

HUMAN DESTINY ACCORDING TO LUCRETIUS, DANTE AND GOETHE

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INTRODUCTION

Lucretius, Dante and Goethe had individual approaches to human destiny. Lucretius's philosophy was based on naturalism, Dante's was based on supernaturalism and Goethe's was based on romanticism. The first was pre-Christian, the second was Christian and the last was post-Christian. Let us examine and compare them.

Lucretius's was the most radical and the most correct of those cosmological systems which the genius of early Greece has devised. According to him, the world is one great machine, all are its parts and reacting, the nature is the birth and composition and his materialism is completed by an aspiration towards freedom and quietness of spirit. Venus is life-giver, nature creates all things and increases and fosters them. Nothing can be created out of nothing, all things come to be without the aid of God, and all nature is built of these two things: the bodies and the void. The soul is made up of material atoms, which are inconceivably fine, and is diffused over all the body from which it cannot exist apart.

Dante is supernaturalist. The raptures of a perfect conformity with the will of God, and of union with Him, overtake him in his prayers. His system is represented in Christendom chiefly by the Catholic Church.

According to Goethe, everything is transcendent. The self-trust of world-building youth and mystical faith in will and

the action are the chief interests.¹

Let us see each poet and find out their own remarks.

CHAPTER I. LUCRETIOUS

Lucretius is one of the greatest of Roman poets and is one of the most obscure biologically. But we can understand his philosophy through his great didactic epic *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) which takes its title from *Περὶ Φύσεως* which was the title of didactic epics by Xenophanes of Colophon, as also of the chief work of Epicurus whose teaching it is the purpose of the poem of Lucretius to expound. We will see several points in Lucretius's thought. Nothing is created out of nothing. He says,

For if things came to being from nothing, every kind might be born from all things, nought would need a seed. Why, were there not bodies to bring each thing to birth, how could things have a fixed unchanging mother? But as it is, since all things are produced from fixed seeds, each thing is born and comes forth into the coasts of light out of that which has in it the substance and first-bodies of each; and it is for this cause that all things cannot be begotten of all, because in fixed things there dwells a power set apart.²

The universe does not change. "We may be sure, all heat will perish utterly to nothing, and all things created will come to be out of nothing. For whatever changes and passes out of its own limits, straightway this is the death of that which was before."³ The universe is infinite and is made up of bodies and space or void.

But now, to weave my task again in words, all nature then,

¹George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1953), pp. 11-21.

²Titus Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura*, Ed. & Tr. by Cyril Bailey, vol. I., (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), I. 157-170,

³*Ibid.*, I. 668-670,

as it is of itself, is built of these two things: for there are bodies and the void, in which they are placed and where they move hither and thither.

There is nothing which you could say is parted from all body and sundered from void, which could be discovered as it were a third nature in the list.⁴

The existence of bodies is witnessed by the senses, the existence of space is a necessary postulate to explain the possibility of motion and to account for the difference in the specific gravity of different solid bodies. The bodies which are of different shapes are and always have been unceasingly in motion, all moving with equal velocity, and it is by their collisions, due to an inherent swerve that so-called solid bodies are formed.⁵

The fundamental criterion is sensation; "we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations"; "all objects of perception are true and real"; "the criteria of truth are the sensations and conceptions and the feelings." Reason cannot test the senses, for it owes its existence to them; one sense cannot correct another, sight hearing, and so on; nor can one sensation correct another, for all are equally true. The differences in sensation produced by different objects are due to the shape, arrangement, and motions of their component atoms, which are preserved in the effluences.⁶

The soul also is made up of material atoms which are inconceivably fine and is diffused over all the body from which it cannot exist apart.⁷ And in any case at death the soul is resolved into its primitive atoms and, therefore, death does not concern us. He says,

Death, then, is nought to us, nor does it concern us a whit, inasmuch as the nature of the mind is but a mortal possession.⁸

⁴*Ibid.*, I. 419, 422, 958.

⁵ I. 422, II. 478, 80-330, 216-293.

⁶ II. 408-409.

⁷ III. 177, 119-358.

⁸ III. 830.

