GOETHE'S FAUST AND PHILOSOPHY*

Those who study philosophy should take a part in the bicentennial celebration of the birth of Goethe, for we see expressed throughout his work that comprehensive interest in the whole of existence and the true values of human life which also characterize the philosopher. There is a felt affinity here, and on this memorable occasion we should at least make it clearer to ourselves.

Goethe said, “the master first shows himself in limitation.” We should confine ourselves, too, and not try to range over the whole field. I want only to set a few things about Goethe’s Faust and about philosophy into juxtaposition, so that they may reflect light on each other and enhance their common meaning.

So to the play, and the very first thing Faust himself says, after the curtain goes up showing him in his study:

Oh, that’s enough of it—
philosophy, jurisprudence and medicine, and
unhappily, theology too;
gone through it all, hot and heavy,
and here I am now, poor fool,
no wiser than before,
yet called Master, yes, even Doctor.¹ (355–368)

That could be Socratic—the knowledge of his own ignorance, but wait and see.

When Mephistopheles comes into the picture, in this same room, in the great scene of Faust’s bold commitment to the devil, Mephistopheles talks straight to him:

I tell you, a fellow who speculates
Is like a beast led round and
round by an evil genie on barren ground,
But all about lie beautiful
green pastures. (1830–1834)

And Faust is ready to go with him.

* An address given at a public meeting of the Philosophical Club on the occasion of the Bicentennial celebration held at Yale University, March 21, 1949.
¹ Translations are all by the author.
Before that action, however, there is an interlude. A young student comes to Faust’s door, just as he himself had once gone to another’s when he too was a student. Faust with human sympathy wants to see him. But the devil takes over and receives him, wearing Faust’s gown. The unwitting student encounters a strange “faculty adviser” indeed: “Make good use of your time; it slips away so fast from one; but Order will teach you how to make good use of it. My dear young friend, I advise you then to take college logic first” (Kollegium Logicum). . . (1908–1911).

And Faust, looking on, invisible, sees an ironical picture of himself and the life of the Doctor.

See how the philosopher steps into class and proves to you it must be so:
The first should be thus, and second thus,
And after that the third thus, and the fourth thus:
And if the first and the second were not so,
The third and fourth never could be.
That’s what the scholars in all places prize so highly!
But they never become master-weavers of thought themselves.
When any one of them wants to know and to describe
The Living Reality
He tries first to drive the spirit out of it;
Then he has the parts in his hand
Only, alas, to lack the spiritual bond of the whole thing. (1928–1941)

“I don’t quite understand you,” the student confesses;

It seems as if everything were going round and round in my head—
I feel so stupid.

Again the true touch of Socrates, a confession of ignorance. But the devil has a malicious recommendation for anyone in this predicament.

Now, before all other things
You must apply yourself to Metaphysics.
There see that you grasp some deep thought which never occurs to man’s brain.
But that doesn’t matter, for whatever goes on there—
Whatever does not go on—
A handsome word will do. . .

More advice later—

Be always well prepared beforehand
Studying paragraph by paragraph
So that you are able later to check
That the master doesn’t say anything but what is written in the book.
But you yourself want to be busy with your note-taking
As if the Holy Spirit itself were dictating your words. (1948–1963)

But soon Mephistopheles has enough of this mock-solemn advising and any reference to “spirit” irks him—he must, as he mutters to himself, re-
sume his own proper role and play the devil's part (2010). So he tempts the young student exactly as he has tempted Faust, with these words:

Gray, dear friend, is all theory
And green the golden tree of life. (2038-9)

Gray philosophy and golden trees and green pastures; writing, words, books, rooms, and outside the great and the small world of life.

Mephistopheles was making fun of philosophy and also trying to make capital of the student's own confusion and discouragement. We should remember this confusion—Goethe makes this a state liable to temptation by the devil who symbolizes the "negative spirit" in man, the spirit that only denies and devalues life.

Mephistopheles had ground for his charges against philosophy but though he said to the student: "this is the case in all places, it is ever so," he did not here truly represent Goethe. It is not a wholesale rejection of philosophy that we are to see in Goethe's lines but rather a demand for a change from one sort of philosophy to another.

