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‘A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealised’, writes Mr Raymond Williams in his *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*,¹ the stimulating book to which I owe my title, and helpful ideas related to a subject that has occupied me for many years, the ‘advance in consciousness’ achieved in classical Weimar. The aim of the present work is first to describe Goethe’s Weimar as we see it now, from documents of the time and from the research, mainly of German scholars, into the most brilliant period of their literary and philosophical history, and secondly to interpret the connections that may be found, after so many eventful years, between German culture and German society, both in the age of Goethe and later.

Wieland and Herder, Goethe and Schiller, it is well known, have come to have a representative quality which makes them the supreme classics of German literature, and their close association with Weimar has made the name of this previously obscure provincial capital into a symbol for ‘Geist’, as the Germans call it, for all that is best in German thought and aspiration. There is a unity of content in these Weimar writers resulting, it is generally agreed, from a view of man and the world shared in essentials by them all in what is called the age of ‘Humanität’, a philosophy of life resting on the belief in the perfectibility of man.

How greatly this humanistic philosophy enriched the subsequent literature and thought of the surrounding world is clear, for instance, from a work like Fritz Strich’s *Goethe and World Literature*,² and no one acquainted with German classicism can read Mr Williams without being constantly reminded of problems common to Germany and England. John Stuart Mill used to think of the ‘Germano-Coleridgian school’, as Mr Williams tells us, as ‘the first . . . who inquired with any comprehensiveness or depth into the inductive laws of the existence and growth of
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human society’, who ‘looked upon the culture of the inward man as the problem of problems’ and were aware that ‘the culture of the human being had been carried to no ordinary height, and human nature had exhibited many of its noblest manifestations, not in Christian countries only, but in the ancient world, in Athens, Sparta, Rome; nay, even barbarians . . . all had their own education, their own culture’. These ideas are pure Herder, and Mill describes them as ‘the characteristic feature of the Goethian period of German literature’ and as ‘richly diffused through the historical and critical writings of the new French school, as well as of Coleridge and his followers’. Coleridge saw ‘a continuing and progressive civilisation’ as the supreme goal, but as one unattainable ‘where this civilisation is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity’. Whatever may be thought about Coleridge’s claim to originality, it is indisputable that what he says here had been said repeatedly, in much the same language (for ‘cultivation’ is surely ‘Bildung’), by Herder, Goethe, Fichte and others, and Carlyle and Arnold openly acknowledged their debt to Germany. In relating ideas about culture to ideas about society, the German and the English writers did not lay the emphasis in the same places, of course, for the problem of industrialism, for instance, central in Victorian England, had in Goethe’s age not yet emerged in Germany, but both schools of thought have common roots in the post-Renaissance belief in reason and the rejection of supernaturalism, the idea that it is man’s duty, as an individual and as a member of society, to make himself. The story of Weimar is therefore relevant to a good deal more than an understanding of German civilisation alone.

There were, as we shall see, special reasons why the Germans should develop, earlier than their neighbours in Europe, a strong theoretical interest in the connection between the ideas of culture and of society. As a first indication of these reasons we may point to the interpretation of German classicism on which leading historians of thought such as Dilthey, Troeltsch and Korff are in all essentials in agreement. According to this view, poetry
and philosophy from Lessing to Hegel, roughly speaking in the last third of the eighteenth century, represent a single sustained effort of the German mind to make sense of its own peculiar world. Unlike their fellow-countrymen earlier in the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth, and unlike their French contemporaries, they were little concerned with improving the material conditions of life. Their ideal, as Troeltsch puts it, was rather ‘a full and free development of the mind and heart for its own sake’, and many members of the intellectual elite began to see in the realisation and propagation of this ideal the specific mission of the Germans. Culture had become a supreme good, an ideal to live for.

