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PAPERS READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY
1965-66

Edited by
ELIZABETH M. WILKINSON
B. A. ROWLEY AND ANN C. WEAVER

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THE DARK SAYINGS OF THE WISE
Some Observations on Goethe’s *Maximen und Reflexionen*
By C. P. Magill

I

“TO UNDERSTAND a proverb and a figure; the words of the wise and their dark sayings.” Thus runs the sixth verse of the Book of Proverbs, which in former days one attributed to Solomon but which turns out to be an anthology of Hebrew gnomic poetry, a piece of jetsam tossed up by the tide of inherited wisdom which perpetually washes the human shore. In content, it belongs to the large family of writings for which we may misappropriate the term Wisdom Literature; in form, it belongs to the family of literary miniatures, in which, as in the field of minute particles of matter, accepted laws do not always apply. Wisdom Literature reaches us in many guises, and since the line must be drawn somewhere the scope of this enquiry is restricted to some of its prose forms. Even this is a tall order, for they are multifarious: aphorisms, maxims, reflexions, apophthegms, proverbs, adages, pithy sayings, sentences, “wise saws and modern instances”, epigrams, *pensées* and gnomes. Since we shall have to do with Goethe’s contribution to this curious art, we may note that he makes more or less indiscriminate use of the following terms: ‘Einzelheiten’, ‘Bemerkungen’, ‘Merkwürdigkeiten’, ‘Aphorismen’, ‘Sentenzen’, ‘Abstraktionen’, ‘Sprüche’. He labels one folderful of sayings ‘Maximen und Reflexionen’, another ‘Späne’ and a third ‘Gnomen’. To avoid confusion, the term ‘sentences’ will be used throughout, in the knowledge that it was good enough for Karl Kraus and Nietzsche
and in the belief that we are dealing with a kind of art commonly produced by sententious persons.

The appetite for wisdom in the form of sentences is insatiable and universal. If one were asked, for example, through which channel does the wisdom of Goethe reach the largest number of English speaking readers, the answer would be: through the ‘Talking Points’ which have been since 1935 a popular feature of the editorial page of the *Daily Express* and in which Goethe figures from time to time. The bookish obtain their diet of wisdom from what are called commonplace books, an odd term, since one might assume that it is precisely the *locus communis* which they are designed to exclude. The first cause of this enquiry was, in fact, a commonplace book, a Victorian anthology entitled *Beautiful Thoughts from German and Spanish Authors*. The editor was Crauford Tait Ramage, a Scottish Calvinist dominie, better known for his letters and travel diaries, entitled *The Nooks and By-ways of Italy. Wanderings in Search of its Ancient Remains and Modern Superstitions*, which have recently been reprinted.

Ramage published four of these ‘Books of Wisdom’ as he called them, covering various literatures. He found the writers of Germany to be “especially rich in sentiments which are of world-wide importance”. He tells us:

*The philosophy of Fichte, the novels and dramas of Goethe, Klopstock’s bright imagination, the pleasing epistolary correspondence of William von Humboldt, Schleiermacher’s religious mysticism, Schiller’s immortal works, the strange and often incomprehensible writings of Paul Richter, have all been laid under contribution to furnish materials for musing to the thoughtful mind.*

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1 This feature began in 1935 under the title ‘They say’. It was discontinued during the war and resumed in 1949 under the title ‘Talking Points’. I am indebted to Mr. Robert Miller of the *Daily Express* for this information.

2 By C. T. Ramage, Liverpool, 1868.

The very title of Ramage’s collection was enough to set the thoughtful mind musing. Could thoughts in the form of sentences be beautiful at all? And if they were, what made them beautiful? Unaware as one was of the amount of thinking that had gone into this and kindred problems, one’s first reaction to Ramage was puzzlement. In his collection, luminaries like Goethe and Schiller outshone what were, to one reader at least, total obscurities, like Krummacher and Moleschott. Splendid lines and dazzling insights co-existed in his pages with what seemed—to contort the title of Leonard Forster’s Cambridge inaugural lecture—examples of the prose of insignificant sense.\(^1\) What, for example, are we to make of: “Ein Mann, der sich durch Schwächen verführen, hinreissen lässt, kann gut, in anderen Punkten, recht liebenswürdig sein, er ist aber kein Mann, sondern ein Mittelding zwischen beiden Geschlechtern.” Equipped with hindsight, one realizes that in the world of sentences one man’s blinding revelation is another man’s platitude. One realizes, too, that the better the sentence, the harder it is to establish its subject; one appreciates the problems faced by those editors of Goethe’s *Maximen und Reflexionen* who, having devised an ingenious set of groupings, are at a loss to know into which group this or that item should be placed. Ramage tackled this problem boldly and gave each item a superscription, which served as the raw material for his index. It is at once clear to what some of these entries refer, e.g. “Ignorance, bustling, nothing more frightful”. In other cases, the task is less easy. “Night-life, immoral” proves to be a reference to a highly moral quotation from Jean Paul’s *Hesperus*. “Lovers, room enough in the smallest cot for” is a reference to Schiller’s “Raum ist in der kleinsten Hütte / Für ein glücklich liebend Paar”. “Du hast wohl recht,

ich finde nicht die Spur / Von einem Geist und alles ist Dressur” appears in the index as “Dog, a, well brought up”.