This episode of the drama mirrors a change that was taking place in the thought of the eighteenth century. The very year of Goethe's birth, 1749, had marked the beginning of a number of new developments which took shape during his years of growth to manhood and which consequently shaped his own thinking. That year Rousseau leaped into fame with his prize essay which argued that advance in the arts and sciences meant only a decline in the morals of mankind—and Rousseau's fame was long continued, for he followed with other writings on the suppression, by civilization, of the free and natural man. There was a widespread attack from many other quarters besides on the conventions, rules, prejudices, and superstitions with which men were weighted down. A strong reaction had set in against authoritarian rule, whether in religion or art or politics. The same year 1749 was the year of publication of Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws, an unconcealed attack on all despotism and a plea for the liberty of man. But deeper still than this immediate message was the concept that was to revolutionize the study of history itself: Montesquieu first taught scholars to beware of reading their own motives, interests, and circumstances into those of different peoples in remote times and places—warned them not to see one pattern of life everywhere but to study how the nations actually lived and what their customs and laws and beliefs actually were. Then we discover variety and individuality in social life. The lesson of Montesquieu was: avoid the stereotype or the fixed form in dealing with man and with society. And another star appeared in the firmament of 1749, the figure of Buffon, the author of the monumental natural history, who is known to us by the oracular saying: "The style is the man." His is a wonderful style for natural science but more to be admired is the idea that he was introducing
into the world of science and thought. He was devoted to the empirical method of Newton but precisely because he was so genuinely empirical he did not assume, in advance of the evidence, that the phenomena of life would exhibit the same mechanical regularity as inanimate matter. For he perceived a distinctive feature about living things, that they were not of a uniform pattern—variation was characteristic of all life. Living nature was full of nuance and exhibited less fixity and repetition than the study of physical nature would lead one to expect. To these representative men of the century we must add Diderot and D'Alembert, the authors and organizers of the great Encyclopedia. Many of the writers of that group were vociferous in their materialism and their atheism and they were as dogmatic and pretentious as any of the metaphysicians the Devil castigates in this play. But Diderot offered new and fresh Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature (1754), imaginative suggestions which others were to think about and develop. Life in general manifests not fixity of form but variability, novelty, spontaneity.

These thoughts about life were carried over into art which deals with life. This is the time of the novels of Richardson, Fielding, Diderot, Rousseau, with stories about the familiar lives of people not merely legendary ones and figures of ancient Greece. The drama was being emancipated from the prescriptions of the neo-classic rules of unity and in comedy and in the historical drama, as in the case of Voltaire, the writers were especially free in adapting their art to their modern subjects. There was Gluck too, aiming to do that in his art, suitting his music to the words of the opera. The paintings exhibited in the salons of Paris were criticised, as new art, and not as imitations of traditional models, by such sensitive critics as Diderot. The influence of this whole development of thought is to be observed even in Hume, who is one of the coolest and most independent minds in the period, and one not given, certainly, to romantic imagining. In his Dialogues on Natural Religion, alluding to the literary art, he wrote: "Some beauties in writing we may meet with, which seem contrary to rules, and which gain the affections and animate the imagination, in opposition to all the precepts of criticism, and to the authority of the established masters."  

What was thus calmly observed by the empirical Hume was hailed with a passionate enthusiasm by the generation to which Goethe belonged, a generation which went through "storm and stress." It was during Goethe's formative years that these tendencies manifested themselves throughout the culture of Europe. New views were ascendant, views of the natural man and of mind, art, morals, nations, laws, civilization, history, and of Life itself in all species. A new philosophy was to be described, a philosophy

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2 Dialogues, Part III.
of man, life, nature. So in Faust the devil must be given his dues. His nega-
tions of the older philosophy symbolize the reactions of many geniuses of
that new age to the philosophy they intended to discard. They were against
the bondage of fixed form and formalism, in art as in logic, against the
dogmatic pretensions of written metaphysics that sounded as if the author
thought the Holy Ghost was guiding his pen, against rationalistic system-
building beyond the actual evidence, and against a quite opposite fault of
narrow rationalism which dismembers the living whole and knows only
the parts, never any unity and tie between them, nor the pulse of the
machine.

But it is time we turned from the meaning of the devil’s critique of philoso-
phy to see more affirmatively what was the philosophy of the scholar Faust.
The act of Faust when he shook off the dust of his study, and its magic
worked by the book, and accepted the offer of Mephistopheles to see all the
world, is also symbolic. It indicates the direction in which Goethe was
going.

