The Story of My Life
GA 28

Chapter VII

I wrote down the ideas of the *Theory of Cognition in Goethe's World-Conception* at a time when Fate had led me into a family which made possible for me many happy hours within its circle, and a fortunate chapter of my life. Among my friends there had for a long time been one whom I had come to hold very dear because of his gay and sunny disposition, his accurate observations upon life and men, and his whole manner, so open and loyal. He introduced me and other mutual friends into his home. There we met, in addition to this friend, two daughters of the family, his sisters, and a man whom we soon had to recognize as the fiancé of the elder daughter. In the background of this family there hovered something we were never able to see. This was the father of the brother and sisters. He was there, and yet not there. We learned from the most various sources something about the man who was to us unknown. According to what we were told, he must have been somewhat unusual. At first the brother and sisters never spoke of their father, even though he must have been in the next room. Then they began, at first very gradually, to make one or another remark about him. Every word showed a feeling of genuine reverence. One felt that in this man they honoured a very important person. But one also felt that they dreaded lest by chance we should happen to see him.

Our conversations in the family circle were generally of a literary character, and, in order to refer to this thing or that, many a book would be brought by the brother or sisters from the father's library. And the circumstances brought it about that I became acquainted, little by little, with much which the man in the next room read, although I never had an opportunity to see him.

At last I could no longer do otherwise than inquire about much that concerned the unknown man. And thus, from the talk of the brother and sisters – which held back much, and yet revealed much – there gradually arose in my mind an image of a noteworthy personality. I loved the man, who to me also seemed an important person. I came finally to reverence in him a man whom the hard experiences of life had brought to the pass of dealing thenceforward only with the world within himself, and of foregoing all human intercourse.

One day we visitors were told that the man was ill, and soon afterward the news of his death had to be conveyed to us. The brother and sisters entrusted to me the funeral address. I said what my heart impelled me to say regarding the personality whom I had come to know only through descriptions. It was a funeral at which only the family, the fiancé of one daughter, and my friends were present. The brother and sisters said to me that I had given a true picture of their father in my funeral address. And from the way they spoke, and from their tears, I could not but feel that this was their real conviction. Moreover, I knew that the man stood as near me in the spirit as if I had had much intercourse with him.

Between the younger daughter and me there gradually came about a beautiful friendship. She really had in her something of the primal type of the German maiden. She bore in her soul nothing acquired from her education, but expressed in her life an original and charming naturalness together with a noble reserve, and this reserve of hers caused a like reserve in me. We loved each other, and both of us were fully aware of this; but neither of us could overcome the fear of saying that we loved each other. Thus the love lived between the words we spoke to each other, and not in the words themselves. I felt the relationship as to our souls was of the most universal kind; but it found no possibility of taking a single step beyond what is of the soul.

I was happy in this friendship; I felt my girl friend like something of the sun in my life. Yet this life later bore us far apart. In place of hours of happy companionship there then remained only a short-lived correspondence, followed by the melancholy memory of a beautiful period of my past life – a memory, however, which has through all my later life arisen again and again from the depths of my soul.

It was at that same time that I once went to Schröer. He was altogether filled with an impression which he had just received. He had become acquainted with the poems of Marie Eugenie delle Grazie. Before him there lay a little volume of her poems, an epic *Herman*, a drama *Saul*, and a story *Die Zigeunerin*.[1] Schröer spoke enthusiastically of these poetical writings. “And all these have been written by a young person before completing her sixteenth year!” he said. Then he added that Robert Zimmermann had said that she was the only genius he had known in his life.

Schröer's enthusiasm now led me also to read the productions one after another. I wrote an article about the poet. This brought me the great pleasure of being permitted to call upon her. During this call I had the opportunity of a conversation with the poet which has often come to mind during my life. She had already begun to work upon an undertaking in the grand style,

her epic *Robespierre*. She discussed the basic ideas of this composition. Already there was present in her conversation an undertone of pessimism. I felt in regard to her as if she meant to represent in such a personality as Robespierre the tragedy in all idealism. Ideals arise in the human heart, but they have no power over the horrible destructive action of nature, empty of all ideals, who utters against all ideals her pitiless cry: “Thou art mere illusion, a fantasm of my own, which I again and again hurl back into nothingness.”

