

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter XII

The time that I consumed in the setting forth of Goethe's natural-scientific ideas for the introduction to Kürschner's *Deutsche National-Literatur* was very protracted. I began this task in the year 1880, and I had not finished even when I entered upon the second phase of my life with the removal from Vienna to Weimar. The reason for this lay in the difficulties I have described in connection with the natural scientific and the mystical form of expression.

While I was labouring to reduce to correct forms of thought Goethe's attitude to the natural sciences, I had to advance also in the formulation of that which had taken shape before my mind as spiritual experience in my perception of the world process. I was thus constantly driven from Goethe to the representation of my own world-conception and back again to him, in order the better to interpret his thoughts by means of the thoughts to which I myself had attained. I felt that the most essential thing in Goethe was his refusal to be content with any sort of theoretically easily surveyed thought-pictures as contrasted with the knowledge of the illimitable richness of reality. Goethe becomes rationalistic when he wishes to describe the manifold forms of plants and animals. He struggles for ideas which manifest themselves as active in the evolution of the earth when he wishes to grasp the geologic building of the earth or the phenomena of meteorology. But his ideas are not abstract thoughts; they are images living in the form of thoughts within the mind.

When I grasped what he has set forth in such pictures in his natural-scientific works, I had before me something which satisfied me to the bottom of my soul. I looked upon a content of ideal images of which I could not but believe that this content – if followed further – represented a true reflection within the human spirit of that which happens in nature. It was clear to me that the form of thought in the natural sciences must be raised to this of Goethe's.

But at the same time, in this grasping of Goethe's knowledge of nature, there came the need for representing the content of ideal images in relation to spiritual reality itself. The ideal images are not justifiable unless they refer to a spiritual reality lying at the foundation of the things of sense. But Goethe, in his holy awe before the immeasurable richness of reality, re-

frains from entering upon a presentation of the spiritual world after having brought the sense-world to the form of a spiritual image in his mind.

I had now to show that Goethe really *experienced* the life of the soul in that he pressed forward from sense-nature to spirit-nature, but that anyone else can *comprehend* Goethe's soul-life only by going beyond him and carrying his own knowledge on to ideal conception of the spiritual world itself. When Goethe spoke of nature, he was standing within the spiritual. He feared that he would become abstract if he proceeded further beyond this vital standing-within to a living in thoughts concerning this standing-within. He desired the experience of being within the spirit; but he did not desire to think himself within the spirit.

I often felt that I should be false to Goethe's way of thinking if I only gave expression to thoughts concerning his world conception. And in regard to every detail which I had to interpret concerning Goethe I had again and again to master the method of speaking about Goethe in Goethe's own way. My setting forth of Goethe's ideas consisted in the struggle, lasting for years, gradually to achieve a better understanding of him with the help of his own ideas. When I look back upon this endeavour I have to say to myself that I owe to this in large measure the evolution of my spiritual experience of knowledge. This evolution proceeded far more slowly than would have been the case if the Goethe task had not been set by destiny on the pathway of my life. I should then have followed my spiritual experiences and have set these forth as they came to light. I should have broken through into the spiritual world more quickly; but I should have had no inducement to sink down by actual striving into my own inner self.

Thus by means of my Goethe task I experienced the difference between a state of soul in which the spiritual world manifests itself, so to speak, as an act of grace, and one in which step by step the soul first makes its own inner self like the spirit, in order that, when the soul experiences itself as true spirit, it may then stand within the spiritual of the world. But in this standing-within man first realizes that the human spirit and the spiritual world may come into union one with the other within the human soul.

During the time that I was working at my interpretation of Goethe, I had Goethe always beside me as an admonisher who called inaudibly to me: "Whoever too rashly moves forward on the spiritual way may attain to a narrowly restricted experience of the spirit, but he enters into a content of reality impoverished of all the richness of life."

In my relation to the Goethe work I could observe clearly "how Karma works in human life." Destiny is made of two forms of fact-complexes which grow into unity in human life. The one streams from the struggle of the soul outward; the other comes from the outer world into man.

My own mental impulses moved toward the perception of the spiritual; the outer spiritual life of the world brought the Goethe work to me. I had to reduce to a harmony within my consciousness the two currents which there met. I occupied the last year of the first phase of my life in justifying myself alternately in the eyes of Goethe and then in my own eyes.

The task I set myself in my doctor's dissertation was an inner experience: that of bringing about an "understanding of man's consciousness with itself." For I saw that man can understand what the genuine reality in the outer world is only when he has perceived this genuine reality within himself.

This bringing together of the genuine reality of the outer world and the genuine reality of the inner life of the soul must be achieved for the knowing consciousness through tireless spiritual activity; for the willing and the acting consciousness it is always present when man in action experiences his own freedom.

That freedom exists as a matter of fact for the unprejudiced consciousness and yet becomes a riddle for the understanding is due to the fundamental fact that man does not possess his own true being, his genuine self-consciousness, as something given from the beginning, but must first achieve this through an understanding of his consciousness with itself.

That which makes man of the highest worth-freedom can be won only after appropriate preparation.

My *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* is based upon an experience which consists in the understanding of human consciousness with itself. In willing, freedom is practised; in feeling, it is experienced; in thinking, it is known. Only, in order to attain this last, one must not lose the life out of thinking.