I like an expression Professor Barker Fairley used seventeen years ago
(1932), when we both took part in a commemoration of the death of Goethe.
He then spoke of Goethe’s “empirical way.” Such a phrase may mislead
students of philosophy, possibly even the “professionals,” unless they hap-
pen to remember their Hegel. Like the scholars depicted by Mephistopheles
we too have our rigid classifications so that when anyone avows that he is
empirical he is immediately put down as a benighted individual who be-
lieves that all we ever know is what is given us by our senses. Hegel knew
better than that. He bore no particular love toward empiricism as such but
he could appreciate the spirit of the new philosophy of the eighteenth
century which we have just now considered and he spoke very justly about
its value in the historical development of our modern culture.

“The lesson of (modern) empiricism,” he said in his Logic, “is that man
must see for himself and feel that he is present in every fact of knowledge
which he has to accept.” (Logic, Chap. IV, sect. 38, translation by Wallace,
p. 78.) Certainly that was Goethe’s way—to see for himself and to be
present with everything that may be known and to place his own valuation
upon each moment of existence. In that respect his creation, the man Faust,
is a magnified image of himself. The career of Faust is summed up, just
before the denouement of the drama, in Part II:

I have simply run through the world,
Only desiring and achieving and desiring again;
And thus powerfully have I stormed through my life,
At first with great and mighty strokes,
But now I go along wisely, and with thoughtful step. (11433-40)

But there was still the dynamic drive to experience.
In the very beginning of the play Faust told of the torment of his "wild drives" and "dreams" (1182). They were not yearnings "for the Beyond or Above"—

No,
it is out of the earth my joys well up
and the present sun is shining on my sorrows here. (1663-5)

When Mephistopheles declares he has something to offer in earthly experience, Faust replies, half in scorn, half with a superb and amused pity:

What will you, poor devil, give me?
Was ever the spirit of a man in his high striving
Grasped by the likes of you? (1697-8)

Then with a reckless confidence, Faust made his fateful bargain:

If ever I declare that any moment is so utterly lovely and complete that I would want it to last forever, unchanged, then
I'll yield you my soul. . . . (1699-1705)

But now don't mistake me,
Faust warns the devil;
With me it is not a question of mere enjoyment.

There is a magnificent scope to Faust's desire for experience:

Whatever is distributed throughout the whole of human kind,
All those experiences I want to enjoy in my inner self.
I want to grasp with my mind the very highest and the lowest. (1765-1771)

It was a foregone conclusion, then, that their visit to Auerbach's Cellar and many other excursions would have little significance. Indeed, any enjoyment of pleasure was hardly worth lingering over. True, a poet is always inclined somewhat to be an Epicurean, for he is interested in the present moment, but as Goethe often said, the poet seeks to "lend eternity to the moment" and it is that making of an experience eternal that is the poet's essential joy. It is the activity that satisfies. Once a creation is made, the poet finds another moment to challenge his art. Even the poet, then, who loves life in the present moments will not succumb to the loveliness of any one moment and thereby cease to be active in creation.

Recall now the early scene when the devil is still in the form of the poodle in Faust's study. Faust then craved some supernatural revelation, all interest in which he shortly after disavowed, at the time of making his bargain. Incidentally, it is as true for Goethe as for our later Bergson, that nothing in the experience of a man can ever be lost or annihilated for it goes along in the pulse of life and its influence will be felt even at the final day, as we shall see in this drama. Well, here was Faust at work on the New
Testament and trying to construe the book of John. It went against the grain for him to render the opening words literally:

   In the beginning was the Word.

He was so sick and tired of words, that "Word" had no longer any high import. Let it read, then,

   In the beginning was Intelligence.

Not that either, because it is not intelligence, mind or sentience

   that makes all things active and creates all.

Perhaps it should be, then,

   In the beginning there was Power.

But Faust could not satisfy himself that any one of these terms made sense; they were simply the old words that had been used for the attributes of God—Reason, Intelligence, Power.

Well, there is nothing to do then but write something not at once intelligible or definite:

   In the beginning was the Deed. (1224–1237)

The original thing in the universe is the creative act.

