volume.

Mr. Kaufmann, professor of philosophy at Princeton, translated Goethe's "Faust."

The New York Times

Published: August 8, 1965

Copyright © The New York Times