

GOETHE AS PHILOSOPHER

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There Seems to be abroad in the minds of too many people the notion that literature and philosophy, so far from being vitally related to each other, are in fact opposites. Men of letters are supposed to be writers who have a genius for expressing in beautiful, if not always in poetic, language the characteristic thoughts and events of individual and social life to the enjoyment of the widest possible circles of readers. Philosophers, on the other hand, are generally conceived of as a people who say or write what they have to say in the most clumsy technical language to the utter dismay of everyone except those esoteric few who themselves are initiates into the dark secrets of the philosophic profession. They are supposed to be dealing with technical and abstract problems which can be related to the problems of actual concrete daily living only by the widest stretch of the imagination. The *literati*, contrariwise, are expected to reflect the very stream of human life in both their poetry and their prose. In brief, the one is supposed to talk both intelligently and interestingly of the things which are common human experience, while the other is expected to express himself quite unintelligently and boringly concerning the most abstruse abstractions of the wanderings of his own—more or less abnormal—mind.

Now it must be confessed that there are, undoubtedly, some real causes for these wide-spread impressions. It is true, for example, that literary greatness and immortality has generally been achieved in direct proportion to the degree to which the respective writer had mastered all three of the great literary virtues, namely reflecting life, lucidity and clarity of statement, and beauty of expression. It is also true, moreover, that much of philosophical literature is, from the purely aesthetic point of view, written so atrociously as not to merit the title of any *style* at all. Nor can it be denied that much philosophical writing leaves almost *infinitely* much to be desired in the direction of clarity and lucidity, and above all of simplicity. I doubt, however, whether

similar admission can, justifiably, be made for the supposed remoteness of philosophy from the daily concerns of life. I fear this last charge against philosophy is wholly due to a fundamental and exceedingly wide-spread misunderstanding of philosophy's nature and character. I think it may be seriously questioned whether in all the twenty-six centuries of Occidental philosophizing a single philosophical problem could be found which was not vitally concerned with human life, even if life be viewed quite onesidedly from a practical point of view. In other words, the so-called remoteness of the philosophical problems from the practical affairs of life is due simply to a total lack of comprehension of the nature and significance of those problems; also, perhaps, to an at least partial misunderstanding of the nature and significance of human life itself. It would be easy to prove this contention; but the present is not the place nor the occasion for such proof. Suffice it to re-emphasize that even without admitting the validity of this last charge against philosophy, enough has already been admitted both *for* great literature and *against* much philosophy to give considerable justification to the popular juxtaposition of these two pursuits.

It should not be overlooked, however, that our admissions in neither instance were couched in language making these admissions universally applicable. The fact is, very little reflection upon the history of human thought will show that in numerous instances the literary genius and the philosopher were one and the same person. Plato is only the most outstanding example of this fact; he is by no means the only one. Aristotle himself was no mean second. What of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, of Augustine and St. Thomas, of Dante, Shakespeare and Rousseau, of Spinoza and Hobbes, of Voltaire and Montaigne, of Schelling, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, of Emerson and William James, of Bertrand Russell and Paul Elmer More? All of these are names which must be conjured with in the realm of literary achievements. And all of them were or still are philosophers to a greater or lesser degree. Not one of these names is either literarily or philosophically insignificant. Which should prove that the generally assumed juxtaposition between these fields is, at the least, not a necessary one. Philosophy has been and in too many quarters

is still being written atrociously. Nor can it be denied that perhaps none have sinned at this point more glaringly than have Kant and Hegel, philosophical names which it would be difficult to surpass in the modern world. Nonetheless, atrocious writing should be considered an opprobrium no less in philosophy than in anything else. Certainly it is nothing to boast about. Moreover, if men like Plato, Aristotle, Aurelius, Spinoza, Emerson and Nietzsche could write philosophy not only intelligently and interestingly but even fascinatingly and captivately, it is quite too late in the day for anyone to argue that it can't be done. What has been done can be done. What is more: it is being done. Has any finer piece of prose literature been written in the twentieth century than Bertrand Russell's "A Free Man's Worship"? Yet that essay is also philosophy, no matter how violently any particular reader may happen to disagree with the specific philosophical position taken in the essay. It is true enough Mr. Russell has not been able to keep up to the standard of writing the King's English which he himself set in that famous discussion. And he has since written some philosophy—especially his various treatises on mathematical philosophy—which, to the technically untrained, is far from being either simple or lucid. Yet in most of Mr. Russell's even philosophical, treatises we can find the *litterateur*, the writer of a splendidly flowing and amazingly lucid, yes of a beautiful style. Surely there is none who would suggest that Mr. Russell is therefore less of a philosopher. Such a suggesting would indicate a complete unawareness of the unforgettable and probably still unsurpassed philosophical achievements of Plato and Aristotle.

Moreover, the discussed supposed antithesis between the two realms of human endeavor becomes all the less justifiable—nor, perhaps, even excusable—when one reflects that philosophy is no less concerned with life than is literature. Whatever may, in many specific instances, be the dullness and abstruse technical language in philosophical essays and books, the fact remains that philosophy has always been man's attempt to "see life steadily and see it whole," to borrow Matthew Arnold's too often repeated but still quite telling phrase. Philosophical analysis, the treatment of the specific and technical problems of philosophy, has been the philosophers's way of

“seeing life *steadily*.” He has been “seeing it *whole*” in terms of the recognition of the inter-relatedness of all problems and also in his attempts at his great philosophical syntheses.