   But how are we to understand that conception? It is possible, of course, to see how it might apply to man. The legend of Dr. Faustus the maker of magic had appealed to many an imagination before Goethe. Faustus was a figure characteristic of the Renaissance, an age very self-conscious about the greatness of man. Take only one example, Machiavelli in Italy. He conjured with a dangerous dream of the princely superman who could by his intelligence and valor and spirit infuse an army and a whole nation with the power to endure, the great man not to be judged by any ordinary standards of conduct but solely by his unique and powerful achievement. Let lesser men afterwards, he said in effect, be the historians of the achievement but they only follow and explain; the master genius leads. The originality of his Deed is beyond them. And what holds of the maker of the state is true of the genius, the maker of anything great.

Yet the character of Faust is not that of the princely genius of Renaissance imagination any more than he is the mere Epicurean. That passage from John as rendered by Faust refers to all Creation, to the Universe itself, as originating in the Act. That warns us that a metaphysics is involved. We must go on to find Goethe's philosophy of Nature in order really to understand his man, Faust.

Was there any particular philosophy, then, with which Goethe was in
sympathy? Could he who had learned his Bible so early and then Homer and the Greeks, find nothing in all philosophy to interpret his own experience?

The record of Goethe’s experience with philosophy offers some suggestions. When a student at the university he had been impressed by one philosopher, the Stoic Epictetus. He had little use, however, for the compendious, professorial learning about the other philosophers, as Mephistopheles’s jibes show. Even Plato was there made a bore to him. But when he was really embarked on his own literary career with the publication of Goetz von Berlichingen and the Sorrows of Werther, there came to his attention through one of his contemporaries the philosophy of Spinoza, who was at that time being read in a new light. The philosopher who in the century before had been abused as an atheist was now heralded, in the romantic style, as “God-intoxicated.” Goethe himself became very enthusiastic. Spinoza’s philosophy remained influential in his thinking for many years thereafter. When Goethe was still working on the Second Part of Faust he said: “I have my Spinoza always at hand.”

What relevance could Spinoza have? If we consult the name Spinoza in a typical, philosophic catalogue, we can read, “Classification: Metaphysics, and under that, ‘monism,’ Being One and Infinite; infinite attributes: man a finite mode of body and mind; universal determinism.” All that seems most unpromising: what bearing has it on Goethe?

But see Spinoza now as Goethe interpreted him. He said that Spinoza had disclosed to him “the unity of all that is.” Goethe himself worked in natural science and with that cue he realized how in every search for knowledge one has always to keep “the nature of the whole” in mind. The myopic neglect of that was the fault with which Mephistopheles had accused the professors: they pick the living whole into parts and miss the unity and relations essential to it. But not only so of the whole of Nature. The same truth holds of every individual and every part. So, in Goethe’s own words “every one of the works of nature has its own being, every one of its appearances has its own individual concept, and yet all these form One.” There is, too, throughout the whole of nature and in every part infinite activity (Thätigkeit). It was for these insights Goethe thanked Spinoza: they made his scientific work significant beyond the establishment of facts. The point of view informed all Goethe’s poetry as well as his science and it shaped his entire conception of the drama of human life. And Spinoza’s philosophy

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3 Quoted from an anthology and commentary entitled, Über allen Gipfeln: Goethes Gedichte im Rahmen seinen Lebens, by Ernst Hartung, publisher, Wilhelm Lange- weise-Brandt, Ebenhausen bei München (pp. 247–9 commentary). See the same idea expressed figuratively in Faust, when Faust was studying the sign of the macro-cosm, 447–453.
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Spinoza's Ethic is itself a personal drama. It is in appearance a book of propositions presented in strict geometrical form, yet if we read, guided by the poet's sensitive imagination, we can discern a poignant human meaning. It is the yearning for love and happiness to which the youthful Spinoza confessed in his earlier book, The Improvement of the Understanding: his search, he said, was "for a joy that would be eternal." That is precisely what Faust is searching for, too, but he does not expect to find it on earth or in Nature. What he counts upon is only his own "ever-striving nature" and he bets his very life on the fact that he would remain ever so—always unsatisfied by any earthly experience.