We are no doubt more sophisticated nowadays, but students of the sentence still have to deal with the same critical problems as their forbears. An early example of the practice of making distinctions between various kinds of sentences can be found in Thomas Fuller’s *Gnomologia: Adages and Proverbs; Wise Sentences and Witty Sayings, Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British*.¹ In his preface, Fuller distinguishes between ‘adagies’ or maxims on the one hand and proverbs and common sayings on the other. The former are “the Observations that Wise Men made from Experience ... summed up into brief and comprehensive Sentences, which being so contriv’d, as to have something remarkable in their Expressions, might be easily remember’d, and brought into Use on Occasions”. The latter consist of “customary little Forms of Words, and trite Speeches” devised by “the Men of Business, and the common People, that they might to their Affairs and Conversations signify and communicate their Sense and Meaning in short, with Smartness or with Pleasantness”. The former “are for Judgment, and are us’d by Men of Understanding and Seriousness”. The latter “are from Wit, and are accomodate to the Vulgar and Men of Mirth”. Like many a modern maker of fine distinctions, Fuller ignores his in practice and tells us: “All that I take upon me here to do, is only throw together a vast confus’d Heap of unsorted Things, old and new, which you may pick over and make use of, according to your Judgment and Pleasure”.

In dealing with “the vast confus’d Heap of unsorted Things” bequeathed to us by the wise, editors and

¹ London, 1732. I am indebted to Prof. W. H. Davies, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, for drawing my attention to this work.
critics of a more recent age set about their work with varying degrees of refinement. Some, like John Morley and Logan Pearsall Smith, regard the making of hair-splitting distinctions between sentences as a waste of time, an exercise of interest only to grammarians and rhetoricians. Others, like W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, the editors of *The Faber Book of Aphorisms*, are content with a broad distinction between the aphorism and the epigram. The latter, in their view, need be true only in a single case; the former is either universally true or true of every member of the class to which it refers. Thus: “Foxhunting is the pursuit of the uneatable by the unspeakable” is an epigram, whereas “The knowledge of God is very far from the love of Him” is an aphorism; it is true both for the Christian and the unbeliever, but in different senses.\(^1\) We have, finally, the makers of hard and fast distinctions who are impatient of the confusion which reigns in this field and select one variety of sentence, the aphorism, for intensive treatment.

As late as 1949, Herman Ulrich Asemisssen, in his ‘Notizen über den Aphorismus’ could refer to the aphorism as “das Aschenbrödel der literarischen Wissenschaft”.\(^2\) This was true only in the sense that before this date there had been no completely satisfactory treatment of the aphorism, although some useful pioneering had been done.\(^3\) We have now reached a point at which the aphorism has been established as a full literary genre in its own right, distinct from other types of sentence such as the maxim, the reflexion or the fragment. The credit

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for this must be shared between Asemissen and J. P. Stern, whose *Lichtenberg. A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* contains the best analysis of the aphorism so far written.¹ Stern combines a reconstruction of Lichtenberg’s doctrine with an anatomy and genealogy of the aphorism. He traces its development from its origins as a vehicle for the expression of scientific data in the pre-systematic and pre-mathematical age of science to its emergence as a literary genre and shows how in Lichtenberg’s work the earlier merges into the later phase. Stern’s book is rich in aphoristic lore and in it the soil thrown up by previous labourers in the field is passed through a fine critical riddle. His argument is intricate and it is therefore fortunate that he himself has done the work of summa-

rizing it for us:

The aphorism, we have found, is a strange and surprisingly complex configuration of words. Its charm lies in an antithesis, perfectly integrated, issuing from a double look at a word or idea. It conceals its autobiographical source yet displays its process of generation. It is self-conscious, yet never exhibits its author’s self-consciousness unmodified. It is something of an experiment with words and ideas, yet it commits aphorist and reader alike to an irretrievable occasion in experience. It uses ideas and sentiments culled from all manner of experience, or again the findings of science, philosophy, literary theory and any number of other enquiries, yet it defies all the systems to which they belong and all coherence wider than itself. It strikes us as both remarkably philosophical and remarkably literary. To one side of it loom empty puns, to the other fragmentary reflections. It and its definition involve us in a great many second thoughts about distinctions which common sense thought firmly established. And it gives one insight while suggesting many — indeed we find it difficult to tell how many, since it is always a little more than their occasion and a little less than their cause. In brief, it is the most paradoxical of genres. Defining a paradox as that formulation of a partial or

ostensible contradiction which originates from a particular experience and in its effects elicits an abundant range of insights, we conclude that the aphorism is the *literary emblem of paradox*.\(^1\)