Even beyond this, however, it must be remembered that, just as the respective periods have pressed their indelible stamp upon the representative philosophies of the period, so that philosophers have often left the imprint of their own point of view not merely upon the thought-life of the leading thinkers of the respective period but upon the actual further development and history of the entire (respective) people. One needs only, by way of example to call attention to the way in which the philosophico-political doctrine of “natural rights” of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Voltaire influenced and determined the fate of French civilization, issuing, as it inevitably did, in the French Revolution and being also by no means unrelated even to the American Revolution. One need only read the philosophical doctrines of these philosophers and then read the watchwords of the French Revolution on the one hand and the preamble to the American Constitution on the other to see, by even such superficial methods of comparison, the obviously intimate relationship. In other words, philosophy, instead of being infinitely remote from the practical affairs of daily life, has left its indelible impress upon human life and history, even if that life and history be viewed from a by no means purely ideological point of view. The extent, furthermore, to which a whole new movement of philosophy may express and represent the dominant mood of an age or even of an entire civilization is perhaps nowhere more easily seen or established than in the contemporary example of American pragmatism and instrumentalism. The philosophies of William James and John Dewey express about as adequately as could be expected the contemporary American scene and its utilitarian outlook of practical efficiency and go-get-ism. In view of these, rather obvious, facts it certainly will not do seriously to accuse philosophy of being remote from life.

Nor will it do, on the other hand, to assume that *belles lettres* are always unphilosophical. Quite aside from the distinctly philosophical illusions of literature already given, there is much good literature which has a decided

unified *Weltanschauung* back of it. Take Robert Browning as a case in point. Browning's writings, by the way, are also a good illustration of *belles lettres* which are by no means simple nor even obviously lucid. But the fact remains that Browning was quite a philosopher in his literary art. Yet he is by no means the proverbial exception which proves the rule. Dante, who has already been mentioned, and even Shakespeare himself offer further illustrations of the same fact. There is no need of multiplying examples, however. Enough have been given to prove that the common opinion on these matters is by no means borne out by the actual facts of the case. Indeed, I make bold to suggest that the man of letters who has no unifying philosophy of life back of his literary output is not very likely to be taken seriously for any considerable period of time. The writer who can flit not merely from one theme to any other but from one basic point of view to any other, like a butterfly, is very likely finally to find his output treated as of butterfly character. A man may, very reasonably, change his basic philosophy of life, and such change is, of course, bound to be reflected in his literary expressions. But a mere momentary humming here and buzzing there does not make for that sterling character and strong nature which characterizes most of the really great literature of the ages. After all, it is only reasonable to suppose that a man, if he really has something worth while to say, should know fairly definitely what he is about. How else can he expect to carry a tone of conviction to the mind of his readers? And if he cannot convince his readers his words and works will fall flat in spite of any other beauty which they may possess. Beautiful words, sentences, and paragraphs and beautifully expressed ideas are indeed moving, but if they are only beautiful they will not move men very long.

Thus I should like to claim that, despite of all general opinions to the contrary and despite any number of specific historical and even contemporary instances to the contrary, philosophy and *belles lettres* are not necessarily opposed to each other. Rather, they are—or, at their best at any rate ought to be—two aspects of the same pursuit; of the pursuit, namely, to find the truths of life and to express the same in both the most adequate and the most

beautiful possible fashion for the benefit of such as care to be guided or inspired by the discoveries of others.

The literary achievements of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe offer perhaps the most outstanding example of this matchless pursuit which can be found in the contemporary world. That he is far and above Germany's greatest poet no one has questioned or is likely to deny. That he must rank alongside of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare among the world's greatest poetic seers is also quite generally admitted. That he expresses what is noblest and best in the particular character of the German people has also often been stressed. But that his character and vision were much broader than nationally Germanic is also very evident; the genius of a Goethe could not be hemmed in by the boundaries of any one country or nation. It is the broadly and deeply *human* that he represents, whether it be in his own life or in the expression of life which he has accomplished in such immortal fashion in his works.

Yet the *philosopher* Goethe has too generally been over-looked. The reason for this is quite obvious, of course. Goethe the poet has so completely captivated the thought and imagination of cultural reader and critic alike that Goethe the philosopher seldom has had a chance even to be noticed. Goethe the thinker, in fact, has had to stand back of Goethe the imaginative creator. Yet Goethe was a philosopher in perhaps the most significant sense of the word.

Perhaps this statement can, initially, best be justified by a brief characterization of the philosopher. A philosopher is a person who has a fairly comprehensive world-view and who is, in general, quite conscious of what his *Weltanschauung* is; he will have achieved his world-view, moreover, as the result of mature and critical reflection upon experience. So far from implying hereby that the philosopher must never change his *Weltanschauung*, I should rather insist that most of the world's greatest philosophers underwent one or more rather decisive changes in their world-view. For, despite the need for coherence and for a unifying point of view, the philosopher is also, of all human beings, the one who most generally realizes that no

question has—as yet—finally been answered. The philosopher, that is to say, is *always seeking*, but hardly ever sure that he has fully arrived or attained. Most of them would, in fact, question the very possibility of man *ever* being able to arrive at any finalities.

If this be so, who could be found to represent this endless Faustian quest more adequately than the one literary artist who, by his own version of the Faust saga, has done more to bring Faust and his eternal quest back into the consciousness of the modern world than any other thinker or man of letters?

