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# Goethe Yearbook



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# Goethe Yearbook

Publications of the Goethe Society  
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Edited by Daniel Purdy

With Catriona MacLeod,  
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**Special Section on  
Goethe's Lyric Poetry**

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HORST LANGE AND CHRISTIAN P. WEBER

## **Introduction: New Approaches to Goethe's Lyric Poetry**

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THIS COLLECTION OF ARTICLES emerged from a series of panels devoted to Goethe's lyric poetry at the Thirty-first Conference of the German Studies Association in 2010. The organizers, including Regina Sachers, were motivated by the observation that this genre of Goethe's writings has been surprisingly understudied in recent years. On the one hand, scholars have tended to revisit very similar questions raised by a comparatively small number of individual poems; only rarely have new contexts or innovative theoretical approaches been brought into play. On the other hand, David Wellbery's magisterial study *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (1996) has been received with such appreciation that scholars seem to have been discouraged from pursuing new directions in this area of research. Our aim was to bring together a wide variety of established and emerging Goethe scholars and take stock of the current innovative approaches to Goethe's lyric poetry. We are hopeful that the following articles, which (with one exception) have their origin in this panel series, will open up new avenues of research and poetic insight as they examine Goethe's lyric through various discursive lenses and from different theoretical angles.

The first three contributions propose new ways of reading Goethe's early poems that go beyond David Wellbery's methodology and assessments. Edgar Landgraf, meeting David Wellbery on his home turf, makes a strong argument that the discursive formation of Goethe's early poems is better understood if approached with a rigorous application of Luhmann's systems theory. Christian Weber delineates metapoetic strategies in Goethe's early poetry and argues that the arrangement of the "great hymns of genius" in the *Erste Weimarer Gedichtsammlung* constitutes a dimension of poetic meaning that cannot be captured by the common approach of reading poems as singular events. Joseph O'Neil's reading of *Erklärung eines alten Holzschnittes vorstellend Hans Sachsens poetische Sendung* reviews David Wellbery's notion of "specular romanticism." As O'Neil argues, in this poem of his first Weimar years Goethe proclaims an alternative version of "poetic vocation" based on distinction, mediation, and judgment instead of the imagined identity between the self and the cosmos that had been suggested as characteristic of his earlier poems.

Other articles gain new ground by activating new contexts. Reading Mignon's "Kennst du das Land" both in its setting in *Wilhelm Meisters*

*Lehrjahre* and in the context of a theory of empathy, Fritz Breithaupt asks how this poem, despite thematizing a highly individual fate, can command universal appeal. Frauke Berndt and Claudia Maienborn draw on insights from linguistics, psychoanalysis, and rhetoric to argue that the “standard” reading of *Auf dem See*, which construes the “reifende Frucht” as a symbol of the maturing subject, is highly questionable; their proposed reading of the poem casts it as a “media event.” Daniel Wilson submits that the questions raised by *Selige Sehnsucht* are best answered by placing it in a series of *Divan* poems that talk about homosexuality. Benjamin Bennett argues that—in light of the “antipoetic” agenda of *Faust*—poetry can only relate to truth by enacting it; he carefully reads two poems (*Dauer im Wechsel* and *Vermächtniß*) to make visible the features of such an enactment. Via Goethe’s theory of science and American transcendentalism, Hannah Eldridge connects her analysis of the difficulties of comprehending the *Divan* poem *Unbegrenzt* to Stanley Cavell’s response to the problems of skepticism. And, intriguingly, starting with *Unbegrenzt* as well, Charlotte Lee finds that the *Divan* and Hegel’s speculative philosophy resonate with surprising similarities.

*Horst Lange, University of Central Arkansas*

*Christian P. Weber, Florida State University*

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EDGAR LANDGRAF

## Intimacy, Morality, and the Inner Problematic of the Lyric

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GOETHE'S POST-ANACREONTIC POETRY "fundamentally alter[ed] the nature of poetic writing, inaugurating a type of literary discourse that, from a European perspective, can be called the Romantic lyric." Thus argues David Wellbery in "Idyllic and Lyric Intimacy," the introductory essay of *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism*.<sup>1</sup> Wellbery does not read the Romantic lyric in the poetological tradition it generated, a tradition that is "in essence tautological, drawing on, and reinforcing, the mythical values—'nature,' 'force,' 'youth,' 'unmediated song'—the texts themselves set into circulation" (7); rather he approaches Goethe's early poetry as a particular *discursive practice* that produces the effects of which it speaks. A comparison of Goethe's "Maifest" with passages from Salomon Geßner's sentimental idylls reveals the "discursive mutations," the changes in the pragmatic, the fictional, the temporal, and the semantic structures that generate the "new enunciative modalities and strategies of reading" (11) associated with the Romantic lyric. While the comparison with Geßner focuses on particular changes in literary writing, the epochal significance Wellbery attributes to Goethe's poetry from the 1770s is not restricted to literary history; rather, Wellbery draws on Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Kittler, and Niklas Luhmann to recognize the broad social relevance of Goethe's writing technique. It is said to have changed "the field of intimate communications" and to have helped reorganize intimacy itself (see 10–11). Furthermore, the structure of the lyric that "crystallize[s] into the signature of a historical emergence" (3) around Goethe's poetry is not restricted to the Romantic period. As the argument progresses past the comparison with Geßner and turns increasingly abstract, Wellbery develops *in nuce* a theory of the *modern* lyric. In respect to what the essay identifies as "the inner problematic of the lyric" (22), Wellbery puts Goethe in proximity to the poetic concerns of one of the most progressive lyric voices of the twentieth century, Paul Celan.<sup>2</sup>