Stern cites as a good example of a good aphorism Lichtenberg's "Ist denn wohl unser Begriff von Gott etwas weiter, als personifizierte Unbegreiflichkeit?" Here we have most of the qualities which Stern and Asemissen demand of the true aphorism: paradox, ambiguity (Asemissen speaks of the aphorism as "ein Gedanke mit Hintergedanken"), the peculiar relation of form and content, the double look at words, the flash effect. Here too is displayed the legerdemain of the good aphorist, who gives us the illusion that it is we, and not he, who have gained the insight which is the true "subject" of the aphorism. Sentences of this kind are rare and Stern estimates that they make up about one fifth of the content of Lichtenberg's notebooks. Examples are scarce in Goethe's *Maximen und Reflexionen*, but perhaps the following, of which the first makes use of the traditional 'Il y a des gens' opening, would qualify: "Es gibt Personen, denen ich wohl will und wünschte, ihnen besser wollen zu können" or "Ein jeder, weil er spricht, glaubt, auch über die Sprache sprechen zu können" or "Grosse Leidenschaften sind Krankheiten ohne Hoffnung. Was sie heilen könnte, macht sie erst recht gefährlich."\(^2\)

Aphorisms are, in the view of Asemissen and Stern, a most superior kind of sentence. They alone have the quality of charm by which we recognize a true example of literary art. In the maxim, defined by Stern as "a pithy and self-assured but not necessarily self-contained precept for living", we miss the aphorism's peculiar integration of form and content. In the reflexion, held to be the

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2 *Goethes Werke, HA, xii, Maximen und Reflexionen,* Nos. 261, 1033, 1253. All references to the *Maximen und Reflexionen* are to this edition. For the function of the 'Il y a des gens' preamble see Stern, *op. cit.,* p. 265.
outcome of a mood or outlook on certain events or experiences, we miss the second look at language and the artful structure of the true aphorism, and are left aesthetically unsatisfied.

If an unseemly time has been spent upon the aphorism, it is because the practice, still current, of using the word as a convenient label for all types of sentence may divert attention from the oddities of the sentence as a literary form. If we consider, for example, the quality of pithiness, we find that typical anthologies such as The Faber Book of Aphorisms or Unbegwinglicher Geist, Ein Brevier deutscher Aphoristik house specimens varying in length from four to three hundred words. Goethe's "Kein Wort steht still" and Novalis's "Jeder Engländer ist eine Insel" appear beside prolix observations by Nietzsche or Tocqueville. To expiate on the problem of brevity would, of course, be ridiculous. A reference to it may, however, be permitted since our instinctive feeling that brevity is of the essence in these matters conflicts with the apparent assumption of anthologists that pithiness is inessential as a ticket of entry. The assumption is not without foundation. After all, Hippocrates, "the father of the aphorism", is not so much a writer of pithy sayings as a medical man writing in the pointed style. The first item in the first book of his aphorisms is not "Life is short and art is long" but:

Life is short, the Art long, opportunity fleeting, experience treacherous, judgement difficult. The physician must be ready, not only to do his duty himself, but also to secure the cooperation of the patient, of the attendants and of externals.¹

Again, while Wilhelm Meister, presumably speaking with the voice of his creator, sings the praise of "kurzgefasste Sprüche jeder Art", Goethe himself sets little store by brevity. Consequently, Günther Müller, in his edition of the Maximen und Reflexionen, has had to invent a

special group entitled ‘Zugespitztes’ which contains only
a small minority of the items, to be precise 86 out of
1438.¹ Common sense suggests that we should accept
Lichtenberg’s equation of brevity and precision in
sententious writing, provided that we take the term
precision literally and do not confuse it with lack of
ambiguity. The voice of common sense is also heard in
Walter Benjamin’s “Es gibt nichts Ärmeres als eine
Wahrheit, ausgedrückt wie sie gedacht ward”, with its
implication that brevity is a result of the repolissage which
most works of art undergo.² Another saying of Benjamin’s—“Der gute Schriftsteller sagt nicht mehr als er denkt”
—moves nearer the heart of the matter, while a saying of
Lichtenberg’s seems to touch the heart itself: “Der
Gedanke hat in dem Ausdruck noch zu viel Spielraum,
ich habe mit dem Stockknopf hingewiesen, wo ich mit
der Nadelspitze hätte hinweisen wollen.”³ Continuing in
this metaphorical vein, one ventures to suggest that the
effect of the brevity which marks all good sentences is to
reduce the amount of clearance between form and content
of a sentence, thus cutting down the volume of extraneous
noise. Alternatively, one may say that brevity is to the
sentence what velocity is to the projectile; it increases its
power of penetration.⁴
It has been said that German writers are not usually
successful in the brief saying.⁵ This is less than just.
Twenty-eight of them are represented in The Faber Book of
Aphorisms and few of them are wordy. Even a casual
excursion into the German sector of this territory produces