This was her conviction. The poet then spoke to me of a further poetic plan, a *Satanid*. She would represent the antitype of God as the Primal Being which is the Power revealing itself to man in terrible, ruinous nature, empty of the ideal. She spoke with genuine inspiration of the Power from the abyss of being, dominant over all being. I went away from the poet profoundly shocked. The greatness with which she had spoken remained impressed upon me; the content of her ideas was the opposite of everything which stood before my mind as a view of the world. But I was never inclined to withhold my interest or my admiration from that which seemed to me great, even when it repelled me utterly by its content. Indeed, I said to myself, such opposites in the world must somewhere find their reconciliation. And this enabled me to follow what repelled me just as if it lay in the same direction as the conception held by my own mind.

Shortly after this I was invited again to the home of delle Grazie. She was to read her *Robespierre* before a number of persons, among whom were Schröer and his wife and also a woman friend of his family. We listened to scenes of lofty poetic rhythm, but with a pessimistic undertone of a richly coloured naturalism: life painted in its most terrible aspects. Great human beings, inwardly deceived by Fate, rose to the surface, or sank below in the grip of tragedy. This was my impression. Schröer became indignant. For him art ought not to plunge beneath such abysses of the “terrible.” The women withdrew. They had experienced a sort of convulsion. I could not agree with Schröer, for he seemed to me to be wholly filled with the feeling that poetry can never be made out of what is terrible in the experience of the human soul, even though this terrible experience is nobly endured. Delle Grazie soon after published a poem in which Nature is celebrated as the highest Power, but in such a way that she mocks at all ideals, which she calls into existence only in order to delude man, and which she hurls back into nothingness when this delusion has been accomplished.

In relation to this composition I wrote a paper entitled *Die Natur und unsere Ideale,*[2] which I did not publish but had privately printed in a small number of copies. In this I discussed the apparent correctness of delle Grazie's view. I said that a view which does not shut out the hostility manifested by nature against human ideals is of a higher order than a “superficial opti-

mism" which blinds itself to the abysses of existence. But I also said in regard to this matter that the free inner being of man creates for itself that which gives meaning and content to life, and that this being could not fully unfold itself if a prodigal nature bestowed upon it from without that which ought to arise within.

Because of this paper I had a painful experience. When Schröer had received it, he wrote me that, if I thought in such a way about pessimism, we had never understood one another, and that anyone who spoke in such a way about nature as I had done in the paper showed thereby that he could not have taken in a sufficiently profound sense Goethe's words: "Know thyself, and live at peace with the world."

I was cut to the heart when I received these lines from the person to whom I felt the most devoted attachment. Schröer could be passionately aroused when he became aware of a sin against the harmony manifesting itself in art in the form of beauty. He turned against delle Grazie when he was forced to observe this sin against his conception. And he considered the admiration which I felt for the poet as a falling away both from him and also from Goethe. He failed to see in my paper what I said regarding the human spirit overcoming from within itself the obstacles of nature; he was offended because I said that external nature could not be the creator of true inner satisfaction for man. I wished to set forth the meaninglessness of pessimism in spite of its correctness within certain limits; Schröer saw in every concession to pessimism something which he called "the slag from burned-out spirits."

In the home of Marie Eugenie delle Grazie I passed some of the happy hours of my life. Saturday evening she always received visitors. Those who came were persons of divers spiritual tendencies. The poet formed the centre of the group. She read aloud from her poems; she spoke in the spirit of her world-conception in very positive language. She cast the light of these ideas upon human life. It was by no means the light of the sun. Always in truth only the pale light of the moon-threatening, overcast skies. But from human dwellings there arose flames of fire into the dusky air as if carrying the sorrows and illusions in which men are consumed. All this, nevertheless, humanly gripping, always fascinating, the bitterness enveloped in the magic power of a wholly spiritualized personality.