Knowledge comes to us through the senses, whose evidence we must accept as unimpeachable. All solid bodies are continually giving off fine films. These fine films, moving with infinite speed, are conveyed to the soul by the various organs of sense. Hence arise the perceptions of sight, smell, hearing, taste.⁹

As Epicurus pointed out to us the highest good (=pleasure) towards which we all move, Venus is "the pleasure of gods and men." Not only is pleasure itself an immediate sensation, but the processes of pleasure and pain are atomic movements of dislocation and readjustment; the atoms themselves, Lucretius argues, cannot have pleasure or pain, because they are not, like compound bodies, composed of parties 'through a change in whose movements they might feel pain or taste the fruits of life-giving pleasure'; this conception has, important consequences.

From time to time in the *De Rerum Natura* there is mention of the gods and of man's relation to them; most often in the scornful outbursts against traditional beliefs, but not infrequently in passages which suggest a genuine conviction of their existence and even a true connection between gods and men. The gods exist and they too are material, but compounded of inconceivably fine atoms. They live apart, immortal, and of perfect felicity, and take no concern in the affairs of men. Our knowledge of the gods is not derived from the senses in the same way as our other knowledge, but comes by immediate intuition. According to him, men's minds are visited both in waking life and more specially in sleep, when the mind is undistracted, by visions of beings of wondrous size and beauty; these visions testify by their movements that the gods have sensation, by their continuity that they are immortal, by the wonderful actions they perform that they have strength and happiness and freedom from the fear of death. These visions are in fact caused by the simulacra, which come from the bodies

⁹IV. 51, 110ff. 196ff. 416f. 563f. II. 414ff.

of the gods, and which are so fine that they cannot be perceived by the senses but only grasped by "an act of attention on the part of the mind." It is these visions which justify and guarantee the belief in the existence of the gods.¹⁰

What cause spread abroad the divine powers of the gods among great nations, and filled cities with altars, and taught men to undertake sacred rites at yearly festivals, rites which are honoured today in great empires and at great places; whence even now there is implanted in mortals a shuddering dread, which raises new shrines of the gods over all the world, and constrains men to throng them on the holy days; of all this it is not hard to give account in words. For indeed already the races of mortals used to perceive the glorious shapes of the gods with waking mind, and all the more in sleep with wondrous bulk of body. To these then they would assign sense because they were seen to move their limbs, and to utter haughty sounds benefitting their noble mien and ample strength. And they gave them everlasting life because their images came in constant stream and the form remained unchanged, and indeed above all because they thought that those endowed with such strength could not readily be vanquished by any force.¹¹

If Lucretius believes in the existence of gods, wholly remote from the affairs of the world, what is his view of the relation of the gods to men? In the first place, traditional religion is an abomination to him. The gods are not such as popular belief supposes them to be, and to accept popular views is in reality an act of impiety.

The religion of Lucretius is certainly not to be looked for in the traditional beliefs or ceremonies of his countrymen. Can it be found anywhere? Indeed Lucretius goes far in his personification of nature; she is the creatress and the perfecter; she is even more effectively personified in the Venus of the poem to

¹⁰IV. 1161-1168, 1169-1193.

¹¹V. 1165-1170.

Book I. But there is no true worship in any of these places, nothing which could rightly be described as religion.

Yet Lucretius does not leave us in doubt of the possibility of religion and of a right relation of man to god. The knowledge that he has nothing to fear from the gods enables Lucretius to contemplate the world with an untroubled mind, which is itself an act of worship: "the true piety is to be able to regard all things with tranquil mind."¹² And the tranquil life of the gods is the realization of the moral ideal; the imitation of their untroubled life is a form of worship; men may learn to lead a life worthy of the gods.¹³

Lucretius illustrates the beautiful conception of religion in order to draw near to the nature and state of the gods, and, as it were, yearns to touch and be with it, and he calls the wise the friends of the gods and the gods the friends of the wise.

"You yourself will not with quiet breast approach the shrines of the gods, nor have strength to drink in with tranquil peace of mind the images which are borne from their holy body to herald their divine form to the minds of men."¹⁴ This is the genuine Epicurean religion, which believes that by means of the simulacra of the gods it is possible that something of their divine peace and tranquillity can be conveyed to man and enable him to live the life which is worthy of the gods, and so himself to become a "god among men." It is a fine conception of religion and far more exalted than the traditional beliefs.¹⁵

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The sequence of topics in Lucretius is as follows. Books I-II expound the doctrine of the atoms and the void. Book III as concerned with showing that the soul is material and does not

¹² V. 1203.