But we must now ask ourselves what we mean by culture. In this context it is clearly personal, as opposed to national, culture that is meant, and we shall find important differences between individual authors in their valuation of the various possible types of personal culture, but for all of them an ethical and social factor was involved in personal culture that rarely entered into the English conception of it before Matthew Arnold's time, though Coleridge and even Burke had insisted, as Mr Williams points out, ‘on man's need for institutions which should confirm and constitute his personal efforts. Cultivation, in fact, though an inward was never a merely individual process. What in the eighteenth century had been an ideal of personality—a personal qualification for participation in polite society—had now, in the face of radical change, to be redefined, as a condition on which society as a whole depended.78

‘Culture’ is in English, as Mr T. S. Eliot reminded us a few years ago,8 a highly ambiguous word, and one that for various reasons we tend to avoid. Yet the concept or rather the concepts for which it stands have become indispensable tools of our thought, though it is necessary to distinguish the various possible meanings of the English word, for which German, for example, often uses separate terms. Apart from its scientific use in a phrase like ‘bacterial culture’, with which we are not concerned, the word seems to have now in English three principal meanings, all
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connected with the notion of tending and improving by education or training. The first is the process of the cultivation of an individual mind. This seems to be the basic meaning from which the others were later derived, and is clearly a metaphorical extension of the literal sense of ‘culture’ that still survives in ‘agriculture’, ‘horticulture’ and so forth. From Cicero’s ‘cultura animi’ down to ‘la culture de l’esprit’ the object of the cultivation was still explicitly stated, but from the middle of the seventeenth century (see Appendix II) examples can be found of the use of ‘cultura’ alone, or of its equivalent in a modern language, particularly in the second or third sense that we shall distinguish, though this absolute use of the word only became common in the second half of the following century.

In its second sense, ‘culture’ means the result, in the individual, of the process of cultivation, as in ‘a man of the widest culture’. In Goethe’s day it became usual to use ‘Bildung’ in both of these first two senses, though ‘Kultur’ was still a possible synonym, along with some other expressions. Goethe himself, in his maturity, always associates this particular kind of ‘Bildung’ with the formation and transformation which he sees going on in all living nature, the object of his morphological studies. ‘If we consider structures (Gestalten) in general,’ he writes in 1806, ‘particularly organic ones, we never come across anything stable or completed, but always things trembling in constant movement.’ Accordingly our language, appropriately enough, is wont to use the word ‘Bildung’ both of the product of formation and of the process.¹⁰

The third common meaning of ‘culture’ is what in German is usually called ‘Kultur’, in English ‘civilisation’, and is applied not to individuals but to groups, usually whole nations. The personal culture that results from the cultivation of an individual’s mind and feeling is stored in his memory and affects his behaviour every moment, but it dies with him. Civilisation or group culture outlives individuals, though it could only come into existence through them, and has to be given a new lease of life by each succeeding generation. It is the result for society of ‘cultivation’
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and ‘personal culture’, stored in the form of habits and traditions, which are handed on partly from individual to individual, by example and by word of mouth, and partly impersonally, through institutions and organisations of a thousand kinds, kept alive by successive individuals. In both kinds of transmission material objects, fashioned by a particular generation, play an all-important part in the resurrection, in each successive generation, of ‘culture’ in individuals and ‘civilisation’ in groups. These accumulated material objects may be subdivided into the useful and the significant. We may include under the former heading the humanised landscape, buildings and technical installations of every kind, everything in fact that is a product of man as toolmaker. The ‘significant’, on the other hand, includes all things to which man has given a symbolic meaning, first language in its most fleeting and insubstantial form, the puffs of breath that convey so much from one human being to others, then the language of gesture, dancing, miming, vocal and instrumental music and all their possible combinations. No civilisation has developed very far without the invention of some way of recording these fleeting expressions of meaning through a secondary symbolisation, marks on paper and so on which last, and enable anyone, at any distance in space and time, who has in his individual life been able to acquire the traditional skills required, has been ‘cultivated’, that is, to recover the original meaning of the signs before him. The plastic arts, working from the beginning with material substances, hand on their meaning from generation to generation much as writing does, but only if they too can be resurrected by a duly ‘cultivated’ individual mind. It is not necessary to carry this elementary analysis further, or to attempt a catalogue of the types of object which accumulate as any civilisation grows, to remind the reader that in any civilisation we are concerned with what Nicolai Hartmann calls ‘objectified mind’, the imprint on a material substance of the activity of human minds, capable of evoking in other minds, given suitable conditions, which always include ‘cultivation’, an activity of a more or less similar kind. These are the material heritage from
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the past that Faust has in mind when, looking round his cramped Gothic room, he cries:

Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen!*

In German, the word ‘Kultur’ is now commonly reserved for the higher manifestations of what we call civilisation, those expressed mainly in symbolic forms—religion, philosophy, literature, art and music, but also law and the forms of political and social life. The history of ‘Kultur’ deals exclusively with this kind of thing. That side of civilisation which ministers to man’s material welfare—transport, housing, sanitation, cooking and everything technological, for instance—is called ‘Zivilisation’. The Russians, on the other hand, seem to use the word corresponding to ‘cultural’ more freely than either we or the Germans do, speaking of such an activity as nursing, for example, as eminently cultural, because it is regarded as unselfishly devoted to the purposes of the community. We are often reminded, when we read of Russian cultural activities, of the contrast drawn by Mr Koestler between the ‘Commissar’, who looks to planned institutions for the improvement of life, and the ‘Yogi’, who relies on change from within, and in discussing Weimar we shall be much concerned with an ‘inward’ point of view very close to that of the ‘Yogi’.

A fourth meaning of ‘culture’ must also be noted, now very common because of the widespread interest in prehistoric archaeology. The archaeologist and anthropologist speak of ‘cultures’ in the plural, distinguishing them from each other by some descriptive name. Here it is the whole way of life of a human society that they have in mind, as far as it may be revealed, for prehistory, by the spade from material remains, or as it is scientifically observed among primitive peoples by the visiting anthropologist. The word was apparently first used in this sense in English by Tylor, in the title of his work on ‘Primitive Culture’, in 1871,

* That which your fathers have bequeathed to you,
Win it afresh, to make it really yours!
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and this is a direct imitation of the German. Herder, we shall find, already used ‘Kultur’ with this meaning, as well as all the others. Sociologists now study culture, understood in this comprehensive sense, in every kind of society, ancient or modern, primitive or advanced. Mr E. A. Hoebel defines culture as ‘the integrated sum total of learned behaviour traits which are manifest and shared by the members of a society’, and Mr T. S. Eliot too says: ‘By “culture”, then, I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion.’ But all are parts of a living whole, ‘in trembling movement’. ‘These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all.’

To possess culture is clearly a human prerogative. Lower creatures can evolve a kind of social life based on instinct, such as we find at its most complex in an ant-hill, but only men, with their highly developed nervous system, have that capacity to learn during their individual lives, and to remember sufficiently well, which makes culture possible. Further, only men living together in a society can have culture, for which it is necessary that each generation shall be influenced not only by its own experience, but by the accumulated results of its ancestors’ experience, handed down to it not only by direct contact, but indirectly by means of its civilisation, with all its material embodiment of the thought and feeling of the past. A Kaspar Hauser could not have even the rudiments of culture in any sense, any more than the ‘wolf children’ who have occasionally been discovered in India. ‘At the time of his capture’, we read of one of them, then eight years old, ‘the boy was drinking on all fours at the side of a forest pool in the company of a she-wolf, which afterwards followed the party for a considerable distance. He is undersized for his age and after six months in human care still prefers raw meat to other foods, and has a tendency to bite. He has not yet learned to speak.’ Hobbes perhaps imagined creatures something like this boy when he described the life of man in
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primitive society, before the emergence of the state, as ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’, and Pufendorf, countering the arguments of the Leviathan, anticipated the modern sociological view of the rôle of culture in raising man above ‘the state of nature’, employing the Latin word ‘cultura’ perhaps for the first time absolutely, in 1686.14 (See Appendix II.)

The comparative poverty of our English vocabulary in these matters seems to indicate that an interest in the theory of culture developed later here than in Germany. German writers were apparently also the first to take up philosophically the subject of general aesthetics. ‘Culture’, like ‘art’ in its modern sense, which embraces all the particular arts, is a late conception everywhere, the result of a process of classifying concepts by similarity gradually carried further and further, with results which may easily mislead the unwary, but cannot be ignored. When we boggle at the word culture, it is generally because we disagree with some view about what is best in culture that is implied in the context. There must inevitably be such disagreements, because cultures and ideals of culture are so various. The summary attempted above does not tell half the story. As Mr Eliot clearly showed us, in any one national civilisation at present there are different co-existent levels of culture, as well as big regional differences, and this is desirable, though some degree of integration is desirable too. Progress in civilisation, he says, brings into being more specialised culture-groups, to the advantage of the whole society, but also at a certain risk to it.