That Goethe's post-anacreontic poetry alters the field of intimate communications (presumably for Western society at large) and that it already carries the seed for the modern lyric are two far-reaching assertions that should enthuse any Goethe scholar and make him or her forget that by the same token Wellbery reduces their genius to that of a gifted craftsman, the mere addressee of discursive changes that created effects that hitherto had erroneously been taken for expressions of a higher soul. In the following, I

want to revisit both observations, not to remystify Goethe, but to expand on the sociohistorical context from which the Romantic lyric emerges. That is, I want to read the poetic changes that coalesce in Goethe's poetry and produce a new discursive practice (and correspondingly a new hermeneutics) in the context of the larger reorganization of the field of intimate communication in the eighteenth century by picking up on a reference to Niklas Luhmann's work that Wellbery's essay makes merely in passing. It suggests that we understand the lyric as a "cultural technique"<sup>3</sup> that helps redefine how intimacy is communicated. It presupposes that changes in the field of communication—rather than new poetic, psychological, or philosophical insights of exceptional souls—offer new possibilities for lovers to constitute and experience themselves in and through their intimate involvements, be they poetic or personal. A more extensive look at the sociohistorical context of this development reveals—this is my thesis—that the differentiation of this discourse in the eighteenth century is modulated by particular moral codes. These moral codes, which guide expectations of authenticity, immediacy, naturalness, originality, and singularity, produce paradoxes in communication that the Romantic lyric adopts for itself and that in turn come to structure modern notions of subjectivity.

### **Communication vs. Consciousness**

I am, of course, aware that Niklas Luhmann's work might not be the ideal tool to advance our appreciation of Goethe's poetry or to satisfy our philological inclinations. If Goethe's poetry indeed is essentially about "die Erkundung der Bedingung der Möglichkeit von Erleben,"<sup>4</sup> one must wonder if the technocratic conceptual apparatus we know as systems theory is the right tool to approach such a sensitive topic. More specifically, one is tempted to ask whether systems theory's inherent focus on communication, rather than consciousness or language, is appropriate for a linguistic practice that, for the most part, is designed for personal, reflective, and often mute consumption rather than interpersonal communication. Is poetry not essentially about subjectivity and the production of states of consciousness, of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, and therefore about the very things that systems theory from the outset defines as unreachable? A few preliminary remarks on the chosen methodology are therefore in order, to delineate what systems theory can and cannot do when dealing with a conception of the lyric that is derived from a particular body of poetry. To keep this section short, I will restrict myself to a small number of basic observations concerning systems theory's distinction between consciousness and communication and their relation to language, as these concepts are relevant for the subsequent reading of Goethe's poetry and the effort to relate the notion of subjectivity associated with the lyric to sociohistorical changes in communication practices.

I will start in medias res, with Luhmann's most infamous claim, namely, that it is not consciousness or the human psyche that communicates, but rather communication. We may consider the radical alterity of consciousness and communication, which Luhmann formalizes along the lines of systems theory in terms of a distinction between different media. Consciousness, or the psychic

system, constitutes a medium different from communication, within which different forms emerge (thoughts, feelings, perceptions). Communications are not thoughts, feelings, or perceptions per se, but relate to the latter only across a medial divide. Luhmann conceives the transfer from one medium to the other in ways quite similar to what Nietzsche observed with regard to the relationship between mental image and language, as “a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.”<sup>5</sup> While systems theory assumes the possibility of an energy transfer, that a system might be irritated in its environment by another system, it refutes the idea of an information transfer in which one system would transport its elements *as such* into another system. Simply put, communications about perceptions or feelings are not the same as what a mind experiences as perceptions and feelings. And vice versa, in whatever forms consciousness might appear within communication, these forms have to be understood as “metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities.”<sup>6</sup>

What Luhmann formalizes with the help of systems theory is not altogether counterintuitive. We all experience every day how words are not the thing they designate or how they fail to “transport” what we hoped to express. Countering the shortcomings of any transfer model, Luhmann conceives of communication not as the coded transmission of a message from a receiver to a recipient, but rather as the processing of the distinction between utterance and information, which is synthesized as understanding.<sup>7</sup> Understanding implies that an utterance was recognized as an utterance and a carrier of information and that one gauges the relationship between utterance and information in one way rather than another (as factual statement, as critique, as a description, as indicating emotional distress, etc.). Understanding takes place independently of the original intentions of a speaker. It succeeds when communication is processed in this way (synthesizing utterance, information, and understanding), and fails when it is not.<sup>8</sup> To say that communication does not somehow transport or adequately represent what thoughts, feelings, and perceptions “really” are does not mean we cannot talk about these things. It merely suggests that such talk takes place in the medium of communication, follows the rules of and is limited by the structure of communication, and will not lead us into the depths of the human soul. The radical implications of Luhmann’s theory aside—Hans-Georg Moeller in his recent study calls it the fourth insult to human vanity, a fundamental sociological challenge to the anthropocentrism of Western thought and much of the humanities<sup>9</sup>—for our purposes it is enough to note how his theory entails a basic change in perspective, namely, that we focus on communication and investigate how it is structured by changing semantics and codes, and do so even and especially when communications concern, observe, or construct consciousness. Whereas from the vantage point of communication, consciousness, the psyche, subjectivity, and so on are thought to be different from, and outside of, communication, this outside nevertheless is constructed through (that is, “within”) communication and appears and is accessible to communication only in the form of (further) communication. To insist on the primacy of communication in this manner is to question resolutely any primacy of the mind, of an “I,” or of subjectivity

existing prior to, and independent of, their articulation by the system of communication.

