INTRODUCTION

Lotte in Weimar is by no means Thomas Mann's most popular novel; but since its appearance in 1939 connoisseurs of Mann's work have consistently held it in especially high regard, principally because it is Mann's most daring work. None of Mann's other novels is as original in conceptualization or as intricately plotted. Among the impressive array of truly great novels written by Mann —from *Buddenbrooks* (1901) through *Doctor Faustus* (1947)—*Lotte in Weimar* stands out as the work in which Mann took the most risks and exposed most completely his deepest feelings about himself and his art.

Lotte is commonly recognized as an "experimental" novel. Its subject matter is historical (it is an account of "real" people and of an event that really occurred—the visit to Goethe, in Weimar, in September 1816, of Charlotte Kestner, the once "beloved" of the poet and the model for his most famous heroine, the "Lotte" of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*); its style is relentlessly "realistic" (Mann's eye for the detail was never sharper, his ear for the subtlest modulations of speech never more finely tuned). Yet the mode of the work is thoroughly modernist. And not only because *Lotte* lavishly deploys the characteristic modernist techniques of free indirect speech, ambiguation of character, derealization of event, dissolution of the distinction between the inside and the outside of experience, plot-inversion, intertextual citation, and the like. Nor even because it takes for its deepest subject matter the very question of the relation between form and content. *Lotte* is a modernist work because its

form instantiates its solution to the problem of the relation between form and content. The result is, as Barthes might have said, a very "writerly" novel. Not only does it repay many rereadings but it cannot be read at all *only once*.

In *Lotte in Weimar* Charlotte Kestner is always on the verge of making the mistake of confusing life with art, and it is from this sickness that she seeks release. She is as tempted by the sin of literalism as Don Quixote or Emma Bovary. Indeed, her own life appears in retrospect to have been one long temptation to read *Werther* literally, to identify herself with and ascribe to herself the attributes with which Goethe had endowed his fictional heroine, and to presume that Goethe must have loved her as Werther had loved "Lotte." But Charlotte turns out to be the very antithesis of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. *Lotte in Weimar* tells the story of Charlotte's release from her sin of literalism and the tyranny of Goethe's art. Charlotte's three weeks in Weimar are her *Bildung*, her education into the mysteries of art's relationship to life. This is why Goethe and his world at Weimar must be seen through her eyes, filtered through her consciousness, and finally grasped in her understanding. For Charlotte's release from her thralldom to "Lotte" is at the same time Mann's release from his worship of Goethe.

Lotte in Weimar is Mann's most personal novel because it is a novel "about" Goethe. It is well known that Goethe was the artist with whom Mann most intimately identified himself. But Goethe was also what Harold Bloom calls the "precursor" with whom, by the time he approached the age of sixty, Mann felt compelled to come to terms—

which meant giving Goethe his due but also reducing him to merely human proportions and consigning him to history. *Lotte in Weimar* succeeds in translating Goethe from Mann's precursor into Mann's prototype. With this work Mann does to Goethe what Charlotte is imagined to have done to "Lotte," which is to say, he dis-identifies with the model. This dis-identification is effected without rancor, even with a certain regret; but it is definitive. It is like Charlotte's response to Goethe's last words in the novel. Goethe ends his last, pompous, Polonian soliloquy by saying, "Death, final flight into flame—the All-in-One—why should it too be aught but transformation? In my quiet heart, dear visions, may you rest—and what a pleasant moment that will be, when we anon awake together!" Mann follows it with this report: "The long-familiar accents died away. 'Peace to your old age!' was all she whispered" (*Die frühvernommene Stimme verhauchte. "Friede deinem Alter!" flüsterte sie noch*).

Mann's thoughts and feelings about Goethe were very masculinist, deeply ambivalent, at once admiring and phobic, in a word, very Oedipean and arguably in the nature of a homoerotic fixation. This might explain why Mann approaches the subject of Goethe by way of a woman's consciousness. Although the figure of Goethe is the center around which everything in the novel turns, the focus of everyone's interest and attention, it is Charlotte, rather than Goethe, who dominates the novel. It is she who incarnates most perfectly the complex attitudes of admiration and hostility which Mann harbored toward Goethe. It is she who, in the novel, finally dominates even

Goethe himself. Above all, however, it is she who, in forgiving Goethe for using everyone with whom he comes into contact as a victim in his sacrifices to art, allows Mann to forgive himself for using his own poetic powers to reduce Goethe to merely human proportions.