It is true, if to be a philosopher would imply to concern one's self exclusively with purely technical problems of philosophy and to occupy one's self purely with the creation of a completely coherent and logically air-tight philosophical system, then Goethe could—frankly—not be considered as a philosopher. For no one was, as we shall see, in general farther from such occupation than was Goethe. It must be admitted, moreover, that such is still too often the generally accepted but entirely too one-sided conception of philosophy. Goethe himself does, in fact, not hesitate to place himself with reference to philosophy thus considered. "For philosophy in the strictest sense of the word I have no sense." "I have always kept myself free from philosophy; the view-point of sound common sense has also been mine." And again: "At any rate I have as much philosophy as I need till my blessed end; in reality I need none at all."¹

Far better, however, than these, superficially considered, disparaging remarks concerning purely technical philosophy do the following sentences from Goethe's famous November 23rd, 1801 letter to Jakobi portray to us his real position to the whole realm of philosophy. He wrote:

You can also easily imagine how I stand toward philosophy. When it concerns itself primarily with (separative) distinctions I cannot well get on with it, and I may well say: it has sometimes hurt me in that it disturbed my natural way: when it unites, or rather when it enhances and confirms our original impressions that we are one with nature,

and transforms this impression into a deep calm intuitive vision in whose everlasting *synkrisis* and *diakrisis* we sense a divine life, even though to lead such a life may not be granted us, then I welcome philosophy.

In other words, Goethe has little or no use for philosophy as critical analysis; but he has supreme faith in philosophy as the search for synthesis and harmony, since only through its synthetic character can it really express life which is, after all, a totality. His letter to Fichte, acknowledging the receipt of a copy of the latter's *Wissenschaftslehre*, dated June 24, 1794, brings out the way in which Goethe always felt himself both repelled and attracted by philosophy and philosophers. In it he wrote: "So far as I am concerned, I will owe you the deepest thanks if you will finally reconcile me with philosophers; with them I have never been able to dispense and yet have never been able to reconcile myself with them either."

The fact of the case is, of more than of almost anything else Goethe was convinced of the fundamental unity of all life. But life, to be understood, had primarily *to be lived*, rather than talked about or even thought about.

*"Wie hast du's denn so weit gebracht ?
Sie sagen, du habest es gut vollbracht!"
"Mein Kind! ich hab es klug gemacht
Ich habe nie ueber das Denken gedacht."*

And again :

*Ja, das ist das rechte Gleis,
Dass man nicht weiss,
Was man denkt,
Wenn man denkt;
Alles ist als wie geschenkt.²*

Indeed, no one, he tells us, can talk about what he has not experienced: "Everything we express is a confession of faith." How utterly true that was of himself he also gives us in his own words. "In all my poetry I have

never shammed." he wrote. "What I have not lived through, what has not moved me to the quick, I have never uttered in verse or prose." It is, obviously, this very fact which makes Goethe's productions such marvelous mirrors of self-revelation. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit* he calls attention to the same fact as follows :

1. The direct quotation.....
2. For the sake of.....

Thus began that tendency, from which through all my life I have not been able to depart, namely to transform into a picture, into a poem everything which delighted or tormented or otherwise occupied me, and thus to settle it for myself in order both to correct my concepts of external things and also to calm myself inwardly about them.

His poetry, dramas, and novels thus were literally the mirror of his soul. Even yet *to read Goethe is to know the man.*

For a mind which was in the habit of exposing itself as a totality at almost any moment it was only natural that Goethe should be found ever and again to be turning against the would be synthesizers and analysts. Against the former he directs these interesting lines, which at the same time show the importance which he assigned to life and to its conquest :

*Fahrt nur fort, nach eurer Weise
Die Welt zu ueberspinnen !
Ich in meinem lebendigem Kreise
Weiss das Leben zu gewinnen.*

Concerning the mere analysts he complains : "Much we would know better, if we did not want to know it so precisely." Certainly it is not necessary to dwell on the far reaching significance of this pithy saying; it might, in fact, be claimed that Henri Bergson has built a complete system of philosophy upon it.

Yet these sentiments must *not* be interpreted to mean that Goethe had neither understanding for nor appreciation of the necessity and value of theory.

Far from it. Rather he was acute enough in his own analysis (!) of human life and thought to realize that "in every attentive look into the world we are already theorizing." Only six months before his death he writes to Schultz: "I am grateful to the critical and idealistic philosophy that it has directed my attention to myself; that is an enormous gain." But even thirty-five years earlier, when he had only recently become acquainted with the Kantian Critical philosophy, he wrote to Jakobi in October 1796 as follows:—

"You would no longer find me to be such a stiff realist; it brings me great advantage that I have become somewhat more acquainted with the other types of thinking, which though they cannot become my own, I nevertheless need very much indeed for practical use as supplement for my one-sidedness."

Expressions such as these show clearly that Goethe felt himself indebted to the great philosophic theories of this age, even though he was, even in this realm, entirely too independent a thinker to accept or swallow anything ready-made and whole.