Giving primacy to communication over consciousness, systems theory is in tune with other poststructuralist theories in that it endeavors to shed the logocentrism of the thought of “Old Europe” (as Luhmann liked to call the Western tradition). But it differs in focusing on communication rather than language. From Luhmann’s perspective, language does not constitute its own system, but rather is used both by consciousness and by communication. As Derrida’s work perhaps shows most clearly, focusing on language makes it difficult to keep consciousness and communication separate. One will return eternally to the finding of an inherent and insurmountable contradiction at the foundation of language, namely—to follow the Husserlian distinction from which both Derrida and Luhmann depart—that the structure that allows language and signs to be used for communicative purposes comes to undermine the purported purity of their use by consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Luhmann avoids the pitfalls of logocentrism not by denying that consciousness is afflicted or even constituted by the communicative structure of language or signs, but by giving primacy to communication precisely (that is, by definition) inasmuch as it represents a process that conditions itself independent of what the psychic systems involved might think or perceive at the time.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the psychic system in and by itself is reduced to an operational modality that in itself (without the distinctions offered by language) is thought to be unconscious.<sup>12</sup> Which is to say, while communication cannot transport or penetrate *Erleben* as *Erleben*, we might well observe the distinctions it has to offer as fashioning, limiting, and helping constitute what and how a mind experiences consciously, including what a consciousness experiences as highly personal, intimate, individual, or subjective.

### **Communication and Lyric Subjectivity**

How does viewing communication rather than language or consciousness as the primary medium of understanding affect how we read poetry? As I remarked earlier, one might well suspect that poetry is not about communication at all, but rather about subjectivity and the expression of exceptional states of consciousness. Focusing on communication means that one would have to read poetry no longer as *Erlebnisdichtung*; but it also offers an alternative to the more sophisticated paradigm offered by psychoanalysis, which, following Jacques Lacan’s work, explores in depth the constitutive role language plays in defining subjectivity. Wellbery draws on that particular discourse when he notes how the Romantic lyric is distinct from the idyll precisely because it solicits a reading practice that “unfolds no longer as the playing of a social game, but rather as the reactualization by the reader of a subjective mode of being articulated in the text” (13). Or when, a little bit later, he distinguishes the Romantic lyric from its predecessor in terms of a shift from the social sphere of communication to one that essentially is about consciousness: “From a discourse that pertains entirely to the domain of social interaction . . . there emerges a discourse keyed to the movements of consciousness and desire, which constitute a private subjectivity in its

radical inwardness" (17). Thus, the "socializing or acculturating effect of the lyric is not achieved in the field of conduct, but in the field of phantasms, yearnings, memories, and wishes: that is to say, in the field of the *imaginary*" (17). Wellbery is quick to point out how "the intimacy the lyric produces is neither homogenous nor unproblematic," but is "troubled by a sort of inner hiatus, by its own form of inter-" (17-18). That is, as a medium, the lyric comes between the purity of consciousness, of private subjectivity, inwardness, and the intimacy it hopes to produce. As we will find out a bit later, it is precisely this tension between the medium (language) and the effects it hopes to produce (private subjectivity, inwardness, intimacy) that defines what Wellbery calls the "inner problematic of the lyric" (22).

Before addressing in more detail what Wellbery describes as the lyric's inner problematic, I want to point toward a tension, perhaps even a semantic uncertainty, that the psychoanalytic underpinnings of the argument produces with regard to the relationship between discourse and consciousness. I do not want to reject Wellbery's argument, but rather mark more clearly the change in perspective that systems theory offers vis-à-vis such psychoanalytically framed observations. The change in discourse that Goethe's poetry signals as well as the "hiatus" from which the modern lyric suffers both rely on a conception of consciousness as a prediscursive entity for their arguments. However elusively defined, consciousness, through its "movements" and as the "field of the imaginary," is thought to inform the effects the lyric is said to produce in the first place. Even the hiatus itself, the "form of the inter-" that is found to haunt the lyric discourse, derives from the assumption of immediacy that confronts the lyric—a linguistic form of *mediation*—with an inherent contradiction: that as mediation it will be in the way of the immediacy it hopes to produce. In contradistinction, within the conceptual frame presented above we can appreciate the emphasis that is put on the alterity of discourse and consciousness as well as the observation that the reflection of the tension between discourse and consciousness is central to the modern lyric. Drawing on systems theory, however, we would not want to argue that consciousness somehow informs, and then is contradicted by, the mediacy needed for its communication, but rather we would want to inquire about the status of consciousness: how does the perception of incongruity between consciousness and discourse develop within the field of intimate communication? In other words, systems theory's radical separation of consciousness and communication asks us *not* to presuppose consciousness, but to ask instead how consciousness is constituted communicatively at a certain time, in a certain culture, and within a certain discursive practice (such as, for example, the field of intimate communications and the lyric). Understanding consciousness and everything we can say and experience consciously about consciousness as products of the system of communication will then allow us to return the questions of intimacy and subjectivity—and their link to the imaginary, to yearnings, memories, wishes, and other forms of savoring the presence of an absence—to the realm of social interaction and articulation. Rather than holding on to the phantasm of the imaginary and seeing it undercut by discourse, we can inquire about the lyric's social origins and its

subsequent poetic unfolding. While we might agree with Wellbery that the lyric no longer “pertains to the domain of social interaction” (17), we may still want to inquire what social games, what domain of social interactions produced the codes that the lyric draws on for the differentiation of its discourse and that, surprisingly, allowed intimacy to leave the domain of social interaction.