¹³ III. 322.

¹⁴ IV. 68-78.

¹⁵ Cyril Bailey, "Prolegomena," in Lucretius, *op. cit.*, pp. 71f.

survive the body. Book IV sets forth the theory of sensuous perception. Book V gives an account of the origin of the world, of life, and of human society. Book VI discusses various meteorological phenomena and thus corresponds largely to the Letter of Epicurus To Pythocles.

Through his works we can see that his idea is naturalistic. Not only pleasure itself is an immediate sensation, but the processes of pleasure and pain are atomic movements of dislocation and readjustment. Atoms themselves cannot have pleasure or pain. Only compound bodies can have. The maximum amount of pleasure is to be obtained from the simple life which brings pleasures free from pain, results in the static pleasure. Thus the truth is to seek the static pleasure of mental peace which is a deep and lasting joy. Consequently his idea of God is poetic not theological. God is personification of nature. Through chaos of the world and of human being, the purpose of life is to seek the pleasure which shows us the fundamental role of the atoms.

CHAPTER II. DANTE

Dante, the greatest of Italian poets, was born at Florence about the middle of May, 1265. Of Dante's works, that by which he is known to all the educated world, and in virtue of which he holds his place as one of the half-dozen greatest writers of all time, is naturally the *Commedia*. The *Commedia*, though often classed for want of a better description among epic poems, is totally different in method and construction from all other poems of that kind.

Its hero is the narrator himself; the incidents do not modify the course of the story; the place of episode is taken by theological or metaphysical disquisitions; the world through which the poet takes his readers is peopled, not with characters of heroic story, but with men and women known personally or by repute to him and those for whom he wrote. Its aim is not to delight, but to reprove, to rebuke, to exhort;

to form men's characters by teaching them what courses of life will meet with reward, what with penalty, hereafter; "to put into verse," as the poet says, "things difficult to think." For such new matter a new vehicle was needed.¹⁶

The Divine Comedy exemplifies Dante's idea of the genesis and development of good and evil. It is an allegory of human life, in the form of a vision of the world beyond the grave, written avowedly with the object of converting a corrupt society to righteousness: "to remove those in life from the state of misery, and lead them to the state of felicity." He is relating, nearly twenty years after the event, a vision which was granted to him during the year of jubilee, 1300, in which for seven days (beginning on the morning of Good Friday) he passed through hell, purgatory, and paradise, spoke with the souls in each realm, and heard what the Providence of God had in store for himself and the world.

In the "Inferno," Dante's style is chiefly influenced by Virgil, and in a lesser degree, by Lucan. Virgil, representing human philosophy acting in accordance with the moral and intellectual virtues, guides Dante by the light of natural reason from the dark wood of alienation from God (where the beasts of lust, pride and avarice drive man back from ascending the Mountain of the Lord), through hell and purgatory to the earthly paradise, the state of temporal felicity, when spiritual liberty has been regained by the purgatorial pains.

The Inferno treats of the corruption of the will. The germ of all sin lies in the substitution of self for God, the various punishments to which the different sinners are subjected are but external symbols of many phases of sinful self-consciousness. Dante's teaching will be found to accord with that of One greater than Goethe who came "to take away the sin of the world," not to nourish it as an instrument of man's salvation. Christ,

¹⁶*Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 7., p. 39.

when tempted by Satan and offered the good of the world, rejected his alliances. When he enters into the gate of hell, he says,

As in the Autumn leaves drop off and fall
One at a time, till boughs return their clothes
Entirely to earth: just so, at call
Do Adam's wicked seed, for each one throws
Himself down from the margin, one by one.
Like birds unto a signal, so drop those.¹⁷

Through Limbo—the first circle of hell—to the seventh circle, he steps each seven sins. The heretics are punished in the severe ways but the prostitutes are not punished so much. For instance, Dante addresses Pope Nicholas III who was guilty of simony. We can see his idea of the cosmos at the end of the “Inferno.” He says,