We must leave this part of our discussion, but not without two more Goethe's remarks which, coming out of the heart of his two most important works, *viz.*, out of *Wilhelm Meister* and *Faust* respectively, summarize Goethe's point of view far more pointedly as well as beautifully than anything a commentator or critic could add. "*Der Sinn*," he tells us in the former, "*erweitert, aber laehmt; die Tat belebt, aber beschraenkt.*" And *Faust* breaks out into the the endlessly quoted

*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie
Und gruen des Lebens golder Baum.*

The one hunger and passionate drive which dominates this great spirit more than any other is his striving for knowledge and understanding of the world and of life; the striving which has, after all, been the distinctly *philosophical* urge since men have been philosophers. But no sooner does one state this fact about Goethe than one comes to realize, as must already have become apparent, that he certainly does not choose to satisfy

this hunger in the most generally accepted fashion. Ask Newton how to come to know the world and he will tell you: go and observe, measure and observe some more, and when you have reached your final conclusion check it with more observations. Ask Darwin how best to know life and he will be found to reply likewise: observe life in all its manifestations and aspects. Recently a contemporary scientist was heard to enlighten his hearers with the twice repeated categorical remark: "science begins and ends in observation." The reader of the same paper implied fairly clearly that the only ultimately valid and real knowledge is *scientific* knowledge. It is hardly necessary to say that Goethe would not and could not agree with a single such sentiment. (And, by the way, I am inclined to think that the word "sentiment" is especially wisely chosen in this connection. For, it appears to me that such a point of view is much more based on the *sentiment* aroused by habitual use of a certain method of procedure than on any rational or empirical demonstrability). Natural science, Goethe saw over 130 years ago,—over three generations before Einstein!—dissects, divides, separates, tears apart, and breaks up everything it touches, while it is of the very nature of the things which are thus broken up and dissected to be a distinct united totality. The art of measurement, which is the essential scientific procedure, can only observe and describe the quantitative *conditions* of behavior, while Goethe insists that real knowledge and understanding is concerned with the actual *forces* themselves whose operational *form* can only be directly *experienced* by the organism. No amount of *merely quantitative analysis*, therefore, can give us information concerning the very *aspects* of life and of the universe which are of *real* significance and meaning for us. Thus natural science can only arrive at the abstractly formulated "laws" which, however, completely exclude the actually originally given and experienced "phenomenon." Science, then, so far from telling you the truth about anything, falsifies more than it explains. For, in the final analysis, neither life nor the universe can ever be *explained* at best your partial explanations succeed only in explaining the problem *away*, *not* in solving it. For knowledge and understanding do not come with a look from the outside, but only from first-hand living experience. There is no other way to understand life except by living.

Yet Goethe himself was quite a biologist; a field in which he made several outstanding discoveries, such as his discoveries of the interosseal maxillary bone and the law of the metamorphosis of plants. He discovered this latter because of his realization of the fact that the specific steps in the evolution of organisms rest largely upon the principle of polarity, the original phenomenon of all natural living processes, namely the eternal alternation of expansion and contraction. In physics too Goethe made a real contribution in his theory of colours. I mention these scientific achievements of Goethe merely to show that his attitude towards natural science cannot be reduced to any supposed ignorance of its field.

In the light of these considerations one need not be surprised to find that Goethe rebels against considering nature as a system. Here is the way he puts it :

Natural system : a contradictory expression. Nature has no system; she has, she is life and the result of an unknown center and (extending) to an unknowable limit. Observation of nature, therefore, is endless, whether one proceeds by division into the most minute or by following the trail of the totality in breadth and height.

Science, therefore, Goethe claims, is largely a human means of easing man's natural astonishment and wonder in the midst of the ever present "Riddle of the Universe," to use Haeckel's famous phrase. Nature, in other words, becomes meaningful in its actual operation, in the activity and interplay of its forces as they can be witnessed in the specific phenomenon. And man, according to Goethe, needs a mediator not merely in matters of faith but also in research: to point him to the eternal in the phenomenon. We find this idea perhaps best expressed near the beginning of Goethe's treatise entitled "Attempt at a Meteorology," where he says: "The true, identical with the divine, can never directly be known by us : we behold it only as by reflection, by example, through symbols in individual and related phenomena; we become aware of it as incomprehensible life and yet cannot renounce the desire to comprehend it nonetheless." Goethe admits that the senses and careful practiced rational judgment can grasp the actual operation in its

purest and simplest form, namely as the original total phenomenon. But beyond this they cannot go. And Goethe lauds it as "the greatest fortune of the thinking man to have divined the comprehensible and calmly to revere the incomprehensible." For behind every and all phenomena Goethe sees the inexplicable. But he advises the investigator: "One should not seek anything behind the phenomena. They themselves are the instruction." Beyond them the mind of man can not go. "The highest which man can reach is wonder, and when the original phenomenon causes him to wonder, let him be satisfied!" Even though it is obviously the poet who speaks here, it is by no means self-evident that the philosopher does not speak here also. For, for Goethe even "all philosophy of nature remains only anthropomorphism, *i.e.*, man, one with himself, imparts to everything which he is not this same unity, draws it with him into himself, makes it one with himself... Things (themselves) are infinite."

Obviously quite in line with this point of view are Goethe's disparaging remarks concerning both scientific hypotheses and theories. "Hypotheses," he tells us, "are lullabies by which the teacher lulls his students to sleep." And "theories are usually the result of the excessive haste of an impatient mind, which would gladly be rid of phenomena and therefore slips in pictures, concepts, yes often nothing but words in place of the phenomena." That very way of putting the matter shows Goethe's own impatience with such methods of procedure. On the other hand, however, it must be kept in mind that Goethe was far from advising the usual lazy man's solution of all problems, namely the so-called "golden middle road." So far from finding truth in the middle between opposing opinions or theories, Goethe expressly states: "In the middle remains the problem, perhaps inscrutable, perhaps accessible." Anyway, "man is not born to solve the problems of the universe, but rather to search for the nature of the problem and after that to keep himself within the limits of the comprehensible". And, after all, the stream of life is infinite and infinitely different, far beyond the capacity of one man to fathom ultimately. Here we see the famous Goethean characteristics of resignation and renunciation asserting themselves. Yet never so that the quest itself would become either useless or no longer fascinating.