### “Wie ich”

To make my argument, I want to revisit one of the most dominant features of Goethe’s poetry from the 1770s, namely, its proclamations of poetic and anthropological autonomy, which form the basis for the modes of subjectivity his poetry invokes. I will draw in particular on two well-known poems, “Prometheus” and “Maifest.” My reading of these poems will be limited to the theoretical concerns I am engaging and will not attempt to provide a comprehensive interpretation of these rich texts or a review of the extensive body of accompanying secondary literature. Instead, I will approach the autonomy these poems assert by focusing on the codes they invoke and the communicational frames they set up in between text and reader,<sup>13</sup> by revisiting the definition of consciousness (or subjectivity) they imply, and by trying to relate their understanding of consciousness to larger changes that affect the eighteenth-century discourse on intimacy. The exploration of poetic autonomy forms the center of such famous and much-discussed poems as “Prometheus,” “Maifest,” “Erwache Friederike,” “Wanderers Sturmlied,” and “Des Künstlers Erdewallen,” that is, poems that bring together the familiar themes of love, spring, procreation, and so on.<sup>14</sup> The notion of autonomy itself is taken from the realm of nature, from the idealization of nature as a productive and complete whole. Adopting these themes for the poetic constitutes a central aspect of modern poetry developing a discursive register of its own.

In “Prometheus,” autonomy and autoproduction are linked perhaps most prominently. The emancipatory thrust of the poem traverses three stages. The stage of challenging Zeus’s power is followed by the narrator’s autobiographical maturation story, in which a fearful child frees itself from idle hopes and fears and learns how to become self-sufficient. The gaining of autonomy, however, seems to find its final-stage completion only in the last strophe. It is through a creative act, the fashioning of human beings in his own image, and the awareness of his creative power that the lyrical I comes to utter, and identify himself with, the first-person singular pronoun “ich” that concludes the poem.<sup>15</sup> This proclamation of autonomy depends on Prometheus doing what only gods and poets can do, namely, consciously (rather than biologically) create human beings in their own image. After his liberation from dogmatism and from being determined from outside, the I seemingly fashions himself by fashioning other selves that in turn must be thought of as possessing the same ability of fashioning human beings in their own image if they want to become autonomous subjects, and so on. It is important to note that Prometheus is not merely protesting against Zeus anymore, but also figures as the creator of man in a new image. Following the image of Prometheus that the poem creates, the concept of man’s autonomy implies that he is self-sustaining (expressed in

the use of the “Herd” metaphor), self-reliant (emphasized earlier in the poem by the figure of the heart), and in possession of his own history and voice vis-à-vis the god he challenges. That the new image of man (in contradistinction to the children and fools who were invoked earlier in the poem) also entails the expectation of uniqueness and singularity—two hallmarks of the modern notion of individuality—is further corroborated by the absence of the pronoun “du” in the first strophe’s address to Zeus, while at the same time juxtaposing the Promethean “ich” at the end of the poem with the plural forms of immature “Kinder” and “Toren” in the middle.

If we read the poem’s affirmation of autonomy along those lines, we recognize a paradox expressed by the last line of the poem, the exclamation “Wie ich!” (FA 1:204). Not only is Prometheus seemingly turning into the god he rejected at the beginning, but the call for autonomy, difference, and singularity also rests on a comparison, on a “*wie*,” and thus has to make equal and present as copy what by definition should be unique and original. As I have explored elsewhere, this paradox is inherent to any affirmation of individuality, indeed, to any form of self-indication.<sup>16</sup> I do not want to return to the anthropological implications of the paradox here, but instead read the last line of the poem as a reflection of poetic autonomy—in a nutshell, that poetry no longer represents real or idealized objects that would precede their poetic description, but rather creates its own world in its descriptions. Let’s first note how the highly charged “Wie ich!” and the unity of sameness and difference it entails applies to the poem as a whole, namely, to the relationship of the Prometheus figure it creates to its mythological predecessor(s). Goethe’s Prometheus is not a description of, nor is he identical with, his mythological predecessor; as various allusions to the Christian god make clear, he represents a modern variant of the mythological figure, a variant that is the creation of the poem itself. To put it more pointedly: if Goethe’s Prometheus is like his predecessor, it is precisely because *he is not like* his predecessor, because he is not just a copy, but is different from the original. To ignore this paradox would be to ignore the difference and therefore the affirmation of autonomy that defines Goethe’s Prometheus in the first place.

This paradoxical unity of sameness and difference also defines the poem’s communicational frame, the relationship between text and reader. The reader’s adoption of the “ich” for him- or herself, and thus the affirmation of subjectivity the poem hopes to enable, must follow the same logic.<sup>17</sup> For the reader to adopt the “ich” authentically (with reference to herself), she too must relate herself in the mode of the “*wie*” to the “ich” that the poem creates, that is, not simply as a copy, but rather as someone unique and different from the referent the poem creates. From the reader’s perspective, then, the poem invites not so much a hermeneutics of identification, but one of simultaneous identification and differentiation. Simply put, without differentiation, the identification fails because it fails to replicate the autonomy that Prometheus claims for himself vis-à-vis Zeus (and the poem’s autonomy vis-à-vis other descriptions of Prometheus). If we read, as Wellbery does, Prometheus as a model for modern subjectivity, it is not enough “to assume the role of the ‘ich’ [to] become the subject I am” (338), at least not if that process does not also entail a moment of differentiation.