Near the end of the last chapter, Goethe (or the figure of him which she feels beside herself in the carriage) asks Charlotte if she had made the journey to Weimar to seek consolation for having been only one among the many loves of his life. She proves herself to have a better understanding of love, life, and art than Goethe himself. For she answers:

> Nay, Goethe, . . . I came to see the might-have-been, the possible. Its deficiencies compared to the actual and existing are plain to see. Yet there it is, beside the actual, in the world, whenever we say "If only" or "As once it was." And it is worth our questioning. . . . Your reality looks different, . . . It is so imposing, no one dares even inquire after the might-have-been. I congratulate you.

This is the fulfillment of the figure laid down in Charlotte's answer to the question asked of her by the head waiter at the Gasthof zum "Elephanten" in the first chapter:

> Frau Councillor, that very last scene before Werther takes his leave, that heart-rending scene between the three of you, where you speak of the dear, departed mother and the final parting and Werther grasps Lotte's hand and cries: "We shall meet again, in all the world we shall know each other's forms again!"—that was real, was it not, it actually hap-

pened, the Herr Privy Councillor [Goethe] did not make it up?

To which Charlotte replies: "Yes and no, my friend, yes and no."

Critics have rightly praised the famous "Seventh Chapter" of *Lotte in Weimar* in which Mann finally—after better than half the book—brings Goethe himself onto the scene, takes readers into the interior of the great writer's consciousness, and allows us to see the world as only a *mature* genius could see it. The chapter is a *tour de force*, a pastiche of Goethe's recorded words and thoughts, on the one hand, and a moving imaginative reconstruction of the sensibility that informed Goethe's art, on the other. But at the same time, this figuration of Goethe is as much a domination as it is a celebration. It is after all, Mann's art that dazzles us in this evocation of Goethe. Moreover, Goethe is elevated only to be brought down to earth and even humiliated in the two chapters that follow and end the novel.

Only in the penultimate chapter of the novel does Charlotte finally succeed in meeting her former admirer. He has no interest in her, if he ever had. His youthful charm, which once had softened his narcissism, has long since dissipated. At the dinner party with the great man, he appears to be a petty social tyrant and egotistical windbag, manipulative of those over whom he has power and thoughtless of those who love and admire him.

Nor is Goethe redeemed in the concluding chapter of the book. For even as the intimate conversation between Charlotte and Goethe unfolds, the wisdom and nobility

of Goethe's words are being subtly undermined. They are undermined in three ways: first, by the pomposity of the speech in which they are delivered; second, by their contrast to the commonsense and ordinary decency expressed in Charlotte's speech; and third, by the realization, which dawns on us at the end, that it is not Goethe, but Goethe's "spirit," with whom Charlotte has been conversing. Moreover, we realize that it is *she*, rather than either Goethe or his "spirit," who has composed, in her own imagination, both her speech and *his*!

It is only here, then, at the very end of the story, that we can fully appreciate the function of the figure of Goethe in the novel. He is primarily there as a monument, a monument to art, to be sure, but a monument nonetheless. And like any monument, the figure of Goethe is there as an occasion for the *Bildung*, the education of Mann's protagonist, who, in this case, is only manifestly Charlotte Kestner. Latently, the protagonist is Mann himself—Mann in drag, Mann writing like a woman (as he will do again, most notably in *Die Betrogene*, "The Deceived One," titled *The Black Swan* in English). Mann-writing-Charlotte-writing-Goethe effects Mann's own liberation from the tyranny which the figure of Goethe had exercised over him for so long.

It is a brilliant stroke. Mann expropriates Goethe's fictional creation, Lotte, by reabsorbing her to the "historical" personage on which she is based, then reinventing her as a version of himself. He brings her to Weimar, ostensibly to visit her sister, but actually to hunt down, confront, interrogate, and indict the great man of letters for "sacrificing" her (as Mann himself had "sacrificed"

the most intimate experiences of the members of his own family to "artistic" purposes) on the altar of his art. When Charlotte forgives Goethe for the use he had made of her in creating Lotte, it is a case of Mann using Charlotte to vindicate Goethe the artist against the egotism and inhumanity of Goethe the man. But this act of forgiveness extends by implication to Mann as well. This is why the novel can be read as an *apologia* for Mann's own life as an artist and a confession of what he took to be his own limitations as a man.

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