¹ Maximen und Reflexionen, ed. G. Müller, Stuttgart, 1944.
² W. Benjamin, Einbahnstrasse, Frankfurt a.M., 1965, p. 107; Illuminationen,
³ Lichtenberg, Gedankenbücher, ed. F. H. Mautner, Frankfurt a.M./Hamburg,
1963, p. 60.
⁴ Cf. Goldsmith, “The smaller the aperture, the higher the jet”.
⁵ G. Rostrevor-Hamilton, ‘Aphorism, Maxim and Proverb’, Cassell’s Encyclo-
pædia of Literature, London, 1953, 1, 246.
a blend of disappointments and pleasant surprises. Among the latter are Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach’s *Aphorismen*, Schumann’s *Musikalische Haus- und Lebensregeln* and Busoni’s *Mozart-Aphorismen*. Among the former are Morgenstern and Nietzsche. Although Morgenstern insists that “es gibt nichts Hemmenderes als Gemeinplätze und Redensarten”, he writes a number of oddly flat aphorisms. Nietzsche writes magnificent sustained prose but the brilliance of his shorter utterances is dimmed by what Karl Schlechta calls “eine merkwürdige Monotonie der Gesamtaussage”.1 One hardly knows into which category to place Schopenhauer. Misled by the title, one opened expectantly his *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit*, which proved to be an exercise in scholarly droning, a tissue of banalities woven around the maxims of an impressive array of authorities, ancient and modern. To read it was to be reminded of one of Goethe’s few bad-tempered reflexions, provoked perhaps by a reading of *Der Messias*: “Um die alten abgeschmacktesten locos communes der Menschheit durchzupetschen, hat Klopstock Himmel und Hölle, Sonne, Mond und Sterne, Zeit und Ewigkeit, Gott und Teufel aufgeboten” (No. 963). One took to heart, however, Schopenhauer’s advice on how to be healthy though intellectual, his warning “vor jeder Anstrengung in der Dämmerung”, his frightening account of the effect of excessive mental exertion on the bowels and his denunciation of excessive labour of any kind, especially for money:

Dass z.B. die gefeierten englischen Dichter dieses Jahrhunderts, wie Walter Scott, Wordsworth, Southey u.a. im Alter, ja, schon in den sechziger Jahren, geistig stumpf und unfähig geworden, ja, zur Imbezillität herabgesunken sind, ist ohne Zweifel daraus zu erklären, dass sie sämtlich, vom hohen Honorar verlockt, die Schriftstellerei als Gewerbe getrieben, also des Geldes wegen geschrieben haben... Dagegen sind

die Heroen des weimarischen Hofes, Goethe, Wieland, Knebel
bis ins hohe und höchste Alter geisteskräftig und geistetätig
geblieben, weil sie keine Lohnschreiber waren. Ebenso Voltaire.¹

II

It is thus to Goethe’s fortunate indifference to lucre
that we owe the work to which overdue attention must
now be paid, the *Maximen und Reflexionen*; the great
majority were written after 1800, a reminder that we have
to do with a middle-aged, indeed elderly kind of literature.
Although we shall find many of Goethe’s best sentences
elsewhere, we may fairly consider the *Maximen und
Reflexionen* in isolation, if only because they are an example
of the way editorial practice can colour our understanding
of a work. No ingratitude is intended towards the able
and devoted scholars who have busied themselves with
the *Maximen und Reflexionen* if we observe that they have
been more concerned with their value as a guide to
Goethe’s mind and as a compendium of his wisdom than
with the need to stand back and consider what they
really are. Had we been alive in Goethe’s day, we should
never have heard of the *Maximen und Reflexionen*. We
would have had to judge Goethe’s ability as a sentence
writer from the series headed ‘Aus Ottiliens Tagebuch’
in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* and those headed ‘Betrach-
tungen im Sinne der Wanderer’ or ‘Aus Makariens Archiv’
in the *Wanderjahre*. Were we scientifically minded, we
would have found other series in the *Farbenlehre*, in the
*Hefte zur Morphologie* and the *Hefte zur Naturwissenschaft.
Further series, bearing such headings as ‘Eigenes und
Angeeignetes in Sprüchen’, ‘Einzelnes’, ‘Älteres beinahe
Veraltetes’ or ‘Bedenklichstes’ would have been found
in various numbers of *Kunst und Altertum*, which Goethe
used as a convenient asylum for homeless sayings. Had