One of the (not uncontroversial) marks of systems theory is its high tolerance for paradox. Paradoxes are not seen as proving an argument wrong or a process impossible, but rather are considered unavoidable (and easy to spot at a certain level of reflexivity). In most cases, they are blind spots that enable certain observations and often function as motors that generate semantic innovation. As deconstruction knows as well as systems theory, the fastest way to discover paradox is to relate a finding, claim, or observation to the means that made the observation possible in the first place. Prometheus's paradox of differentiation qua identification hinges on the reader taking into account the comparison used for the affirmation of autonomy. Affirmations of autonomy are always caught in such a bind. They need to distinguish themselves from something—which therefore continues to define and hence contradict the claim of autonomy. In Goethe's Prometheus poem, I want to suggest, this paradox concerns the referential gesture of the poem. The emphatic identification with the poem's "ich" only works if the poem is not read as the description of a mythological figure that preexists its articulation through the poem. Only by suspending the idea of a referent that would exist independent of the poem, and thus only by recognizing art's autonomy vis-à-vis (other representations of) the world, can the reader replicate the poem's creation of an autonomous "ich" and assume and perform the role of "ich" for herself. The result is not an absolute autonomy—which, as Wellbery argues with regard to the subjectivity created by "Maifest," would require the effacement of the text itself—but rather one that allows for a simultaneous identification with, and differentiation from, the text. The affirmation of autonomy by the reader thus is linked to the recognition of aesthetic autonomy in the broad sense that would understand poetry (and art in general) no longer as descriptions of real or idealized objects and events, but rather as creating its own world(s). Put differently, the descriptive function of the text must be subsumed under its performative function to allow the reader to adopt the "ich" of the poem authentically, that is, with reference to him- or herself. Other readings are possible, of course, but only through such an act of identification will the poem develop its full pathos.

### **“Wie du mich”**

I want to move briefly from "ich" to "du" and the specular moment that defines a poem such as "Maifest." "Maifest," too, is marked by poetic self-reflection. It repeats the last line of Prometheus, "wie ich," but extends it to encompass a "dich":

O Mädchen, Mädchen,  
Wie lieb' ich dich!  
Wie blinkt dein Auge!  
Wie liebst du mich!

So liebt die Lerche  
Gesang und Luft,

Und Morgenblumen  
Den Himmels Duft,

Wie ich dich liebe  
Mit warmen Blut,  
Die du mir Jugend  
Und Freud und Mut

Zu neuen Liedern,  
Und Tänzten gibst!  
Sei ewig glücklich  
Wie du mich liebst! (FA 1:130)

The personal pronouns again are only vaguely defined referentially,<sup>18</sup> and precisely for that reason can be adopted by the reader. The reiteration of the “wie lieb ich dich . . . Wie liebst du mich . . . Wie ich dich liebe . . . Wie du mich liebst!” seems to stage syntactically the merry dance of the “you” and the “I” described in the poem. In the reiteration of his love, the “ich” morphs from subject to object (“mich”) and back. The “ich” is “ich” inasmuch as he finds himself to be the object of her love, and, vice versa, only as the object of his love (“dich”) does she become the subject (“du”) for whom he can be the object of love. This is what David Wellbery describes as the “specular moment,” as an exchange that creates, rather than presupposes, the self, for the simple reason that it is love and desire that fashion this self that is nothing, or at least not the same, without love.<sup>19</sup> Without emotional investment, the beloved “du” would not be for the “I” what she is; nor would the “I” be the loving and singing “I” that the thought of her or her gaze enables him to be.<sup>20</sup> From a sociological point of view, the idea of an “I” finding its identity through a (inherently social) process of mutual recognition is not surprising. It merely underlines what empirically is hard to ignore in any sufficiently complex society, namely that a subject’s identity is not a given, constant entity, but something that is in flux, up for permanent (social) re-articulation, something that is constituted and permanently reconstituted differently in different social circumstances.<sup>21</sup> The often-noted fact that in “Maifest” the process of mutual recognition is internalized and emanates from one person only does not contradict its basic social nature. My recognition by another person will always depend on my recognizing another person’s utterance, gaze, or mere presence as a form of recognition as well as on how I accept and attribute meaning to such signs. In this sense, that is, understood as a social process, any self’s recognition by another person always happens independent of the actual intentions or feelings of the other person,<sup>22</sup> because, as argued above, those cannot be transmitted as such. In fact, it is because they cannot be transmitted that social systems form as the space where these feelings can be discussed, where one can search for voluntary and involuntary signs of confirmation, where one can trust or doubt what one sees or hears, or look for physical evidence, or articulate the desire for a ring, and so on. The mind’s closure, in other words, is the condition for its openness, that is, it helps generate and differentiate feelings and intensify a relationship. To acknowledge the closure of

consciousness does not mean that one would have to ignore that the process of recognition in the poem is one-sided and gendered in favor of the male and that this would affect *how* subjectivity is constituted here; it would question, however, the implication that a woman's silence is a necessary precondition for the constitution of the I's (male) subjectivity. The internalization of the process of recognition merely suggests that it is detached from further negotiation, that it is taken out of the social dynamics that would expose the subject to continued redefinitions as new "data" were processed. The internalization of the process, in other words, gives the subject a certain stability and lends duration (through reiteration, one of the central marks of Goethe's "Maifest" poem) to the moment of self-recognition.

In a way still more pronounced than the "Prometheus" poem, "Maifest" applies the specular structure also to its own reading. The concluding lines open the *wie-ich-dich-wie-du-mich-wie-ich-dich* structure to the poem-reader relationship. Both "ich" and "du" are open to be adopted by or projected upon another by the reader, as Goethe leaves the pronoun referents almost completely devoid of specification. For the hermeneutics of identification to work, the poem itself must assume the mediating role that love plays within it. As love is said to become the source for the production of new songs, "Liebe" morphs into "Lieder," "Lieder" that invoke the "Lerche," a possible source of the Lieder and metaphor of the poet that sings these Lieder in the first place. Thus, the production of poetry and the invocation of the poet (as *Lerche*/singer) replicates the circular structure that defines both the loving/loved "ich" and "du." If we read the last two lines of the poem as an apostrophe that is (also) addressing the reader—a reading I find hard to resist—we can transpose the specular moment onto the relationship between poem and reader.<sup>23</sup> Wellbery reads the poem's end—"Sei ewig glücklich / Wie du mich liebst!"—as a poetic metastatement, an instruction on how to read the poem of which it is and is not a part.<sup>24</sup> Just as the identity of the "ich" in the poem is linked to how, how much, and how long he loves the "du," the reader's adoption of this "ich" hinges in turn on how and for how long the reader is invested emotionally in the poem. This is the effect of the tautological answer the concluding couplet provides to the earlier question, "wie liebst du mich!"—an exclamation delivered in the syntactical form of a question—tautologically reiterating the question, namely, with "wie du mich liebst." Thus love is presented both as the necessary precondition and the consequence of the poetic medium's effectiveness. "Sei ewig glücklich / wie du mich liebst!" implies both "by virtue of" and "as long as you love me in the way" ("wie") the poem suggests.<sup>25</sup>