The emergence of such a culture-group, with the risks and advantages thereby entailed, is the theme of the following pages, a group of particular interest to the student of culture because it was so fully conscious of its own cultural effort, to the extent of sometimes defeating its own end, for culture is as shy a bird as happiness and often eludes a too direct approach. This group has the advantage for the student of being, for modern conditions, relatively closed, and its history is very fully recorded. We can therefore trace clearly the main stages in the development of Weimar, one quite unforeseen at the outset of our period, and
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we can understand something of the complex interplay of social and intellectual factors, of environment and individual genius. Broadly humanitarian aims were honestly pursued by the leading figures, but inevitably, an element of ‘contingence’, as the theologians say, entered into all the ideas and ideals of the time, and it is particularly interesting to try to see how it modified them, and thus perhaps to explain in part some of the moral and aesthetic contradictions in later German history. It is a ‘civilisation grounded in cultivation’ that I see and wish to present in my picture of Weimar, concentrating attention on those typical features in the life of its intellectual leaders and their patrons which seem important for my purpose. The story is carried only as far as the end of the old Reich, a year after Schiller’s death, but in a final chapter the later history of the ideas of cultivation and civilisation (Bildung and Kultur) is outlined, to indicate how a diffused and diluted Weimar humanism was sometimes perverted to strange purposes in the struggle for national unity and power, sometimes transformed into an inner refuge, divorced from influence on everyday life.

Weimar, thou wert assigned a special fate,
Like Bethlehem in Judah, small and great.

So Goethe poses the problem which faces us in the first chapter: why Weimar? The first step towards Weimar’s cultural leadership, it is generally agreed, was taken by Duchess Anna Amalia when, all unknowing, she asked Wieland to be the tutor of her elder son, and we can find reasons for her choice of a novelist and poet, and this particular one, in her character and earlier history, and in his. Wieland already made Weimar into something of a literary centre with his Deutscher Merkur, but he would hardly, on his own initiative, have sought out such a brilliant rival as the young Goethe. To understand Goethe’s advent, we must know what a boy-duce could see in him, and bring in Knebel as intermediary.

The second chapter describes first the obscure German court, in a modest town whose society was quite normal for the times,
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into which Goethe burst like a ‘Voltaireian Huron’ when, being at a loose end, he accepted a casual invitation to go there. Why he stayed on, how he became the Duke’s trusted friend and adviser, and what exactly he did in the official posts that he filled for the next ten years are the questions to which the second half of the chapter attempts an answer.

The third chapter deals with the arts, especially the amateur theatre, as they developed in these years under Goethe’s leadership, then with the new interest in natural history and science evoked in the poet by the demands of practical life and followed up for its own sake, an interest shared by Knebel, Herder and others, and finally with Goethe’s inward growth, his conscious efforts at self-mastery and his relation with Charlotte von Stein, until his escape to Italy, to be himself again, in 1786.

The fourth chapter leads up to the discussion of classical Weimar’s cultural institutions by analysing the theories of culture put forward by those principally responsible for the final shaping of those institutions, Herder, with his pioneering history of civilisation and humane ideas, Goethe, with his notion of individual self-improvement, closely connected with his scientific and aesthetic ideas and most fully expressed at this stage in Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, the first ‘Bildungsroman’, and Schiller, with his Letters on Aesthetic Education.

In the fifth chapter the connection is established between the cultivation and creative effort of the leading figures in Weimar and Jena (the university of the state) and various important institutions that made their work fruitful for society in Weimar and further afield, and gave it permanence in a material embodiment, through which it became a lasting feature of German civilisation. Wieland’s influence was exerted chiefly through his Deutscher Merkur. His assistant in the early days, Bertuch, spread Weimar ideas far and wide through a whole series of periodical publications, one, the Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung, of the greatest importance, and he greatly benefited local arts and crafts through his Modejournal and his Centre for Local Industries. Herder left his mark on history mainly through his books,