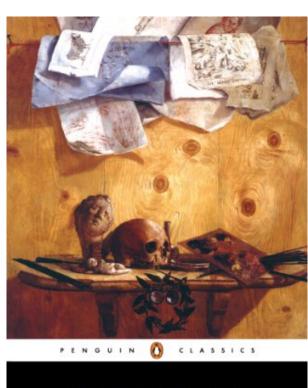
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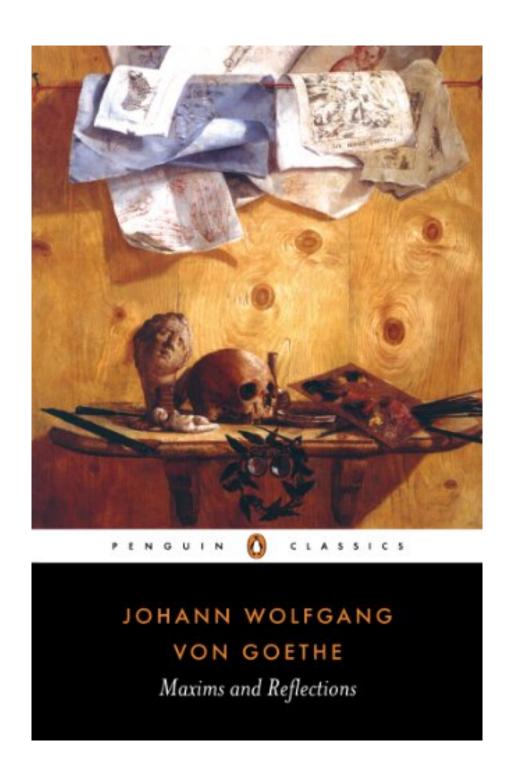


JOHANN WOLFGANG
VON GOETHE

Maxims and Reflections

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Language Notes

Text: English (translation)
Original Language: German

About the Author

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), a towering figure in German literature, was the author of "The Sorrows of Young Werther, Faust, Italian Journey, The Theory of Colours" (MIT Press edition, 1970), and many other works.

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Throughout his long, hectic and astonishingly varied life, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) would jot down his passing thoughts on theatre programmes, visiting cards, draft manuscripts and even bills ... Goethe was probably the last true 'Renaissance Man'.

Although employed as a Privy Councillor at the Duke of Weimar's court, where he helped oversee major mining, road-building and irrigation projects, he also painted, directed plays, carried out research in anatomy, botany and optics – and still found time to produce masterpieces in every literary genre. His fourteen hundred Maxims and Reflections reveal some of his deepest thought on art, ethics, literature and natural science, but also his immediate reactions to books, chance encounters or his administrative work. Although variable in quality, the vast majority have a freshness and immediacy which vividly conjure up Goethe the man. They make an ideal introduction to one of the greatest of European writers.

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Most helpful customer reviews

42 of 45 people found the following review helpful.

Essential reading (but this translation is not too good)

By Ram Mohan Rao

I say this is essential reading, but this is more true for someone familiar with Goethe. This is not to say that the casual reader will not find something of value, but 'Maxims and Reflections' is as much a reflection of Goethe and what he held true and interesting, as it is a collection of "wise sayings."

I think it would be helpful to a potential reader to review here some of the Maxims and Reflections, with comments.

Some are simplistic: "Behaviour is a mirror in which everyone shows his image."

Some are interesting, and one will see the truth in them upon some reflection. These may not really educate, but they are interesting in themselves: "There is something horrifying about a man of outstanding excellence

of whom stupid people are proud."

Some are statements of what most of us would agree with easily, but they are important because they shed light upon the man and his concerns. For example, we often see how concerned he is with certain kinds of people being dangerous: "Fools and intelligent people are equally undamaging. Half-fools and half-sages, these are the most dangerous of all."

Some are incomprehensible: "Work makes the journeyman."

Some are enigmatic, at least to me: "Wisdom is to be found only in truth."

Some are observations that are not too profound but which will serve as food for thought: "Human nature needs to be numbed from time to time, but without being put to sleep; hence smoking, spirits, opiates."

Some are simply personal beliefs, and we need to know that Goethe beleived such-and-such a thing: "Painting and tattooing the body is a return to animality."

Some are profound truths or observations, and will serve as food for a lot of thought: "Time is itself an element." "Mysteries do not as yet amount to miracles." "Truth is contrary to our nature, not so error, and this for a very simple reason: truth demands that we should recognize ourselves as limited, error flatters us that, in one way or another, we are unlimited." In this last one, for example, we get an idea about the kind of simple, pragmatic reasoning the great man often employed.

Some are statements by others, in other languages, and it is an interesting exercise to try and see why the great man included these in the Maxims and Reflections: "L'amour est un vrai recommenceur. [Love is truly a new beginning.]"

Some are classic maxims, which are oft-quoted, even today: "There is nothing more dreadful than active ignorance." This example also serves to show that the translation is really bad in places: that phrase *really* deserves to be translated "ignorance in action".

And some are difficult to comprehend - but when makes the effort, they turn out to be absolute gems: "The first and last thing demanded of genius is love of truth."

36 of 46 people found the following review helpful.

Extremely Dry

By A Customer

This is my first Goethe reading, and I was very unimpressed. I was turned on to Goethe after reading a couple insightful quotes used in articles, but found the book to be incredibly dry and uninspiring...not to mention below expectations for one of the most highly regarded German writers of all times. Puzzled, I found the quote that encouraged me to read Goethe in the first place...

"No one is more hopelessly enslaved, than the person who falsely believes he is free."

Not bad, right? Right...but this translation was from the *article* I read, not the book/translation being reviewed. In the book/translation being reviewed, the quote read as follows...

"No one is more a slave that the one who thinks he is free without being free."

Wow! Just flows off the tongue. Don't we think that a master of the German language would use stronger language? Wouldn't we expect verbage more similar to the former rather than the latter example? Wouldn't we expect one of the greatest writers of all time to paint a gripping visual rather than dribble out some wisdom?

I think so. I'm going to go out on a limb and trust centuries of readers and critics. 300 years can't be wrong. The stark difference b/w the two examples leads me to believe that the translation we are reviewing is either very poor, or very literal. I am by no means a German authority (I have enough trouble with English) and I haven't researched this enough to draw any other conclusions, but I HAVE to give Goethe the benefit of the doubt. I think a different translation may be more moving.

15 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Aphoristic Genius

By Sirin

This small book has held more inspiration and caused me to pause and reflect more than any other I have

read. I find myself circling the number preceding the most poignant passages so I can return to them at a later time of need. It is as essential as the works of the great philosophers.

See all 8 customer reviews...

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