Interpreted as an instruction on how to read the poem, one must wonder what reading practice hides behind the term "love" and how this reading practice could constitute a subjectivity that is analogous to the one the poem describes with regard to the lyrical I. Simply put, does love make the reader blind or does it help the reader to see, and if so, how? With regard to the invitation "to love the poem," Wellbery understands love as a hermeneutic practice that produces the subject by rendering the reader blind. That is, he reads the concluding couplet of "Maifest" as providing final evidence that the subjectivity the text calls forth requires the "effacement" of the text itself. "The envoi, then, simply directs the reader to return the text to the Source

from which, as text, it is cut off: 'Interpret emphatically so that the text as text disappears before the phantasmatic presence of the loving soul whose flux of feeling precedes all speech. Efface the text and its time and insofar as you do this [wie du mich liebst] you will know eternal bliss'" (25-26). Wellbery, of course, is critical of the blindness the poem invokes, of a structure that "sends readers, as it were, *into and through the language of the poem in quest of their most intimate subjectivity*" (18). As quoted earlier, he recognizes how "the intimacy the lyric produces is neither homogenous nor unproblematic," but is "troubled by a sort of inner hiatus, by its own form of inter." (17-18). The last five and most intricate pages of Wellbery's essay explain this hiatus as the poetic recognition of a fundamental incommensurability between the aesthetic subjectivity that the reader ought to find and the lyrical discourse that enables his quest. This incommensurability is what Wellbery identifies as the "inner problematic of the lyric" (22), and it is the reason why the poetic text is calling for its self-effacement. The problem is that the medium as medium prevents what it has been asked to do. The medium fails to open up "a space in which aesthetic subjectivity achieves autonomy in the precise sense that it gives itself its own law of being" (22).

We have already encountered this problem at the end of the Prometheus poem. The affirmation of autonomy is undermined by its dependence on a "wie," which, however, enables the affirmation of autonomy in the first place. In respect to "Maifest," only theoretical rigor can unearth the problem, although it nevertheless results in the same recognition of the incommensurability of comparison and autonomy, discourse and subjectivity. Wellbery locates the paradox of "Maifest" in the poem's strategy of establishing an equivalence, and ultimately effacing the difference, between the three major terms the poem puts into circulation: "nature," "love," and "song." While the affirmation of equivalence requires the differentiation of the terms, the lyrical discourse as medium has to separate, and therefore undercut, what it wants to equate. Again, the problem is one inherent in any assertion of identity: it "presupposes a difference among the terms whose identity is being asserted, and in this sense, the identity posited is not, and cannot be, absolute" (24). Wellbery suggests that the "only possible solution to this dilemma would seem to be the paradoxical one of eradicating the text's very inscription" (24). Accordingly, the lyric, he finds, can exist only in the paradoxical mode of a self-effacement, as a retreat from the very language that makes it possible in the first place.

According to Wellbery, this problematic is not restricted to "Maifest," but "will come to dominate, in various forms, what is called the Age of Goethe" (24). The reason for the problem's reach is, he argues, that once (and for as long as) subjectivity comes to rest on assertions of autonomy, self-identity, immediacy, singularity, and so on, and the lyric is directed toward the dissolution of differences (for example, toward the experience of oneness with nature) and other ideals of immediacy, authenticity, and autonomy, the language used to construct or mediate these ideals will necessarily interfere with what the lyric hopes to produce. "The speech/writing of the text betrays the very intimacy of which it speaks, and this intimacy—the sheer presence-to-itself of poetic subjectivity—can only be saved if it is posited in an anterior or posterior of the text itself" (24). While I do not want to question this

diagnosis here, I want to suggest that we do not stop with it, but continue by inquiring about the origins of what appears to be a basic communicational paradox at the heart of the lyric.

### **Subjectivity and Incommunicability**

This is where I want to bring in Luhmann more explicitly and more extensively than Wellbery does, by addressing what I believe can be identified as the historical context from which this communicational paradox emerges. In *Love as Passion*, Luhmann identifies as the central invention of the eighteenth century's discourse of intimacy the "discovery of incommunicability."<sup>26</sup> Incommunicability is no longer merely about passion upsetting eloquent speech, about love causing one to stutter, blush, become speechless, or to utter incomprehensible or unintentionally revealing things; the eighteenth century discovers a more fundamental problem with the communication of one's feelings. It comes to recognize basic limits of communicability in that communication, by virtue of occurring, may destroy the meaning of the utterance. The experience of incommunicability—which accompanies the period's broader mistrust in rhetoric, signaling "the end of a technical faith in communication" (125)—first cropped up when the discourse of intimacy started to include moral concepts that have, when being communicated, what Luhmann calls a "contra-intentional effect" (122). These are "concepts that had to rely on authenticity, i.e. naturalness, genuineness, sensitivity and originality" (122). One cannot communicate these virtues because communicating them raises suspicion, makes the natural seem contrived, the genuine artificial, and the sensitive and original appear as mere copies. We are familiar with these problems through the plots of eighteenth-century epistolary novels and bourgeois tragedies where the aristocratic seducer's ability to cunningly simulate these virtues comes to threaten the lives of many innocent daughters. Viewed from the perspective of what are often seen as bourgeois moral codes, the playful and deceitful aristocratic practices appear as immoral. The most devious of seducers know that they have to disguise the act of communication itself if they want to be successful. Thus, Derby in Sophie de la Roche's *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* or Valmont in Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* stage situations in which they can be observed "secretly" doing good deeds. Because the observer believes the deed was not meant to be observed, what these deeds communicate escapes the counterintentional effects that their open communication would produce (namely, the suspicion that the speaker/doer's care is not genuine, but merely about improving his or her reputation). Similarly, letting private letters "inadvertently" be intercepted can create the semblance of authentic speech. By hiding the true addressee of the letter, the "inadvertent" recipient (who does not know that she is the true addressee) can be tricked into believing that what she sees or reads are authentic utterances. For the reader of these novels or the audience of these plays, the deception, of course, is apparent, reinforcing the sense of counterintentionality when it comes to the communication of these virtues. While the Enlightenment often looks for authenticity and security of meaning in the language of the body (tears, fainting, blushing, etc.), these signs can be faked as well, and thus ultimately