While I was climbing downward, thou wast there. But
when I turned, thou then wast passing by the spot toward
which all heavy bodies bear. And now thou'rt standing
underneath the sky that's opposite that lofty rounded space
above dry land, beneath whose height did die the Man that
lived and died beyond sin's trace. Upon the little sphere
thy feet press tight, which has Judecca for its other face.
'Tis morning here when over there 'tis night. And he
whose every hair made one degree for us, is fixed as first,
in time's despite. On this side where we are, from Heaven
fell he: and all the previous land there situate, for fear of
him took refuge in the sea, and came into our hemisphere.¹⁸

As these thoughts become ours, and we understand that this hell may be to us the gateway of heaven, we, with truer and wider outlook than Dante had, may subscribe to his inscription on the portals of the Inferno:

High justice moved the architect above:
The power that built me was the power divine:
Wisdom supreme is marked in every line,

¹⁷*The Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Tr. by Louis How, (New York: The Barbor Press, 1937), Part I. Hell, Canto III. 112-117.

¹⁸XXXIV. 109, 124.

And over all there broods primeval love.¹⁹

Dante, whose horizon was that of his age, could not behold the full significance of the love in which he so profoundly believed, but we, set free from the misconceptions into which a rationalistic theology had plunged the Church, may enter into the restored inheritance of Christian liberty, and rejoice to see the good which shines above evil, the love which is destined to conquer, knowing that "the loudest thunders of consciences, instead of being prophetic of endless misery, become to us the sure witness of an untiring love which will never cease its efforts to separate us from all evil." How pregnant, in the light of this thought, does that prayer become which the Lord of love taught us when He bade us say, "Our Father which art in heaven, deliver us from evil." The pity and terror of certain episodes in the "Inferno"—the fatal love of Francesca de Rimini, the fall of Guido da Montefeltro, the doom of Count Ugolino—reach the utmost heights of tragedy.

The Purgatorio, perhaps the most artistically perfect of the three canticles, owes less to the beauty of the separate episodes. Dante's conception of purgatory as a lofty mountain, rising out of the ocean in the southern hemisphere, and leading up to the Garden of Eden, the necessary preparation for winning back the earthly paradise, and with it all the prerogatives lost by man at the fall of Adam, seems peculiar to him; nor do we find elsewhere the purifying process carried on beneath the sun and stars, with the beauty of transfigured nature only eclipsed by the splendour of the angelic custodians of the seven terraces. The meeting with Beatrice on the banks of Lethe, with Dante's personal confession of an unworthy past, completes the story of the "Vita Nuova" after the bitter experiences and disillusiones of a lifetime.²⁰

Here we find three ways in which sin may be regarded. It may be regarded as an abiding fact—an act done, which not even

¹⁹III. 5-8.

²⁰*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. IV, p. 631.

omnipotence can undo: in this light it is a stain upon the divine purity of things. The act cannot be undone, but the stain may be blotted out. Forgiveness is needed for acts such as these. But sin is also a violation of the divine order: it is something which has set at work laws which are unfailing in operation: every act is followed by consequences, and there is no escape from the consequences of our wrong-doing. "Whatever a man soweth that shall he reap." God does not let us off the penalty, though He may forgive the sin. There is a third aspect of sin. It is a symptom of a spirit which is not in full harmony with the divine order: it is the sign of what we may call spiritual disease. This is a condition of the soul, and from this the soul needs to be set free. There is the need of inward purification.

The discipline of the Purgatorio therefore becomes a training in self-mastery. The penalties exacted are appropriate to the fault, and the exercises are graduated, if we may use the expression, so as to produce right conditions. Like the exercises at Nauheim, they are calculated to restore the full and normal action of the heart, and to give that facility of self-government which is perfect freedom.²¹

The process of purifying has moved from the center of man's being outward: its power has passed in ever-widening circles till it has grasped man's whole body. When humility has taken the place of pride, when pity has supplanted envy, when peace has banished anger, then the spirit and soul and body are presented blameless in the garden of the earthly paradise. Perfect self-mastery is now the portion of the pilgrim: the great animating principle of love is delivered from the powers which distorted, starved, or inflated it: it is restored to its pure, natural capacity: it is ready for worthy uses, and it is open to heavenly inspirations.