While I was working at my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, it was my constant endeavour in the statement of my thoughts to keep my inner experience fully awake within the very thoughts. This gives to thoughts the mystical character of inner perception, but makes the perception like the perception of the outer physical world. If one forces oneself through to such an inner experience, then one no longer finds any contradiction between knowledge of nature and knowledge of spirit. It becomes clear to one that the second is only a metamorphosed continuation of the first. Since this appeared thus to me, I could later place on the title-page of my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* the motto: *Seelische Beobachtungsergebnisse nach naturwis-*

senshaftliche Methode.¹ For, when the natural-scientific methods are truly followed in the spiritual sphere, then these lead one in knowledge into this sphere.

There was great significance for me at that time in my thorough-going work upon Goethe's fairy-tale of *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*, which forms the conclusion of his *Entertainments of the German Wanderers*. These "riddle tales" have had many interpreters. I was not at all interested in the "interpretation" of the content. I wished simply to take that in its poetic, artistic form. I always had an antipathy to shattering the dominant fantasy with intellectual interpretation.

I saw that these poems of Goethe's had arisen out of his spiritual intercourse with Schiller. When Schiller wrote his *Briefe zur Förderung der ästhetischen Erziehung des Menschen*,² his mind was passing through the philosophical phase of its evolution. The "understanding of human consciousness with itself" was a mental task which occupied him most intensely. He saw the human mind on the one side wholly absorbed in intellectual activity. He felt that the mind dominant in the purely intellectual was not dependent upon the bodily and sensible. And yet he found in this form of supersensible activity something unsatisfying. The mind is "in the spirit" when it is given over to the "logical necessity" of the reason, but in this activity it is neither free nor inwardly spiritually alive. It is given over to an abstract shadow-image of the spirit, but is not weaving and ruling in the life and existence of the spirit. On the other side, Schiller observed that, in an opposite sort of activity, the mind is wholly given over to the bodily – the sense-perceptions and the instinctive impulses. Then the influence out of the spiritual shadow-images is lost from the mind, but it is given over to natural law, which does not constitute its being. Schiller came to the conclusion that man is not "true man" in either of these activities. But he can produce through himself that which is not given to him by nature or by the rational shadows of the spiritual coming to existence without his effort. He can take his reason into his sense-activities; and he can elevate the sensible into a higher realm of consciousness so that it acts like the spiritual. Thus he attains to a mood midway between the logical and the natural compulsion.

Schiller sees man in such a mood when he is living in the artistic. The aesthetic conception of the world directs its look upon the sensible, but in such a way that it perceives therein the spirit. It lives in shadows of the spirit, but in its creating or its enjoying it gives to the spirit a sensible form so that it loses the shadow existence.

Years before had this endeavour of Schiller's to reach a conception of the "true man" attracted my attention; now, when Goethe's "riddle fairy-tale" became itself a riddle to me, Schiller's

endeavour occurred to me again. I saw how Goethe had taken hold of Schiller's conception of the "true man." For him no less than for his friend this was a vital question: "How does the shadowy spiritual find in the mind the sensible-corporeal, and how does the natural in physical bodies work itself upward to the spiritual?"

The correspondence between the two friends and all that can be learned otherwise about their spiritual relationship indicates that Schiller's solution was too abstract, too one-sidedly philosophical for Goethe. He created the charming picture of the stream which separates two worlds; of the will-o'-the-wisps who seek the way from one world to the other; of the snake which must sacrifice itself in order to form a bridge between the two worlds; of the beautiful lily who can only be surmised as wandering in the spirit on the "far side" of the stream by those who live on "this side," and of much more. Over against Schiller's philosophical solution he places a poetic vision in fairy-tale form. He had the feeling that, if one attacked with philosophical conceptions the riddle of the soul which Schiller perceived, such a person impoverished himself while seeking for his true being. He desired to approach the riddle in all the wealth of the soul's experience.

The Goethe fairy-tale images hark back to imaginations which had often been set forth before the time of Goethe by seekers for the spiritual experience of the soul. The three kings of fairy-lore are found in some resemblance in the *Chymische Hochzeit*³ by Christian Rosenkreutz. Other forms are revivals of those which had appeared earlier in pictures of the way of knowledge. Only in Goethe these pictures appear in a more beautiful, noble, artistic form of fantasy, whereas they had until his time borne a less artistic character.

In these fairy-tales Goethe carried this fanciful creation near to the point at which it passes over into the inner process of the soul which is a knowing experience of the real world of spirit. I felt that one could see to the utmost depths of Goethe's nature when one sank down into this poetry.

Not the interpretation, but the stimulus to the experience of the soul, was the important result that came to me from my work upon the fairy-tales. This stimulus later influenced my mental life even in the shaping of the mystery dramas which I afterward wrote. As to that part of my work which related directly to Goethe, I could gain but little from these fairy-tales. For it seemed to me that Goethe in their composition had grown beyond himself in his world-conception, as if impelled by a half-conscious life of the soul. In this way there came about for me a serious difficulty. I could set forth my interpretation of Goethe for *Kürschner's Deutsche National-Literatur* only in the style in which I had commenced this; but this in itself did not

suffice me at all. For I said to myself that, while Goethe was writing the “fairy-tales,” he had, as it were, looked across the boundary and had seen into the spiritual world. But nevertheless what he wrote about natural processes gave no attention to this glimpse. Therefore he could not be interpreted on the basis of this insight.

But even though I obtained nothing at once for my Goethe writings from sinking down into the fairy-tale, yet I gained much mental stimulus from it. What came to me as mental content in connection with the fairy-tale became most important material for meditation. I returned to this again and again. By this activity I prepared myself beforehand for the temper of mind into which I entered later during my Weimar work.

1. *The Results of Spiritual Observation According to the Methods of Natural Science.*
2. *Letters on the Advancement of the Aesthetic Education of man.*
3. *Chemical Marriage.*

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