The dramatic character of the argument of Spinoza's Ethic may have established that affinity between the philosopher and the poet so that Goethe would want his Spinoza always at hand during the writing of Faust. The Ethic of Spinoza is in five parts like the five acts in a play: Act I, Of God; Act II, Of Mind; Act III, The Motivations of Man; Act IV, Human Bondage; Act V, The Triumphant Power of Mind or the Ultimate Freedom of Man. The difference between the presentation in the philosophy and the drama of Faust is this: the philosopher is seeing sub specie eternitatis. He knows God first, and is clear in his ideas. He knows mind as a finite mode of the One Infinite Being. He deduces the operations of man, the way down to bondage and the way up to Freedom. The philosopher sees it all as God sees it. But in Goethe's Faust, God is not seen by the man Faust, God is in his Heaven and only we of the audience know that He is there and that there is a scheme of the Universe. Faust is struggling man, in the dark, knowing only his own wild drives. Spinoza disclosed the essential logic of the universal drama of human existence; Goethe portrayed the experience of a particular man finding his own way.

They are one in their view of the nature of man. "The effort," Spinoza said, "by which each thing endevors to persevere in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself" (III Prop. VII). The names which mankind gives to this effort or endeavor vary—some may call it "appetite," others "desire," and others "will." Whatever it be called, it is the distinctive thing about a man. And Spinoza describes the career of an individual as follows: Man's efforts to exist begin with confused ideas and purposes. These may remain so all his life long, but there is a power in him which can bring him "into the clear." His mind is that power which endevors to understand the whole universe as well as himself. It presses on toward the clear idea. When that is attained man is no longer determined simply by external forces but by all the forces of nature which concur in his action. Then man is free, without internal conflicts of motive and without conflicts, too, between himself and other beings. This is the career of man according to Spinoza.
Goethe uses the term "striving" to describe the essence of the man Faust. If Faust were ever to desist and rest he would cease to be himself, the man that he is. And the lesson of Spinoza's "freedom through mind" Faust learned in his own hard way. He had been superbly proud of the power of which he was conscious in himself, the power of a superman, above all other men; but this power in the end is not to manifest itself as a power against others but as one harmonious with others' natures and strivings. Hear Faust's own words very near the end of his life:

Fool that I was. Whoever directs his dazzled eyes above,
Fancying himself above the clouds over his fellow men. (11443)

I will not finish that, but go straight to the late-learned wisdom, gained at the moment of his death:

I would love to see the people all just crowding about,
and to stand among them, standing on a free land and with a free people. (11579–81)

The Faustian life-motif of striving realizes itself in this wisdom of the final moment when man contemplates himself as one with all humanity. All Faust's striving has been toward the achieving of this complete knowledge. It has been, in his own words, a "drive towards truth (Ein Drang nach Wahrheit)." And now we remember how, in the Prologue to the play, God had said: this man is "confused" but he is "a good man"; he is ever-striving and he will come "out in the clear."

Yet this great thought of Spinoza is not all the philosophy that is woven into the drama of Goethe's Faust. Another philosopher is cited by Goethe whose influence flows into his inspiration for this work. Long after leaving the university he made a discovery while reading the Symposium and the Phaedrus. He had a sudden awakening and he felt as if he were reading Plato for the first time. Whenever he read anything with such enthusiasm and whole-souled passion, he made the ideas therein profoundly his own and gave them an original form in the crucible of his own imagination.

Turn to the Symposium. It, too, like Spinoza's Ethic is the story of a soul on its way through life. The subject of the discussion is Love—a discourse on it from every guest at the banquet. It is what Socrates says, in repeating the words of a wise priestess, Diotima, that concerns us. Love is the experience of being drawn to the beautiful. Commonly it is thought of as one's desire to possess the beautiful and to be happy so. Not so, said Diotima, it is to create and become immortal. The object which lovers have in view is "birth in beauty," and this love takes many forms, ranging from the most earthly to the divine. There is love in man and woman and the children
thereof—and that is the first and simplest approach to human immortality. The generations and generations to come after them are their hold on a life that is longer than that which the individuals enjoy. But this suggests that the very principle of self-preservation itself, which is in every living being, is but a kind of love working organically, in the growth, repair, and reproduction of the body. Here is a microcosmic form of love. Then there are beings in whom this immortality of the body is not achieved; but they find an immortality in the children of their genius, in creations of art and beauty. This artistic love finds its satisfaction in the created beauty in things, in words, even in stones, and in whatsoever man can make in the form of ideal beauty. But the principle of love or organization has still higher reaches. It operates in the forming and maintaining of whole communities of men. There is thus the kind of immortality of the founder of a State, like Lycurgus, which is higher still than the immortality of a Homer. And finally, as the uttermost stage of love, above the political and artistic creativeness, is the love of wisdom purely for itself, which is what the word “philosophy” signifies. This is the culmination of the whole course of Love. It is the “final cause” directing the whole process of life, from its brute organic states through the communion of the body, through the poesy of art, through the association of men with a common purpose, to that supreme intercourse of the soul with what is purely divine and ideal. *Love leads beings on to a fulfillment in wisdom.* Thus it is, according to Diotima-Socrates, man ultimately participates in immortality.