Love now moves, natural and equable, within their will-disciplined souls, and love is ready to go forth in holy activity, aspiring after God and longing to be of service to man. Love is

²¹W. Boyd-Carpenter, *The Spiritual Message of Dante* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 180.

purified for sacrifice: heaven is opening above her head: grace and gifts divine are descending upon her. Laved in the streams of sweet forgetfulness and happy memory, she is ready to mount to the stars:

Pointing to him; "That other is the shade
For whom just now your kingdom shook with bliss
In every slope, on making him evade."²²

* * * * *

In contrasts full of horror, human suffering and curse in Inferno, the spontaneous joy which pervades Hellenic literature stands always overshadowed by the black cloud of Death and Fate. In contrast of only night in Inferno, Purgatorio has either morning or evening. The idea of Purgatorio depends on the idea of Gregory the Great. Here salvation by good works is emphasized.

The essence of Dante's philosophy is that all virtues and all vices proceed from love. The "Purgatorio" shows how love is to be set in order; the "Paradiso" shows how it is rendered perfect in successive stages of illumination, until it attains to union with the Divine Love. The whole structure and spiritual arrangement of Dante's paradise, in which groups of saints make a temporary appearance in the lower spheres in token of the "many mansions," is closely dependent upon the teachings of the Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Bernard concerning the different offices of the orders of angels. It is doubtful whether he knew the "Celestial Hierarchy" of Dionysius at first hand, in the translation of Scotus Erigena; but St. Bernard's "De Consideratione" certainly influenced him profoundly. Dante's debt to the Fathers and Doctors of the Church has not yet been investigated with the fullness of research that has been devoted to elucidating his knowledge of the classical writers. His theology is mainly that of St. Thomas Aquinas, though he occasionally departs from the teaching of the Angelical

²²Purgatorio, XXIII. 130-133.

Doctor. On particular points, the influence of St. Gregory, St. Isidore, St. Anselm, and St. Bonaventure may be traced; that of Boethius is marked and deep throughout. His mysticism is professedly based upon St. Augustine, St. Bernard, and Richard of St. Victor, while in many places it curiously anticipates that of St. John of the Cross. "Many instances occur in which Dante gives a spiritual turn to the physical speculations of the Greeks." Even in the "Paradiso" the authority of Aristotle is, next to that of the Scriptures, supreme; and it is noteworthy that, when questioned by St. John upon charity, Dante appeals first of all to the Stagirite as showing us the curse for loving good for Himself and above all things.

More than toward others, movement must be bound
By loving minds of all them that discern
The Truth whereon this evidence we ground.²³

The harmonious fusion of the loftiest mysticism with direct transcripts from nature and the homely circumstance of daily life, all handled with poetic passion and the most consummate art, gives the "Divine Comedy" its unique character. The closing canto is the crown of the whole work; sense and music are wedded in perfect harmony; the most profound mystery of faith is there set forth in supreme songs with a vivid clearness and illuminating precision that can never be surpassed.²⁴

Thus with the vision of God this great pilgrimage ends. All the regions traversed have given their tale and taught their lesson: in every experience Dante has had some share. But what he reached in this final vision was not detailed knowledge: it was, as far as mind goes, the realization of all things in God: of God in His three-fold nature, and of the manhood taken into God. His vision added nothing to knowledge; but it gave what was more precious than knowledge: it brought the inspiration of love as an empowering

²³Purgatorio, XXVI. 317-319.

²⁴*Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VI, p. 632.

energy to his wish and to his will. By searching out he could not fathom the measureless depths of the Divine Nature, but by drawing near to God he could become partaker of that Divine Nature, which is love.

Thus the last great scene of this great poem shows us that, as love alone can lead to the knowledge of God, the highest knowledge man can gain leads but to love.

* * * * *

The atmosphere of the Inferno is law: that of the Purgatorio is hope: love breathes everywhere in the Paradiso. The word love is used nineteen times in the Inferno, and some fifty times in the Purgatorio: it rings like a joy-bell throughout the Paradiso: there are seventy-seven times.