Nor does it mean that Goethe turns opportunist and accommodates himself to any one's or every one's point of view. No, he is far from being "all things to all men." But, in view of the endless differentiations and infinite aspects of actual life and experience he does practically find it necessary to be all things to *himself*. This he expressed most eloquently in the famous passage of his letter to Jakobi of January 6th, 1813, *viz.* :

"As for myself, I, because of the numerous aspects of my being, cannot be satisfied with a single mode of thought; as a poet and artist I am a polytheist; as an investigator of nature, on the other hand, I am a pantheist; and the one I am as decidedly as I am the other. Did I require a God for myself as a moral personality, I should already be provided therewith also. Celestial and terrestrial things constitute a world of such vastness that only the organs of all beings together may comprehend it."

Moreover, two years earlier, January 22, 1811, he had written to Reinhardt as follows :—

"All of the possible opinions, after all, do go through our head by and by, partly historically, partly productively. . . . the various ways of thinking are grounded in the differences among men and for just that reason a thoroughly uniform conviction is impossible. Once one knows on which side one stands, and where on that side one stands, one has already done quite enough; for then one is calm within and fair towards others."

Obviously, then, the peculiar position of the individual is not the only position. Rather, the existing variety of human opinions is not only an existential fact but a happy circumstance. For "only all men (together) know nature, only humanity as a whole lives the human." Knowledge, read knowledge, for Goethe is a *social* achievement.

Yet Goethe is not a worshipper of the mob, or of the masses. He has no faith in the maxim *vox popul, vox dei*. He makes this quite clear in connection with the just quoted passage from which he goes on to say : "No

matter how I place myself, I see in many famous axioms only the expressions of an individuality and just the very thing which is most universally recognized as true is usually only a prejudice of the mob, which latter lives under certain temporal conditions and which may therefore just as well be looked upon as an individual." In fact, Goethe goes even so far as to use the miserable character of the masses of men as an excuse for the absurdities of philosophers. Writing to von Muller under date of February 2nd, 1821, he says: "If men *en masse* were not so miserable, the philosophers would not find it necessary by contrast to be so absurd." Superficially considered this remark may produce more mirth than light. But a little serious consideration of it will show that it contains a profound truth. Or is it not possible, by way of a simple example, that a *philosophy* of mechanistic materialism might never have arisen had it not been for the preceding philosophy of equally one-sided and unbalanced absolute or subjective idealism? And it is quite unlikely that a philosophy of absolute idealism would ever have developed except for the crudely naive realism of the unthinking and uncritical masses. In other words, philosophy is perhaps as often a *reaction against* as it is the dignified *expression* of the life and opinions of the day. Moreover, even philosophy probably cannot escape the universal operation of the law of the pendulum. The pendulum of public opinion having swung too far in one direction, the philosophic reaction is not very likely to stop, on the return swing, nicely and balancedly in the middle. Rather it is most likely to swing to the opposite extreme, thus accounting for its "absurdity". I am well aware of the fact that the very *aim* of philosophy is to achieve "a balanced view of life," instead of an extreme or onesided one. But I submit that, in order to make possible this very balance, it is sometimes absolutely necessary first to achieve the opposite extreme of the existing *status quo*. Balance, in other words, in a moving world, is not achieved by reaching a standstill, but by the action and reaction of opposing forces, by the natural (even though perhaps absurd) swing of the pendulum.

But, to return to Goethe, Although the *whole* truth can be had *only by all* men combined, the individual can only achieve his own individual truth. Every man, according to Goethe, has his own individual truth, and the

validity of his truth is to be determined by application of the following criterion: "Only what is fertile is true." A slight mis-translation of the German word *fruchtbar*, from this quotation as "fruitful" instead of "fertile" would, of course, cause this Goethean saying to be hailed with much delight by our pragmatist friends. But, before they and the general "success philosophy" of our Average American become too hilarious in announcing the great Genius of Weimar as the progenitor of their philosophy, let them stop long enough to inquire into Goethe's meaning of the term "fertile" in this connection. He makes himself very explicit on this subject that by "fertile" he does precisely *not* mean fruitful in the sense of external advantage or even in the sense of the expansion of our knowledge of facts. Rather he means our own inner development by it through the arousing to free activity of previously slumbering forces of our mind. Only thus can our inner consciousness be organically expanded and developed. The man who grasps in this fashion, so Goethe informs us, not only has grown a bit himself, but has also aided in the clarification of his own life and is thereby brought closer to the deity. For that reason even error may, at times, be a furtherer of truth; it may be the necessary detour without which a certain portion of our personality might never have been aroused to activity and life. And without activity there simply is nothing.

It is this last fact which gives to Goethe's views of man such an eternal freshness and vitality. Man, like the universe itself, is an eternal problem and vitality. Man, like the universe itself, is an eternal problem and riddle for Goethe.