¹ Schopenhauer, *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit. Paränesen und Maximen*, Bern,
1946, p. 45.
we been classical scholars, we would have realized that ‘Wilhelm Meisters Lehrbrief’ begins with, and ‘Aus Makariens Archiv’ is interspersed with, translations from Hippocrates. Had we survived Goethe and acquired the Eckermann-Riemer Nachlassausgabe of 1840, we would have found three volumes of ‘Sprüche in Prosa’ in which the sentences published in Goethe’s lifetime are married to those in the Nachlass. It was Max Hecker who put an end to this method of handling Goethe’s sentences. Eckermann’s term ‘Sprüche in Prosa’ was in his view “von allen Bezeichnungen, die man hätte wählen können, wohl die ungeschicktesten” and he chose instead a term with which Goethe had headed a folder of sentences dated 1822. While Eckermann, admittedly following a suggestion by Goethe, had attempted the impossible task of organizing the whole mass of sentences in three groups, according to whether they dealt with art, nature or literary and ethical matters, Hecker presented the sentences in their original settings and sequence. His edition, now nearly sixty years old, is still incomparably the best. In modern editions of Goethe we commonly find a volume entitled Maximen und Reflexionen, containing about 1400 items, arranged according to the policy of the editors in groups bearing such titles as ‘Gott und Natur’, ‘Religion und Christentum’, ‘Erkenntnis und Irrtum’. There is no denying the convenience of this arrangement and, as Elizabeth Wilkinson has pointed out, Günther Müller’s arrangement does show clearly the dialectical movement of Goethe’s thought. But there is a danger that such procedures may obscure the nature of particular sentences and give a false impression of the work as a

whole. For example, one finds in some editors a perverse wish to read back into the *Maximen und Reflexionen* the orderliness which they themselves have imposed upon them. Erich Trunz claims that they form "ein Ganzes, in dem alle Teile aufeinander abgestimmt scheinen, sich wechselseitig ergänzen, deuten und ineinander spiegeln" (HA, xii, 697). Paul Stöcklein is doubtless correct in saying that they are based upon "ein unsystematisches System" but one cannot accept his claim that one of the most important tasks of research must be "dieses System aus den Reihen nachzuzeichnen und die fehlenden Stücke zu ergänzen, sowie die ungeordnet überlieferten Aphorismen des Nachlasses geistig einzubeziehen" (AA, ix, 739). Leonard Willoughby¹ convinced us once for all of the unity and continuity of Goethe's work as a whole and the value and charm of his *Maximen und Reflexionen* are in no way diminished if we accept them for what they are—a miscellany, indeed a commonplace book, admittedly of an uncommon kind.

In composing his sentences, Goethe seems to have followed the method used in the composition of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes, of whom Aubrey wrote:

He walked much and contemplated, and he had in the head of his Staffe a pen and inke-horne, carried always a Notebook in his pocket, and as soon as a notion darted, he presently entred it into his Booke, or els he should perhaps have lost it.²

It was Goethe's habit, to judge from Max Hecker's description of the manuscripts, to transfix his darting notions by jotting them down on whatever was nearest to hand—on old envelopes, household bills, torn shreds of coarse wrapping paper, old theatre programmes, drafts of letters, diary entries or sketches for some piece of work. This "lässliche Gewohnheit", as Hecker called

it, resulted in problems of decipherment and dating equal
to those faced by editors of Nietzsche, who not only
composed ambulando but was shortsighted to boot and
used the same notebooks again and again, now working
from front to back and now from back to front. When
he had written his sentences, Goethe’s problem was
what to do with them and, as we have seen, he housed
them where he could. His casual method of solving the
accommodation problem is well illustrated by the senten-
ces which appear in the Wanderjahre. These have been the
subject of much scholarly contention, with which Hans
Reiss deals in a recent article and which need not concern
us here.1 But it is profitable to recall Eckermann’s
account of the episode, however unreliable it may be.
The manuscript drafts of the Wanderjahre were full of
sentences which were to have been woven into the fabric
of the book, but of which many remained unused. When
it became apparent that the three parts in which the
Wanderjahre were due to appear were too thin, Goethe
decided to pad them out with this surplus material.
Eckermann, who was instructed to assemble and arrange
it, tells us:

Unter diesen Umständen liess er mich rufen; er erzählte mir
den Hergang und eröfnete mir zugleich, wie er sich zu helfen
gedenke, indem er mir zwei starke Manuskriptbündel vorlegte,
die er zu diesem Zweck hatte herbeiholen lassen. “In diesen
beiden Paketen”, sagte er, “werden Sie verschiedene bisher
ungedruckte Schriften finden, Einzelheiten, vollendete und
unvollendete Sachen, Aussprüche über Naturforschung, Kunst,
Litteratur und Leben, alles durcheinander. Wie wäre es nun,
wenn Sie davon sechs bis acht gedruckte Bogen zusammen-
redigierten, um damit vorläufig die Lücken der “Wanderjahre”
zu füllen. Genau genommen, gehört es zwar nicht dahin, allein
es lässt sich damit rechtfertigen, dass bei Makarien von einem
Archiv gesprochen wird, worin sich dergleichen Einzelheiten