At delle Grazie's side was Laurenz Müllner, a Catholic priest, teacher of the poet, and later her discreet and noble friend. He was at that time professor of Christian philosophy in the theological faculty of the University. The impression he made, not only by his face but in his whole figure, was that of one whose development had been mental and ascetic. A sceptic in philosophy, thoroughly grounded in all aspects of philosophy, in conceptions of art and literature. He

wrote for the Catholic clerical journal, *Vaterland*, stimulating articles upon artistic and literary subjects. The poet's pessimistic view of the world and of life fell always from his lips also.

Both united in a positive antipathy to Goethe; on the other hand, their interest was directed to Shakespeare and the later poets, children of the sorrowful burden of life, and of the naturalistic confusions of human nature. Dostoievsky they loved warmly; Leopold von Sacher-Masoch they looked upon as a brilliant writer who shrank back from no truth in order to represent that which is growing up in the morass of modern life as all too human and worthy of destruction. In Laurenz Müllner the antipathy to Goethe took on something of the colour of Catholic theology. He praised Baumgarten's monograph, which characterized Goethe as the antithesis of that which is deserving of human endeavour. In delle Grazie there was something like a profound personal antipathy to Goethe.

About the two were gathered professors of the theological faculty, Catholic priests of the very finest scholarship. First among them all was the priest of the Cistercian Order of the Holy Cross, Wilhelm Neumann. Müllner justly esteemed him because of his comprehensive scholarship. He said to me once, when in the absence of Neumann I was speaking with enthusiastic admiration of his broad and comprehensive scholarship: “Yes, indeed, Professor Neumann knows the whole world and three villages besides.” I liked to accompany the learned man when we went away from delle Grazie's at the same time. I had many a conversation with this “ideal” of a scientific man who was at the same time a “true son of his Church.” I would here mention only two of these. One was in regard to the person of Christ. I expressed my view to the effect that Jesus of Nazareth, by reason of supramundane influence, had received the Christ into himself, and that Christ as a spiritual Being has lived in human evolution since the Mystery of Golgotha. This conversation remained deeply imprinted in my mind; ever and again it has arisen in memory. For it was profoundly significant for me. There were really three persons engaged in that discussion: Professor Neumann and I, and a third, unseen person, the personification of Catholic dogmatic theology, visible to spiritual perception as he walked behind the professor, always beckoning with his finger threateningly, and always tapping Professor Neumann on the shoulder as a reminder whenever the subtle logic of the scholar led him too far in agreement with me. It was noteworthy how often the first clause of the latter's sentences would be reversed in the second clause. There I was face to face with the Catholic way of life in one of its best representatives. It was through him that I learned to esteem it, but also to know it through and through.

Another time we discussed the question of repeated earth lives. The professor then listened to me, spoke of all sorts of literature in which something on this subject could be found; he often nodded his head lightly, but had no inclination to enter into the merits of a question which

seemed to him very fanciful. So this conversation also became of great import to me. The uncomfortableness with which Neumann felt the answers he did not utter in response to my statements was deeply impressed upon my memory.

Besides these, the Saturday evening callers were the historian of the Church and other theologians, and in addition I met now and then the philosopher Adolf Stöhr, Goswine von Berlepsch, the emotionally moving story-teller Emilie Mataja (who bore the pen-name of Emil Marriot, the poet and writer Fritz Lemmermayer, and the composer Stross. Fritz Lemmermayer, with whom I was later on terms of intimate friendship, I came to know at one of delle Grazie's afternoons. A highly noteworthy man. Whatever interested him he expressed with inwardly measured dignity. In his outward appearance he resembled equally the musician Rubinstein and the actor Lewinsky. With Hebbel he developed almost a cult. He had definite views on art and life born out of the sagacious understanding of the heart, and these were unusually fixed. He had written the interesting and profound romance, *Der Alchemist*,[3] and much besides that was characterized by beauty and depth. He knew how to consider the least things in life from the view-point of the most vital. I recall how I once saw him in his charming little room in a side-street in Vienna together with other friends. He had planned his meal: two soft-boiled eggs, to be cooked in an instantaneous boiler, together with bread. He remarked with much emphasis while the water was heating to boil the eggs for us: “This will be delicious!” In a later phase of my life I shall again have occasion to speak of him.