*Des Menschen Leben ist ein aehnliches Gedicht:
Es hat wohl einen Anfang, hat ein Ende,
Allein ein Ganzes ist es nicht.*

Sentiments such as these have caused Goethe to be accused even by Schiller of being satirical in his attitude toward man. But when one dips deeper into Goethe's views, it is easy to discover the fact that it is not satire but eternal wonder on Goethe's part which produces that initial effect on the reader. For, while Goethe is thoroughly appreciative of the light which the

capacity for rational judgment throws upon man's path, he is constantly aware that this light is in the habit of clarifying the path just far enough ahead to keep one—under favorable other conditions—on the road. For the most part he finds man driven more by a certain inexplicable "demon" from within than by the application of the light of reason. Goethe felt himself "demon possessed" no less than Socrates had done over two thousand years before Goethe. In neither instance, of course, does the word "demon" have any particular moral or otherwise evaluative connotation. It is felt to be a mysterious inner driving force which, according to Goethe, determines a man's ultimate peculiar personality and decisions more than any other characteristics. It is the drive which necessitates activity, the burning fire within which will not let a man rest.

Yet it is, perhaps, the greatest possession—alas!, in *both* senses of this word—of man. It urges him eternally on and on and forces him more and more to become most truly himself. The *Faust*, Goethe's incomparably greatest master-piece, develops this tremendous theme to the highest perfection. It has rightly been called "The Song of Songs of Activity." In its graphic description of Faust as the man who eternally stands between God and the devil it depicts the typically Goethean conception of the fundamental human problematic. The principle of polarity is as fundamental in man as it is in nature. In fact, nature and man are ultimately continuous arts of a continuous whole and must not artificially be separated. Two souls live in man's breast, of which the one always tightly clings to the earth while the other is eternally striving beyond everything merely earthy. In the eternal conflict between these opposing forces within his own nature Faust himself finds it impossible ever to say to the moment; "remain!" He has to be up and doing. The idea of *activity* runs through the whole drama from the remark in the Prologue that "man's activity all too easily may flag" to the remarks in the closing chorus coming to us from the great Beyond to which Faust's soul has gone:

*Das Unzulaengliche,
Hier wird's Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche,
Hier ist's getan.*

The task of life for Faust is to purify his activity. For the drive to action may be increased, on the one hand, to insolent presumptuousness or it may, on the other hand, run out in the sand. The content and object of activity, therefore, becomes of great importance. Faust's only holy writ begins with the words: "*Im Anfang war die Tat!*" Restlessly striving it becomes Faust's life-long task to reach "new spheres of pure activity". Even the idea of committing suicide is freighted with this notion. While, on the other hand, "if I stand still I am a slave."

The whole aim of Mephistopheles is to drag Faust through life and to keep this very Faustian restless activity going in order to tire him out at last. Only thus can the devil win and Faust lose his bet. Each experience of Faust's life is thus consummated in active deeds. But, neither activity in the world of sense (the Gretchen tragedy) nor unification with embodied aesthetic harmony (in the Helena tragedy) can satisfy his restless spirit. Yet, even after having turned from both of these, Faust's spirit is far from being defeated. "*Dieser Erdenkreis gewaehrt noch Raum zu grossen Taten,*" he cries, and with it enters upon the experiences and activities of the ruler tragedy. "*Die Tat ist alles!*" In harmony with this sentiment Faust throws himself into the activities contained in the service of culture and of society. But here too the overflow of his restless striving causes him for the third time to entangle himself with heinous guilt. So it happens that in none of the fields of his activity has he been able to find rest or satisfaction; and it looks as if Mephistopheles were to lose his bet.

Yet it is just when the endless Faustian quest seems to have withstood every temptation with which Mephistopheles has tried to capture him and to tire him out—it is just then that Faust comes to a double realization which, while it is completely in line with the achievement of an "ever purer activity." on the other hand causes him to lose his bet to Mephistophels and thus to bring about—in harmony with the original contract—his death. He realizes, first of all, that to be truly man means to free yourself from all magic and from all desire to be a superman and instead to achieve purely by your own strength

and by your own truest nature. His second and equally important realization is that "to be a man" is to be one with many other men. The last and highest achievement, therefore, would be, in purely human strength and activity.

*Eroeffn, ich Räumee vielen Millionen,
Nicht sicher zwar, doch taetig-frei zu wohnen.
* * * * **
*Jal diesem Sinne bin ich a ganz ergeben,
Das ist der Weisheit letzter Schluss :
Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben,
Der taeglich sie erobern muss.
Und so verbringt, umrungen von Gefahr,
Hier Kindheit, Mann und Greis sein tuechtig Jahr.
Solch ein Gewimmel moecht' ich sehn.
Auf freiem Grund mit freiem Volke stehn.*

In the commitment to social activity for the welfare and good of millions, but no longer in doing it simply *for* them or *to* them, but *with* them, in this he finally finds the highest and only lasting aspiration and satisfaction of his soul.