1 ‘Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre. Der Weg von der ersten zur zweiten Fassung’,
DVLG, xxxix (1965), 52–6.
befinden. Wir kommen dadurch für den Augenblick über eine grosse Verlegenheit hinaus und haben zugleich den Vorteil, durch dieses Vehikel eine Masse sehr bedeutender Dinge schicklich in die Welt zu bringen.¹

This was done, but when the novel appeared, the general reader and in particular the female general reader was disconcerted by the interruption of the story through what Eckermann calls "eine Menge rätselhafter Sprüche" and they were accordingly omitted in the Nachlassausgabe of 1840. Modern practice is to re-insert them in the body of the novel.

Many of Goethe's sentences are, like those in the Wanderjahre, by-products of some other, more important activity but the personal significance of the Maximen und Reflexionen for Goethe should not be underestimated. Paul Stöcklein calls them "ein abgerissenes Selbstgespräch des Geistes", an apt description, for in many of them we can hear Goethe turning a problem over and over in his mind (AA, ix, 737). In the numerous sentences dealing with the related problems of self-knowledge and self-evaluation, he seems little concerned with producing some terse and felicitous expression of a final solution; he prefers to reach his objective by manœuvre rather than by direct assault.² For Geneviève Bianquis, the only critic who has noted the absence from the Maximen und Reflexionen of significant parts of Goethe's thought, they were a form of self-applied therapy. What they represent is "la médication intellectuelle, la cure de pensée abstraite, ou tout au moins générale, qui se montre efficace à calmer une sensibilité aisément blessée par la vie".³ One cannot improve on such general assessments of the Maximen und Reflexionen but some observations may be

¹ Gespräche mit Goethe, 15 May 1831.
² E.g., Nos. 1224, 1225, 1068, 1069.
permitted on aspects of them which have not been overworked.

In some future edition of Goethe’s sentences, they will no doubt be grouped according to their formal peculiarities and not according to their supposed content. Use could be made of accepted terms such as the maxim, the aphorism (in its precise sense) or the parable, but the editor would also have to employ terms which our imperfect understanding of the art of the sentence has not so far enabled us to invent. There might be a section devoted to items in which Goethe employs well tried sententious devices. For example, in “Es bleibt einem jeden immer noch soviel Kraft, das auszuführen, wovon er überzeugt ist” (No. 1053), he uses the formula invented by La Rochefoucauld in “Nous avons tous assez de force pour supporter les maux d’autrui”. Even if we ignore the problems of form, there is a case for having a special and bulky section entitled ‘Angeeignetes’. The Maximen und Reflexionen are full of quotations, with or without quotation marks: straight quotations, translations of and variations on quotations, first-hand quotations and second-hand quotations—a saying attributed to Cromwell and quoted by De Retz, a piece of Tacitus quoted by Zincgref (Nos. 1389, 105). Zincgref’s Der Teutschen Scharfsinnigen Kluge Sprüch, Apopthegmata genant is only one of the collections pillaged by Goethe. “Grosse Leidenschaften sind Krankheiten ohne Hoffnung. Was sie heilen könnte, macht sie erst recht gefährlich”, which Asennissen cites as an example of a true and effective aphorism, comes from a French collection, Vasconiana ou recueil des bons mots (1730).\(^1\) Another source was The Koran or Essays, Sentiments, Characters and Callimachies of Tria Juncta in Uno, a commonplace book wrongly attributed

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\(^1\) No. 1253. “Les grandes passions sont des maux sans remède. Ce qui les guérit les rend périlleuses.”
at the time to Sterne, which yielded a string of sentences in ‘Aus Makariens Archiv’, including the excellent and still valid “Neuere Poeten tun viel Wasser in die Tinte”. Goethe could be an economical as well as a spendthrift writer and so it is not surprising that he is much given to self-quotation. He quotes from his own letters — the sentence “Wir sind naturforschend Pantheisten, dichtend Polytheisten, sittlich Monotheisten” comes from a letter he wrote to Jacobi. Sentences which had already occurred in the Italienische Reise or the Wanderjahre recur, either by oversight or intent, in the Maximen und Reflexionen. The sentence indexed by Ramage as “Ignorance, bustling, nothing more frightful” occurs twice in the Maximen und Reflexionen, once in its familiar form as “Es ist nichts schrecklicher als eine tätige Unwissenheit” and once as the fall-out of a chain reaction set off by the dark saying of Nathan der Weise: “Kein Mensch muss müssen” and recorded at some length in ‘Betrachtungen im Sinne der Wanderer’. The amount of ‘Angeeignetes’, both direct and indirect, in the Maximen und Reflexionen is enough to warrant the earlier description of the work as a commonplace book. It is, however, an unusual commonplace book in the sense that Goethe seldom leaves untouched what he takes. We might, therefore, head the ‘Angeeignetes’ section with the lines:

Diese Worte sind nicht alle in Sachsen
Noch auf meinem eignen Mist gewachsen,
Doch was für Samen die Fremde bringt
Erzog ich im Lande gut gedüngt. (HA, 1, 547)

An answer must now be found to the question: are the Maximen und Reflexionen difficult? In Günther Müller’s
view they are not, at least not in the sense that they involve the unravelling of a tangled skein of ideas. All they demand of the reader is “ein anschauungsbereites, aufgeschlossenes und gesammeltes Betrachten, denn sie führen im wesentlichen von der Vielfältigkeit der Erscheinungen zu den einfachen Grundzügen und Lebenskräften, die sich in allen Einzelerscheinungen, ‘allem Vergänglichen’, zur Darstellung bringen”.¹ Even if we do not all detect in ourselves a capacity for “anschauungsbereites, aufgeschlossenes und gesammeltes Betrachten”, we shall not find them dark in the Biblical sense. The word bidhay, translated as ‘dark sayings’ in some versions of the Bible, could more accurately be rendered as ‘riddles’ or ‘insinuations’ or ‘ambiguous sayings”² and Goethe is neither a poser of riddles nor a wiseacre. Nevertheless, the Maximen und Reflexionen give us an insight into the nature of the darkness which at times overshadows the words of the wise. Goethe is much concerned with the occupational troubles of the brain worker, with the causes and nature of error, with the pursuit of simplicity and clarity and with the problem of obscurity. He has a particular distaste for what he calls “das Abstruse”, for the introduction of man-made complications into matters already enigmatic enough:

Ist denn die Welt nicht schon voller Rätsel genug, dass man die einfachsten Erscheinungen auch noch zu Rätseln machen soll? (No. 440)

He compares modern mystics to Trophonius, the Greek architect who was swallowed up by the earth and who vented muffled oracles from his dismal subterranean prison (No. 71). The nuisance had, he complained, even spread to science: “Es gibt jetzt eine böse Art in den

¹ Müller, ed. cit., pp. xii–xiii.
² I am indebted for this information to Rev. Prof. Gwilym H. Jones, of the Theological College, Aberystwyth.
Wissenschaften abstrus zu sein’ (No. 575). It was thus natural that he should react sharply when he himself was the target of a charge of obscurity. The charge was made by Johann Gottfried Schadow, the Prussian court sculptor, in the course of a brisk exchange of views concerning naturalism in art, and it provoked Goethe to write one of his best series of sentences, his ‘Aphorismen, Freunden und Gegnern zur Beherzigung’.¹ In several of these one hears an echo of the motif sounded in the title of this enquiry.

Before considering them, it is well to note that both writers and critics like to talk about sentences in what may be called light metaphors. Most of us would agree with J. P. Stern’s view that one of the functions of an aphorism is to illuminate a mental landscape, to throw light upon an obscure corner of our minds, even if we are not sure at a first reading what is being illuminated.² But there is no denying the darkness of many good sentences. We have to do here with a kind of obscurity not found in the writer of significant nonsense nor among speakers with tongues. Nor have we to do with plain confusion, of the kind detected by Byron in the writings of August Wilhelm Schlegel, of whom he wrote: “He always seems upon the verge of meaning; and, lo, he goes down like a sunset, or melts like a rainbow”. In the world of the sentence, the darkness is part of the art, as Thomas Fuller was quick to observe. Many of the items in his collection are, he explains, “bare expressions, to be taken literally in their proper meaning”. Others, however, “have something of the Obscure and Surprize which as soon as understood, renders them pretty and notable”.³ Despite his tendency to be too bright for

¹ Hecker, *ed. cit.*, Nos. 1064–96. This is the only series to which Goethe applies the term ‘Aphorismen’.
³ Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. v.
words, the most artful obscurantist among writers of German sentences is Karl Kraus. He is happy to admit “dass es Autoren gibt, die vor mir den Mangel voraus-haben, dass sie leicht verständlich schreiben?” and asserts, implausibly: “Ich kenne keine schwerere Lektüre als die leichte.” ¹ To give the necessary ‘Hintergründigkeit’ to his sentences he exploits to the full the paradox, as, for example, in one of his aphorisms about aphorisms: “Der längste Atem gehört zum Aphorismus”.² Although he is poles apart from Goethe as a sentence writer, he looks at the problem of clarity and obscurity in a similar way. In an aphorism which touches upon this problem — “Der Aphorismus deckt sich nie mit der Wahrheit; er ist ent-weder eine halbe Wahrheit oder anderthalb” — we hear an echo of Goethe’s division of errors into whole, half and quarter errors.³ 