fail to provide the certainty one might seek.<sup>27</sup> The problem becomes all the more urgent in the eighteenth century when love is coupled with marriage expectations, and hence certainty in matters of love can become an existential question, a matter of (social) life and death.

The counterintentional effect that haunts statements of authenticity in the eighteenth century also affect assertions of singularity and uniqueness. They run into the problem that the words and metaphors used to make such assertions are themselves not singular or unique, but have been used many times before. Most famously, this problem is expressed by Werther when he recognizes that calling Lotte an “Engel” is but to repeat what everyone says about his love (see letter of June 16) and thus cannot express appropriately what she means to him, that is, how singular and unique she is for him. We encountered a version of this paradox in Goethe’s Prometheus poem: the affirmation of singularity (and autonomy) contradicted its constitution through a *comparison*, the reader having to *copy* the uniqueness proposed by the poem’s “ich.”

I want to suggest that we read what Wellbery identifies as “the inner problematic of the lyric” in this sociohistorical context. It is sociohistorical (rather than anthropological, psychological, or semio-ontological) in that it stems from communicative practices that belong to its particular time and derive from the particular social systems that (temporarily) form when people decide to connect intimately. These social systems, which emerge as intimate relations, are guided by changing codes and semantic innovations that intensify the relation between partners. Luhmann suspects that incommunicability was “invented in order to take the banality out of mediocrity” (122). This was a need in a time when the great heroic adventures of previous centuries had given way to more internalized perspectives and both morality and literature “began to take an interest in normal people” (153). With the discovery of incommunicability, the discourse of intimacy gained in complexity and depth in the eighteenth century as it explored, reflected on—and tried to counter—the limits of communicability. Recognizing the counterintentional effects that haunt intimate communications, the eighteenth century developed different responses to the problem of incommunicability: it played with the impossibility of communicating authentically, reflected on the paradox of communicating incommunicability, used irony or cynicism when confronted with the limits of communicability, and so on. The period’s epistolary novels provide ample examples for these strategies of communication, which show that, as Luhmann has written, “the communicative error was noticed and then adopted as the form of communication” (124). As the particular German reaction to the discovery of incommunicability, Luhmann identifies “coquetry with loneliness. . . . One accepted what one had to learn—not within the social relationship, but as an alternative to it” (125). In this context we can understand the emergence of modern notions of subjectivity as an extension and evolution of communicative strategies that reflect on the limits of communicability, and that in the process of doing so delineate a sphere of consciousness that is thought to be outside of, and fundamentally incompatible, with communication.

What Luhmann claims with an eye toward heroines of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, such as Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, we might

want to modify with regard to Goethe's lyric (and with regard to *Werther*). Goethe's innovativeness is his adoption of the problem of incommunicability that marked the intimate discourse for the lyric. That is, he transposes it from the realm of personal interaction into the realm of self-reflection. Subsequently, the problem of incommunicability no longer merely occurs in social interactions, but also begins to define the human condition as being torn between feeling and concept, singularity and commonplace, perception and communication, as well as individuality and sociability. With (and far beyond) Goethe, the lyric becomes a preferred site where the "experience" of the tension between consciousness and communication is reflected and made accessible. This is not to say that all lyric poetry since Goethe is about this tension; but I want to suggest that what Wellbery described as the "field of the imaginary," of "phantasms, yearnings, memories, and wishes" (17), feeds on the newly discovered incommensurability of consciousness and communication. Furthermore, inasmuch as the modern lyric revolves around making present an inherent absence, it might indeed help lift its reader out of his or her (emotional) mediocrity—by adding reflexivity and a moment of inherent suffering (*Leiden*) from the "human condition" to his or her *Leidenschaft*. Recognizing and reflecting the limits of communicability, the lyric becomes a site where the modern psyche can gain new sensibilities, become more complex, and can cultivate an inherent sense of self-alienation. Drawing on systems theory, we can understand these developments as deriving from differentiations in the system of communication. In this manner, we can understand the lyric as a central (but not the only) site for the construction of modern subjectivity, and modern subjectivity as a cultural phenomenon that is linked to the inclusion of moral codes that have a counterintentional effect on the discourse of intimacy. To put it bluntly, the inclusion of these moral codes reflect the success of Protestant ethics in the eighteenth century, an ethics that invites introspection and requires authenticity. The influence of Pietism on Goethe has, of course, been much discussed. However, if we draw on Luhmann, we can inquire into the relevance and the effects of the introduction of these moral codes on a broader, cultural scale: they affect the codes that guide the communication of intimacy itself, presumably as much in the religious as in the romantic and the lyric context. And we can better appreciate how these moral codes come to promote the recognition of an inherent gap between consciousness (emotions, a sense of self, a singular "ich") on the one hand and communication on the other. The modern psyche's sensibilities, its complexity, and its inherent sense of alienation—all features that remain central to the modern lyric—evolve from the perception of this gap, a perception that is constituted and refined by communications that acknowledge how they fail to communicate subjectivity and *Erleben* authentically and truthful to its singularity.<sup>28</sup>