*Zum Augenblicke duerft' ich sagen :
Verweile doch, du bist so schoen!
* * * * **
*Im Vorgefuehl von solchem hohen Glueck
Geniess' ich jetzt den hoechsten Augenblick.*

No sooner is the word over his lips than he is reminded of the similar words of his contract with the devil. He tries to justify himself by pointing out that he has created something lasting, something which goes way beyond the personal individuality and in which yet, just *because* he himself is its creator, his own individuality will forever be preserved. This is the significant meaning of Faust's famous words :

*Es kann die Spur von meinen Erdentagen
Nicht in Aeonon untergehn.*

Not his fame is imperishable, but the deed. For it is the deed which can never again be lost and which reaches way beyond the individual personality. It is the consciousness through his perishable ego to have achieved something super-personal and imperishable. It is *that* he desires to preserve. And with this desire he has achieved the highest purification of his nature, but with it also he has lost his bet—and dies. He had achieved, finally, humanity in his own right; but the happy realization of that fact causes him to lose the magic contract—naturally. To become an active man in the midst of active men and to help them to achieve freedom and life, this is the final purifying striving and activity. As Goethe expressed it in one sentence in the *Pandora*:

Des echten Mannes wahre Feier ist die Tat.

Or again, as we find it is Faust's own admonition to himself when he ponders the fact of his great dependence on heredity :

*Was du ererbt von deinen Vaetern hast,
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.*

However, neither for Faust nor for *Faust's* creator is this the end. The activity of an active personality cannot thus abruptly be cut off. Goethe says :

“The conviction of our continued existence springs for me out of the very concept of activity; for which I am restlessly at work to my very end, nature is duty-bound to assign to me another form of existence when the present form no longer is able to maintain my spirit.”

Goethe says to men: as long as you *want* to be active, you can depend upon your own immortality: for activity is the innermost essence of your truest existence, and activity is in destructable as long as you are actively striving. You shall be active; therefore it must be possible to be active, even when all outward conditions are basically changed.

Here, then, we have, even stronger perhaps than in Kant's similar formulation, an ethical foundation of the belief in *immortality*. The sense of obligation *demand*s it, and what nature demands she must grant. Therefore, because

it *must* be so, it is so. Stronger also than Kant's appears to be Goethe's denial of all eudaimonistic reasons for immortality. Not the desire or need for happiness, nor even the demand of a "practical reason," but the necessity of continuous activity guarantees the truly active person's immortality. Immortality thus, for Goethe, is as much of an achievement as it is a gift. Only the actively striving person can expect further opportunity for self-expressive activity after death. But for such active personalities death simply cannot be the end. If we can only call this a conditional *immortality*, so be it. For this is all that can definitely be asserted as Goethe's point of view on this subject; and the idea is certainly itself immortalized in the *Faust*. It makes the crowning consummation of the "Songs of Activity".

Undoubtedly the *Faust* is poetry supreme. But even such a brief characterization of Goethe's master-piece as was possible in the compass of this lecture cannot but leave us with a clear recognition of the fact that underneath this tremendous drama and running all through it there is to be found a *philosophy* in the sense of a broad, but nonetheless, quite definite *Weltanschauung*. There is here a fundamental sense of the meaning and purpose of human life, a grappling with the problem of "good and evil," and a definite attempt to relate man both to his surrounding physical universe and to God. It is true Goethe never deals with these problems in the abstract, but they remain philosophical problems nonetheless, no matter how they are treated. And when they are treated with such a basically unifying idea and at the same time with such an all-inclusive sweep as we find in the *Faust*, it is a mere *Streit um des Kaisers Bart* to dispute the right to call the creator of this drama of human life a *philosopher*. One may rightfully challenge either the basic convictions or the conclusions of this Goethean *Weltanschauung*, or both. But one cannot deny the fact that it is or contains a philosophical world-view, no less unified because it also happens to be great poetry.

Goethe's philosophy of education is, in many regards strikingly similar to his views on immortality. At least this is true of his more mature views on education. For in his earlier life Goethe looks at education, even as he does at the rest of the world, purely through the eyes of his own, after all

rather unique experience. Feeling at that time that he owes very little to his teachers and all the more to himself, his youthful views of education are far from traditional or orthodox. Above all else he demands freedom for the individual to develop his own inherent individual personality. But the *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe's unquestionably greatest work centering around the problem of education, already shows a decided tempering of that earlier judgment. Even in the earlier *Lehrjahre* Goethe already admits the necessity of educational lawfulness and order, a concept which becomes much more explicit, however, in the *Wanderjahre*. By this time Goethe has become convinced that real freedom is not, after all, meant for every individual. Only the exceptional individual can stand such freedom. Men who have no insight into the divine nature cannot enjoy true freedom. Yet truly cultural education cannot be had without such insight. Most men, therefore, so Goethe insists, do not even *want* to become truly educated. They are not concerned with the development of their truest and finest human nature. Only their more superficial selves demand their time and their attention. But for this very reason the majority of mankind cannot be left to itself. Society not only has the right but the duty to influence these men if they are ever to become valuable members of the group.

This social ideal of educational selectiveness may seem far removed from the contemporary ideal of democratic "education for everyone." But it shows the clear analytic mind and sober judgment of Goethe at a time when the ideals of "liberty, equality, fraternity" were in the very air he had to breathe. This is all the more remarkable when one remembers that Goethe came to these conclusions long before anyone had yet even thought of inventing intelligence or aptitude tests. After all, it is impossible to educate anyone beyond the limits of his native capacity, no matter what the professed ideals of any particular age or social group may happen to be. The sooner we really learn this lesson even in twentieth century America and then set out to practice it, the better it will be for all concerned. Even in his educational philosophy, therefore, Goethe is not as ancient as the hundred years which have passed since his death might cause one to think.