See how that vision reconstitutes itself in the imagination of Goethe. The Faust of the Second Part is conscious that he has been filled with “a tremendous resolve evermore to strive toward highest Existence” (Pt. 2, Sc. 1). Long had he striven in confusion and darkness, and therefore in error, which led to sorrow and suffering. Now he is quite aware of a direction from without and above, which he thought he had eliminated when bargaining with the devil. It is true he is never actually content with any condition attained, but in prospect he could say the fatal words “Tarry a while, Thou art so lovely,” as he envisaged himself at last standing with a free people on a free land that is reclaimed from the sea and that must be preserved by the dykes which everyone would have to watch and mend, thus earning their freedom daily. At that moment he is almost at the end in his long striving, having attained to the stage of development in love of a Lycurgus, beyond the poet. And the next step, which would make him one with Wisdom, he cannot take as a mortal, any more than Socrates could do so. Faust has to die to enter upon his immortality.

There is, then, a transformation of Faust in that moment—and we must note, too, a transformation in the philosophy. For Goethe at this point
uses the imagery of the Christian faith. According to the story Faust is taken up to God in his Heaven. And the angels sing: “saved from the evil one is he, this noble member of the spiritual world.”

Whichever makes such endeavor
Striving ever
Him we can save,
And if Heavenly Love has in any way
Been gracious unto him
We the heavenly choir welcome him to us.

The last words of the drama are that “it is such Love that leads on all who strive.”

Thus the motif from Spinoza of the “drive toward truth” is complemented by the Platonic Love which directs man’s course to the end of wisdom—and that wisdom becomes a knowledge of salvation by the grace of God. This is what Goethe the master-weaver, the thinker-poet made of the visions found in Spinoza, in Plato, in the Bible, and in his own experience in life.

What of God? There is no philosophy that can escape the question. Nor any poet, for that matter, if he does really apply himself to the understanding of human experience. For the idea of God is in human experience. It is not a sheer fabrication of a metaphysics beating about its barren ground. It may come to free spirits wandering in the green pastures. Or lovers in a garden find the thought standing between them. So to turn back to the part of this drama which is most interesting in the actual performance of Faust, the First Part, see Gretchen put the question to her lover, anxious to know him and be wholly one with him: “Do you believe in God?” He, doubting, yet full of his love, answered her, saying:

Don’t misunderstand me, sweet thing!
Who dares to name Him?
And who confess: I believe in Him?
Who can feel, and then attempt to say
‘I don’t believe in Him?’
The All-Embracing, the All-Sustaining, does He not hold
And sustain you, me, Himself?
Doesn’t Heaven arch itself there above us?
Doesn’t the Earth here below stay firm and fast?
Don’t the eternal stars mounting high look kindly on us?
Don’t I look eye to eye in you, and doesn’t everything
Throng in upon you, head and heart, and weave itself into an Eternal Secret
Something visibly invisible round about you?
Let your heart be full of it, it is so great a thing,
And when you are then wholly happy in feeling
Just call it by some name, whatever you will. Call it
Happiness, Heart, Love, God.
I haven't any name for it. Feeling is everything.
The name is but sound and vapor, obscuring the glow of Heaven.

(Lines 3438 ff)

What kind of an answer is that? Is the lover merely putting her off with words and playing on her feelings? Some critics have taken the passage as simply ironical, as a criticism of the vogue of sensibility in religion from which Goethe had made his escape. It is partly so but not altogether by any means. It is well to see this passage in the light of developments in the eighteenth century philosophy of religion.