The features of this realm which strike us are love, peace, and progress, accomplished by increasing light and perpetual song. The last highest Trinity of heavens may hold a symbolism of the working of the Godhead. God the Father as the central point of love: God the Son is God manifest in energy: God the Spirit distributes to all, severally, as they need.

The hour at which Dante enters the Inferno is sundown. In contrast he enters the Purgatorio at sunrise; a new day of hope has dawned upon his life: the hour is one of promise: the sun's sweet influence is the ascendant. But he enters the Paradise at mid-day, when the sun's full power is poured upon the earth: it is the hour of sacred, high, eternal noon: the sun is at the zenith, and all human occupations are suspended: the sound of industry is hushed. It is the hour of the cessation of human effort.

The peace and stability of the universe are here in the very presence of God, whose fire is the fire of love. He is both the security of peace and the source of the energising power of every realm, from the center to the most distant circumference of his empire... the universe.

The Paradise is a spectacle of eye—shifting light—center, of ever-sounding music; every sphere is instinct with love and knowledge. Human passion and human suffering are there unknown. Human nature and God's Essence are made one.

For Dante, the purpose of life is to live in the Paradise. It means to live with Divine Essence. The raptures of a perfect conformity with the will of God, and of union with Him, overtake him in his prayers. The System is represented in the Catholic Church.

CHAPTER III. GOETHE

The crowning achievement of Goethe's literary life was the completion of *Faust*. The poem had accompanied him since early manhood and was the repository for the fullest "confession" of his life; it is the poetic epitome of his experience. The second part is far removed from the impressive realism of the *Urfaust* or even the classicism of the first part. It is a phantasmagory; a drama the actors in which are not creatures of flesh and blood, but shadows in an unreal world of allegory. The lover of Gretchen has, as far as poetic continuity is concerned, disappeared with the close of the first part. In the second part it is virtually a new Faust who, accompanied by a new Mephistopheles, goes out into a world that is not ours. Yet behind the elusive allegories of an imperial court with its financial difficulties, behind the classical *Walpurgisnacht*, the fantastic creation of the Homunculus, the close where the centenarian Faust finally triumphs over the powers of evil, there lies a philosophy of life, a ripe wisdom born of experience, such as no other modern European poet has given us.²⁵ Faust has been well called the "divine comedy" of 18th century humanism.

Faust is no philosophical poem, after an open or deliberate fashion; and yet it offers a solution to the moral problem of existence as truly as do the poems of Lucretius and Dante.

²⁵*Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 10, 473.

Now Faust is the form on the top of two great waves of human aspiration, merging and heaping themselves up together,—the wave of romanticism rising from the depths of northern traditions and *genuis*, and the wave of a new paganism coming from Greece over Italy. It is the drama of a philosophical adventure; a rebellion against convention; a flight to nature, to tenderness, to beauty; and then a return to convention again, with a feeling that nature, tenderness, and beauty, unless found there, will not be found at all. He refers the pursuit of the ideal to the ideal itself; perhaps, as in the case of Lessing, because the hope of realizing the ideal, and the interest in realizing it, were beginning to forsake him.²⁶

Goethe is a philosopher of experience as it comes to the individual; the philosopher of life, as action, memory, or soliloquy may put life before each of us in turn. And, also, Goethe's Faust glorified the return from Christianity to paganism.

We can see the use of reason through the conversation between the Lord and Mephistopheles.

Since Thou, O Lord, deign'st to approach again
And ask us how we do, in manner kindest,
And heretofore to meet myself wert fain,
Among Thy menials, now, my face Thou findest.

.....

Life somewhat better might content him,
But for the beam of heavenly light which Thou hast lent him,
He calls it Reason—thence his power's increased,
To be far beastlier than any beast.
Saving Thy Gracious Presence, he to me
A long-legged grasshopper appears to be,
That springing flies, and flying springs,
And in the grass the same old ditty sings.
Would he still lay among the grass he grows in!
Each bit of dung he seeks, to stick his nose in.²⁷

This idea is revealed in Faust's prologue.