### **Intimacy as a Hermeneutic Practice**

In conclusion I want to return briefly to the last line of Goethe's "Maifest." As indicated earlier, it takes quite a bit of theoretical rigor to unearth the "inner problematic of the lyric," the dimension of yearning, longing, alienation, in

a poem that for over two centuries has enthused its readers because of its apparent simplicity. For this dimension is, perhaps as if in a nascent state, somewhat subdued in this otherwise rather cheerful poem, whose concept of love seems to entail something other than a reflection of the limits of communicability. In the context of eighteenth-century changes in the nature of intimate communications, we may read the metapoetic statement at the end of the poem less as a call for the effacement of the text than as the call for a particular hermeneutic practice that would emulate how we “read” when love makes us *not* blind, but allows us to see. In other words, I want to suggest that we apply the poem’s call for love to the reading of the poem not only in the sense of using the text/beloved as a screen for our phantasmatic projections, but also as a mark of intimate discourse, in terms of love altering one’s perceptions. We can do so without drawing on a suspect (and, at this point for my argument, contradictory) notion of consciousness if we think of the change in perception as a hermeneutic practice that has the propensity of attaching increased meaning to the side of communication concerned with utterance and not with information. Intimate communication is highly sensitive toward the difference between utterance and information. Whereas normal communication focuses on the informational value of communication—that is, on the world it presumably refers to and that is thought to exist independently from it—intimate communication focuses much more on the site of the utterance, deriving informational value as much from how, when, why, and by whom something is being said as from what is being said. Focusing on the utterance rather than the information is a precondition for the discovery of the problem of incommunicability in the first place. But it also entails the possibility of attributing increased and increasingly personal meaning to verbal and nonverbal utterances. Almost anything (a gaze, a gesture, a bow) can become an interesting sign, increasing the attention and appreciation one pays to another. Transposed onto the reading of a poem, this hermeneutic practice would lead the reader to lend meaning to matters that mark the poem as a poetic utterance, such as form, tropes, and figures, and to develop an appreciation of the circumstances of the poem’s “presence,” that is, when, where, and how it is being read. These circumstances will vary in each instance the poem is being read and therefore might be experienced as authentic and singular. The poem *per se* cannot communicate this experience; precisely for this reason, the moment of happiness (“Sei ewig glücklich”) depends on the “wie,” on the reader’s ability to cherish the experience of reading the poem in and as the act of reading it.

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## NOTES

1. David Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe’s Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 7. Subsequent quotes from this book will be referenced in the text by page number only.

2. Wellbery's argument aligns Goethe with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's Celan study, *Poetry as Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999). The claim, of course, is not one of continuity in poetic diction, semantics, and imagery, as well as in poetic intentions, but merely that we can identify a common problematic that generated (highly) different poetic responses. To expand and reflect on the emergence of this problematic in the eighteenth century is the central concern of my essay.

3. I am using the term in the same vein as Bernhard Sieger, understanding the lyric as a cultural technique of "hominization" and as a medium with the power to "suspend codes or disseminate, internalize, and institutionalize sign and symbol systems [and] loosen cultural codes, erase signs, deterritorialize images and tones" ("Cacography or Communication?: Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies," *Grey Room* 29 [Winter 2008]: 26–47; here 31). In doing so, I also want to indicate the proximity between contemporary cultural media studies and contemporary systems theory. While Luhmann focuses almost exclusively on communication as medium, he derives structural and semantic changes and the increased complexity of modern society from technological inventions that introduced new media (alphabetization, the invention of the printing press, the advent of electronic media, and so on—see esp. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997] chapter 2, 5–8).

4. Gerhard Neumann and David E. Wellbery, introduction to *Die Gabe des Gedichts: Goethe's Lyric im Wechsel der Töne*, ed. Gerhard Neumann and David E. Wellbery (Freiburg: Rombach, 2008) 14.

5. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979) 79–97; here 82. As language is also used for the production of thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, Luhmann distinguishes not between language and mental image, but rather between communication and consciousness—and hence between language and signs used in communication and their use by individual minds.

6. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," 83. The proximity between Nietzsche's and Luhmann's epistemology that I am suggesting here derives, I would contend, from the fact that both thinkers radicalize Kant by including insights from the natural sciences. Nietzsche's observations regarding nerve stimuli are indebted to the physiologist Johannes Müller's principle of nerve energy, which states that a nerve cell always produces the same nerve-specific output independent of the source of its stimulation. (On Nietzsche's familiarity with nineteenth-century physiology, including the works of Johannes Müller, see Dirk Solies, "Naturwissenschaften als Aufklärung, Am Beispiel von Nietzsches Physiologierezeption," in *Nietzsche als Radikalaufklärer oder radikaler Gegenauflärer?: Internationale Tagung der Nietzsche-Gesellschaft in Zusammenarbeit mit der Kant-Forschungsstelle Mainz und der Stiftung Weimarer Klassik und Kunstsammlungen vom 15.–17. Mai 2003 in Weimar*, ed. Renate Reschke [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004] 247–53.) The works by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (which are important for Luhmann) are an extension of this scientific tradition.

7. The utterance refers to the fact that something was said or signaled and to the circumstances that surround this event. The information concerns the content of the utterance, what was said, represented, referred to, etc.

8. Luhmann explains his conception of communication most precisely in chapter 4, "Communication and Action," of *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995); and "What Is Communication," in *Communication Theory* 2, no. 3 (1992): 251–59. On the participation of consciousness in communication, see esp. "How Can the Mind Participate in Communication,"