If time or space would permit it would be not only interesting but also profitable to trace the definite influence which such technical philosophers as Spinoza and Kant—to mention only two among the greatest ones—exerted over the thought and mental development of Goethe. In both instances we have numerous expressions from Goethe's own pen to vouch for the reality and great impact of these influences. Spinoza's influence upon Goethe seems to have been greater in his younger years, although it is quite clear that Goethe never completely escaped from the spell which the great God-intoxicated Grinder of Lenses early had cast over him. The mystical pantheism of Spinoza most admirably fitted into the temperament of the great Bard of Weimar. It is not possible to say as much for Kant's influence upon Goethe. But this is certainly not surprising. The coldly and rationally analytical mind of Kant was far removed from the warm pulsating active life of Goethe. Yet Goethe did not, with a gesture of supercilious superiority, close his mind against the Critical Philosophy. Rather he worked hard, in his later years, to try to understand the Kantian position. What is more: he gladly accepted the tutelage of the ten years younger Schiller in this task. The best proof of the importance which Goethe saw in the Kantian philosophy is, of course, to be found in Goethe's own essay on *Einwirkung der Neueren Philosophie*, written in 1817. It is true, the essay shows perhaps more misunderstanding of the Kantian position than it shows real comprehension. And it is also true that Goethe almost always changes Kant's doctrines so that they are more Goethean than Kantian. But the fact remains that Goethe made very serious attempts to understand and come to terms with the Critical Philosophy. If he did not succeed as much as the more technical philosopher might wish he had, let us remember that the genius of Goethe seems never to have been able to touch anything without changing it. Whatever he absorbed from others he transformed until, by the creative power of his mind, the absorbed material appeared much more natively Goethean than borrowed. Even the great Kant could not escape this fate at the hands of Goethe.

All of this has had to be purely fragmentary. It has been just as impossible to exhaust any one of the specific points raised as it has been impossible even

to raise more than just a small number of the aspects of Goethe's thinking which show him as the philosopher. But enough, I trust, has been brought out to prove the primary contention of this discussion, namely that Goethe was, after all, a philosopher in perhaps the highest and most significant sense of the word: he increasingly developed a rational and comprehensive *Welt-anschauung* which, in its inclusive character and tremendous reach, in its apparent lack of dogmatism yet equally apparent deep conviction, in its eternal Faustian quest and ceaseless activity, in its glorification of the individual and his rights and yet its ultimate goal of profound human service—in all of these aspects has proved perhaps to be the single greatest and most universally understood highway upon which the modern world has walked out of the later renaissance and out of the extreme worship of reason of the late eighteenth century into the world of the more distinctly contemporary spirit and culture. Moreover, in his profound *human* insights Goethe still leads the way; he is still a modern among moderns, and a seer of the first magnitude. Many of his insights have not merely the earmark of genius but that of 'eternal' truth (relatively speaking).

I doubt, therefore, whether, even a hundred-thirty-four years after his death, it is possible to do greater honour to this universal genius than was done him by his own fatherland's greatest momentary enemy, when Napoleon met Goethe at Erfurt and the great Corsican greeted Germany's "first citizen" with the memorable words: *Vous êtes un homme!* For greater than the philosopher or even the poet was THE MAN GOETHE: *Vous êtes un homme!*

"INCIPIT TRAGOEDIA"

VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY NIETZSCHE

Ended the years of waiting,
the Hours of hope and tears,
the effort to reach the point where
dialogue disperses fears.

The fields cry out for harvest,
the beasts seek out their kin :
but the heart recedes from passion
as autumn winds blow in.

Man moves forward or backward
to the here and now in him
pursuing the shadow
in which his valves dim.

But a voice cries out in protest
from without or from within :
a caged bird sings of freedom
as life ebbs in him.

II

Vain the attempts to discover
earth on which to build :
vain the words in the hollow
where never the word was willed.

But the seeing eye is open —
like a spear it touches me—
piercing the seed of memory
with the form time is to see
The eye is the centre of beauty,

the needle of heart and mind,
 the repository of vision,
 the hope of man born blind.

III

Never nearer, never further
 from the freedom for which we fought,
 from youth's blinding vision
 in which we are caught.
 Never nearer, never further
 from the dream whose time has come,
 from the unity of purpose,
 from the victory faith has won.

We have blundered on in darkness
 hardly knowing who we were,
 hardly naming our own children
 lest a miracle recur.

We have watched the moon change faces
 twenty times within an hour.
 From the heights of Mt. Olympus
 we have called the fig a flower.

Must this now all be over?
 Must farewell be forever?
 Or is there somewhere someone who
 believes the phoenix lives in you?

IV

Green fields, rivers and mountains,
 are you in time like me?
 Are you under heaven
 as water is under the sea?
 Children play in the rice-fields;

men carry water and hay making
to huts where women sit making
mysterious forms in clay.

Fish swim in the river,
the river runs under the sun
whose rays like truth or art
burn the values tradition has won.

Climbers conquer the mountain,
geologists pierce her side,
technologists open her heart up
to build a world where her breasts divide.

Mountains, rivers and green fields,
I move in you as you live in me.
answering the challenge of being
where time touches eternity.

V

Shatter the window! Shatter old dreams!
Look now at the camel-clad green
of unfamiliar landscape
where silence speaks what has not been.

Through midnight's heart-blaze suffering
you fear to face alone,
watch the poor in the fields at midday
till their labour is your own.

Cup your hands : drink deep from the brown skin
the old man fills at the well;
commit yourself to the moment.
Destroy your heaven to conquer hell.