²⁶Santayana, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

²⁷Goethe, *Faust*, Prologue in Heaven

I've studied now Philosophy
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,
From end to end, with labor keen;
And here, poor fool! with all my lore
I stand, no wiser than before.²⁸

But his eyes are open for the Earth-Spirit, the key to all experiences. He says,

How otherwise upon me works this sign!
Thou, Spirit of the Earth, art nearer:
Even now my powers are loftier, clearer;
I glow, as drunk with new-made wine:
New strength and heart to meet the world incite me,
The woe of earth, the bliss of earth, invite me,
And though the shock of storms may smite me,
No crash of shipwreck shall have power to fright me!

.....
I feel thy presence, Spirit I invoke!
Reveal thyself!
Ha! in my heart what rending stroke!
With new impulsions
My senses heave in this convulsion!
I feel thee draw my dheart, absorb, exhaust me:
Thou must! thou must! and though my life it cost me!²⁹

We can read Faust's idea of Religion through his conversation with Margaret.³⁰ She asks to him,

How is't with thy religion, pray?
Thou art a dear, good-hearted man,
And yet, I think, does not incline that way.

Faust answers,

Leave that, my child! Thou know'st my love is tender;
For love, my blood and life would I surrender,
And as for Faith and Church, I grant to each his own.

Margaret says,

'Tis is long since thou hast been to mass or to confession.
Believest thou in God?

²⁸*Ibid.*, First, part of the Tragedy.

²⁹*loc. cit.*

³⁰*Ibid.*, Martha's Garden.

Faust says,

My darling, who shall dare
"I believe in God!" to say?
Ask priest or sage the answer to declare,
And it will seem a mocking play,
A sarcasm on the asker.

Margaret says,

Then thou believest not!

The great episode of Gretchen follows; and when he leaves her to view the wild revels of the Walpurgisnacht, his youth for a moment catches the contagion of that orgy. His love of ideal beauty, which remains unsatisfied, saves him, however, from any lasting illusion. He sees a little red mouse running out of the mouth of a nymph he is pursuing, and his momentary inclination turns to aversion. When he goes back to Gretchen in her prison, it is too late for him to do more than recognize the ruin he has brought about, Gretchen dishonoured, her mother poisoned, her brother killed, her child drowned by her in a pond, and she herself about to be executed. Gretchen, who is the only true Christian in this poem, refuses to be rescued, because she wishes to offer her voluntary death in propitiation for her grave, though almost involuntary, offences.³¹

The second part of Faust forms a worthy close to the life of Germany's greatest man of letters, who died in Weimar on March 22, 1832. His was the last of those universal minds which have been able to compass all domains of human activity and knowledge; for he stood on the brink of an era of rapidly expanding knowledge which has made forever impossible the universality of interest and sympathy which distinguished him. That Goethe is Germany's greatest poet and the master of her classical literature has never been seriously questioned. The intrinsic value of his poetic work, regarded apart from his personality, may be smaller in proportion to its bulk than is the case with some lesser German poets and with

³¹Santayana, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

the great poets of other literatures. Only a small fraction of his poetical work sprang from what might be called a purely artistic and objective impulse; by far the larger—and the better—part is the immediate precipitate of his thought, emotions, and experiences.

When, after the scene with the Earth-Spirit, Faust thought of suicide, he regarded it as means to escape from oppressive conditions and to begin a fresh life under conditions wholly different and unknown. It was as if a man in middle life, disgusted with his profession, should abandon it to take up another. Such a resolution is serious. It expresses a great dissatisfaction with things as they shand, but it also expresses a great hope. Death, for Goethe, is an adventure, like any other; and if, contrary to his presumption, this adventure should prove the last, that, too, is a risk he is willing to run.

Accordingly, as he lifted the poison to his lips, he drank to the dawn, to a new springtime of existence. It was by no means the saddest nor the weakest moment of his life.

Des Lebens Fackel wollten wir entzünden,
Ein Feuermeer umschlingt uns, welch ein Feuer!
So bleibe denn die Sonne mir im Pücken!
Der Wasserzturz, das Felsenriff durchbrausend,
Ihn schau' ich an mit wachsendem Entzücken.
Allein wie berrich, diesem Sturm erspriessend,
Wölbt sich des bunten Bogens Wechseldauer.
Der spiegelt ab das menschliche Bestreben.
Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben.³²

* * * * *

What was life? Faust has had enough of the pedantry of the university faculties. He does not want the abstract concept, nor the laborious agencies of analytical research. His spirit struggles, as Schelling says, "for a view of primal nature and of the eternal inwardness of its manifestations." The practices of unorthodox science, of white magic, are to bring his spirit into direct contact

³²Goethe, *op. cit.*, Part I. Act I.

with the spirit world, which the Magi-legends of the Christian centuries still looked upon as forbidden and called black magic.