The first position was a rationalistic one—God was proved to exist as the cause of the Universe. He was the great mechanic, standing outside his work, making it operate, according to his laws, in a hum-drum fashion. Sometimes a eulogistic fancy colored his mechanic’s supremacy, when He was depicted as an Absolute Monarch ruling his World from Above, great, remote, and powerful. This is the God of Deism, a Being external to his world, far-off, indifferent, just The-Cause-of-All. The revolt against this in many minds of that century took the form of asserting that God is known very differently in feeling, that God is a personal being, nearer to man than that, and working through the spirits of men as they do good works. Goethe shared that sentiment and never entirely rejected it. But his interest lay in something more affirmative and definite, in the new view of nature which was developing in that century—which we have noted earlier. Nature was no longer conceived as purely mechanical in its processes. The phenomena of life exhibited purpose, which is something very different from cause. The study of this aspect was widespread, and Goethe himself became engrossed by it. He was interested even in its philosophical interpretation. When Kant produced his Third Critique on the purpose in Nature and the meaning of beauty in Art, Goethe read his work with approval being patient for the first time with anything coming from that weighty pen. And the effect of all this philosophy was to bring Nature nearer to Spirit, and to abolish the notion of a God wholly outside of the World. God is in Nature—nay more, it was just as Spinoza had said: God is Nature.

After all, then, there was still some honesty in Faust’s answer to his sweetheart: The All-Embracing, All-Sustaining Being manifest above the earth and below, and in the eyes of lovers and the stars of heaven and in the intricate web of Nature—that was something of what God meant.

The severe philosophers will say: You cannot have both, not Nature and God, and you must decide by reason between them. But Goethe, like Hegel who came shortly afterward, would be disposed to resent the exclusive alternative: it is not “either...or” but “both...and.” Let it be God and
Nature. The poet refuses to decide, when a decision means ignoring something real in human experience.

It is appropriate at this point where we are trying to come to the personal meaning of Goethe to have recourse to a few of his great lyrics, outside the drama of Faust. Thus he wrote Mahomet’s Gesang, the song of the divine stream of love descending and freshening everything in creation and making all things yearn for their ultimate destination. It is a beautiful nature-myth of his own creation; and yet it is a song of man’s beseeching and love of God and one’s brother. Of the stream he tells:

Now it comes upon the Plain,
Shining like silver; and the Plain shines too;
And the streams of the Plain; and the brooks of the Mountain,
Shout out to it, and cry:
Brother, brother, take thy brothers along,
Along to thy ancient, eternal Father, to the eternal Ocean...

In Ganymede there is told the yearning of man to be taken up to “the bosom of the All-Loving Father,” as Faust is gathered up to his God in Heaven. The language of the Bible comes quite naturally with these words about Nature—it is all one. This is an expression of personal religion. Who can ever read the Wanderer’s Song at Night “Der du von dem Himmel bist” without recognizing a genuine prayer? Or Ubber allen Gipfeln without knowing the eternal peace of a soul? Or Ilmenau without meeting with a man who had profound fellowship for those who were in distress and poor in spirit? Where you have these things you have a religion.

Epilogue

One should be very careful in a discussion of this sort not to give the impression that such a work of poetic genius as Faust can be summarized in a philosophy. We can decipher different strands in the weave of it, Spinoza’s “effort” is the striving motif, Plato’s “Love” is the beneficent directive motif, and the various other threads are discernible in it. We can analyze and find such parts. But if we think for a moment that this is the sum of it all, we are quite mistaken.

A person who is to realize the meaning of Goethe must do so through the poetry and through all the powers of understanding in his own spirit. But it takes more and one can never be sure that he has any insight without that more—for it is really only another poet, another maker, another master-weaver who can attain to such knowledge because he has the experience himself of the deed, the creative art.

We cannot, in any case, simply equate Faust as a poem of man, nature, and God with any philosophy of man, nature, and God. Poetry and philosophy are distinct. But they are related, too, and fall within the whole in
which they are parts. It is because there is such poetry and creative vision and art about life that philosophy itself is prevented from sinking into a metaphysic on barren ground, where nothing grows and nothing dies and nothing is transformed with new life. I think these parting words are in the spirit of Goethe.

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