Goethe approaches the problem from several directions. He considers, for example, the kind of subjective obscurity which arises from sheer obtuseness:

Wer einem Autor Dunkelheit vorwerfen will, sollte erst sein eigenes Inneres beanschauen, ob es denn da auch recht hell ist; in der Dämmerung wird eine sehr deutliche Schrift unlesbar. (No. 350)

But it is not enough, as the following sentence implies, to view a sentence in the light of one’s own light:

Wer Maximen bekämpfen will, sollte fähig sein, sie recht klar aufzustellen und innerhalb dieser Klarheit zu kämpfen, damit er nicht in den Fall gerate, mit selbstgeschaffenen Luftbildern zu fechten. (No. 348)

He recognizes, however, that we are all in a sense speakers with tongues, and when he asks us to consider “dass

¹ Karl Kraus, Beim Wort genommen, Munich, 1955, pp. 122, 118.
² Ibid., p. 238.
³ Ibid., p. 161; Goethe, No. 337.
nicht jede Sprache jedem verständlich sei” (No. 707) we detect a rueful admission that there are places upon which light can never be shed and that for some of us, some of the words of some of the wise must forever remain dark. The most revealing observation to be found in the Maximen und Reflexionen is not by Goethe at all; it comes from a letter which Hamann wrote to Friedrich Jacobi and runs: “Deutlichkeit ist eine gehörige Verteilung von Licht und Schatten.” To this Goethe adds only two words: “Hamann. Hört!”

In his own sentences there is usually a just distribution of light and shade. Occasionally there is an excess of light and we have a pallid effect, as in: “Der Umgang mit Frauen ist das Element guter Sitten” or “Eine Sammlung von Anekdoten und Maximen ist für den Weltmann der grösste Schatz, wenn er die ersten an schicklichen Orten ins Gespräch einzustreuen, der letzten im treffenden Falle sich zu erinnern weiss” (Nos. 1176, 1365). When there is an excess of shade and an effect of obscurity, it is almost always because Goethe is using technical form in the sense that Schiller applies the term to Kant’s language. Examples of this are the sentences: “In der Phanerogamie ist noch so viel Kryptogramisches, dass Jahrhunderte es nicht entziffern werden” or “Kristallographie so wie Stöchiometrie vollendet auch den Oryktognosten; ich aber finde, dass man seit einiger Zeit in der Lehrmethode gerrißt hat . . .” (Nos. 598, 673), and further examples may be found in Goethe’s observations on ‘Urphänomene’. But most of his sentences are clear at a first, or at most a third reading and have as we say “an immediate appeal”. A contemporary essayist has written: “I reject everything which appeals to me immediately, knowing from experience that this means

1 No. 351. Letter of 18 January 1786.
I already have it.” He was talking, however, of choosing suit lengths, not of sentences and turning his idea upside down we can say that we accept most of Goethe’s wisdom because we have it already. To read the Maximen und Reflexionen is to come across many old friends in modern dress. The truths they contain are often home truths and of these some are nearer home than others. In a sentence like “Zu berichtigen verstehen die Deutschen, nicht nachzuhelfen” we hear, if we are Britons, a distant truth (No. 166). We hear the sound of approaching footsteps, if we are scholars, in the sentence: “Gewisse Bücher scheinen geschrieben zu sein, nicht damit man daraus lerne, sondern damit man wisse, dass der Verfasser etwas gewusst hat” (No. 460). When we read: “Wer keine Liebe fühlt, muss schmeicheln lernen”, we know that the unwelcome stranger is already there and has made himself at home (No. 1270).

If it is true that the aphorist wages incessant war against “die Diktatur des Gewöhnlichen” and that originality is the prime characteristic of his products, then Goethe is no aphorist. He may be an inventor — “mein ganzes inneres Wirken erwies sich als eine lebendige Heuristik” (No. 237) — but it is his way to re-invent old things and re-think old thoughts. He does not strain our eyes with dazzling insights, nor our ears with resounding paradoxes; more often than not, he offers us the consolation of shared experience. When he is at his best, his truths are evident, but not self-evident and his wit is true in the sense that it is “nature to advantage dress’d”. And so only a few of the Maximen und Reflexionen can be numbered among the dark sayings of the wise. For the greater part they are commonplaces, touched by art. It is hard in discussing them to steer a course between the platitudinous and the abstruse. If there has been

some labouring of the obvious in this enquiry, the excuse must be that its subject is a writer with a special talent for "the illumination of the usual". If there has been some shedding of darkness on light places, let us recall that even Goethe could not always make himself clear:

Die Dunkelheit gewisser Maximen ist nur relativ: nicht alles ist dem Hörenden deutlich zu machen, was dem Ausübenden einleuchtet. (No. 349)