The beauty of woman and the passion for classicism are strongly emphasized. "For beauty in herself is blest: And grace makes irresistible."³³ "The noblest things our spirit hath attained are marred by alien matter's base intrusion."³⁴

Faust has no talent for the Holy, and the world here set forth is not to be comprehended according to the scheme of the moral order which is set forth in the religious plays of the Middle Ages. Nor is Faust of the breed of Shakespeare's heroes, in whose character Would and Should, the moral force within and necessity without, encounter and counterbalance one another. Goethe's hero is one of the modern titans of the will who recognize only one necessity, one law: their own imperious ego. "For fate and faith take no decisive part: Salvation lies within the sinless heart."³⁵ For a man of this kind it is surely correct to say that his will is his kingdom of heaven. He would fain be everything by virtue of himself and by means of himself, and achieve everything for the sake of himself. When Mephistopheres bids him consider that man is made for "day and night" and not for the sake of enjoying in himself the absolute, the undiminished entirety of existence, Faust replies, "But I will."

We can see that to be miscellaneous, to be indefinite, to be unfinished, is essential to the romantic life. It is essential to all life, in its immediacy; and only in reference to what is not life—to objects, ideals, and unanimities that cannot be experienced but may only be conceived—life can become rational and inalienable. Here we may see the radical and inalienable excellence of romanticism; its sincerity, freedom, richness, and infinity. We may see its limitations, in that it cannot fix or trust any of its ideals, and blindly believes the universe to be as wayward as itself, so

³³*Ibid.*, Part II. Act V. ³⁴*Ibid.*, Part II. Act. V.

³⁵*Ibid.*, Prologue.

that nature and art are always slipping through its fingers. It is obstinately empirical, and will never learn anything from experience.³⁶

POSTSCRIPT

After this survey I appreciate three philosophical poets very highly. Yet I am not completely satisfied by each one of them. Because each one of them is a tantalizing one for me since each one is good for one purpose but not good enough for another.

I agree with Lucretius everything consists from Atoms. Through the chaos of the world and of human being, there is the ultimate meaning beyond these Atoms, not in these chaos themselves. Through my experiences during the second World War, I cannot trust any development of civilization or prosperity of the nations. The meaning exists beyond them not in themselves. However, I do not agree with Lucretius on the point that nothing can be created out of nothing, all things come to be without the aids of God. Our history has the beginning and the end. We have to face the movement of this history.

I agree with Dante that the raptures of a perfect conformity with the will of God, and of union with Him, overtake in his prayers. By searching out he could not fathom the measureless depths of the Divine Nature, but by drawing near to God he could become partaker of that Divine Nature, which is love. However, I don't agree with Dante on the point of the imaginary dream of heaven. The purpose of life is to live in the Paradise. Yes, it is true. It means to live with Divine Essence. I can see this kind of system represented by Dante as that of the Catholic Church. Our responsibility as Christians is to live in our history in order to reveal divine Love to people who are not

³⁶Cf. Santayana, *op. cit.*, pp. 177f. Karl Viëtor, *Goethe The Poet*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 305-327.

Christians yet. It is not merely dream but reality. Besides, our faith does not depend on any human system or achievement like the Pope. Dante himself had his reservations about Popes.

I agree with Goethe that our life is always indefinite and unfinished. He refers the pursuit of the ideal to the ideal itself. The hope of realizing the ideal, and the interest in realizing it, are beginning to forsake him. Experience comes to the individual. This kind of philosophy of life, as action, memory, or soliloquy may put life before each of us in turn. However, I don't agree with Goethe on the point of the Christian faith. Though our life is beyond our human reason or philosophy, our life is meaningful because of God in Christ. There is one passage in Matthew which I memorized in the Church School but I could not understand it for a long time and now appreciate it very highly.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in
heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For
my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Mt. 11 : 28-30)

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