Alfred Stross, the composer, was a gifted man, but one tinged with a profound pessimism. When he took his seat at the piano in delle Grazie's home and played his études, one had the feeling: Anton Bruckner's music reduced to airy tones which would fain flee this earthly existence. Stross was little understood; Fritz Lemmermayer was inexpressibly devoted to him.

Both Lemmermayer and Stross were intimate friends of Robert Hamerling. Through them I was led later into a brief correspondence with Hamerling, to which I shall refer again. Stross finally died of a serious illness in spiritual darkness.

The sculptor Hans Brandstadter I also met at delle Grazie's. Even though unseen, there hovered over all this group of friends, through frequent wonderful descriptions of him almost like hymns of praise, the historian of theology Werner. Delle Grazie loved him more than anyone else. Never once did he appear on a Saturday evening when I was able to be present. But his admirer showed us the picture of the biographer of Thomas Aquinas from ever new angles, the picture of the good, lovable scholar who remained naïve even to extreme old age. One imag-

ined a man so selfless, so absorbed in the matter about which he spoke as a historian, so exact, that one said, “If only there were many such historians!”

A veritable fascination ruled over these Saturday evening gatherings. After it had grown dark, a lamp was lighted under a shade of some red fabric, and we sat in a circular space of light which made the whole company festive. Then delle Grazie would frequently become extraordinarily talkative – especially when those living at a distance had gone – and one was permitted to hear many a word that sounded like sighs from the depths in the after-pangs of grievous days of fate. But one listened also to genuine humour over the personalities of life, and tones of indignation over the corruption in the press and elsewhere. Between-whiles there were the sarcastic, often caustic, remarks of Müllner on all sorts of philosophical, artistic, and other themes. Delle Grazie's house was a place in which pessimism revealed itself in direct and vital force, a place of anti-Goetheanism. Everyone listened whenever I spoke of Goethe; but Laurenz Müllner held the opinion that I ascribed to Goethe things which really had little to do with the actual minister of the Grand-duke Karl August. Nevertheless for me every visit at this house – and I knew that I was welcomed there – was something for which I am inexpressibly grateful; I felt that I was in a spiritual atmosphere which was of genuine benefit to me. For this purpose I did not require agreement in ideas; I required earnest and striving humanity susceptible to the spiritual. I was now between this house, which I frequented with much pleasure, and my teacher and fatherly friend Karl Julius Schröer, who, after the first visit, never again appeared at delle Grazie's. My emotional life, drawn in both directions by sincere love and esteem, was actually torn in two. But it was just at this time that those thoughts first came to maturity in me which later formed the volume *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*.[4] In the unpublished paper about delle Grazie mentioned above, *Nature and Our Ideals*, there lie the germs of the later book in the following sentences: “Our ideals are no longer so superficial as to be satisfied with a reality often so flat and so empty. Yet I cannot believe that there is no means whereby to rise above the profound pessimism which comes from this knowledge. This elevation comes to me when I look into our inner world, when I enter more intimately into the nature of our ideal world. This is a self-contained world, complete in itself, which can neither win anything nor lose anything by reason of the transitoriness of the external. Do not our ideals, if these are really living individualities, possess an existence for themselves independently of the kindness or unkindness of nature? Even though the lovely rose may for ever be shattered by the pitiless gusts of the wind, it has fulfilled its mission, for it has rejoiced hundreds of human eyes; if tomorrow it should please murderous nature to destroy the whole starry sky, yet for thousands of years men have gazed up reverently toward it, and this is enough. Not the existence in time, no, but the inner being of things, constitutes their completion. The ideals of our spirits are a world for themselves, which must also live for themselves, and which can gain nothing from

the co-operation of a good nature. What a pitiable creature man would be if he could not gain satisfaction within his own ideal world, but must first to this end have the co-operation of nature! What divine freedom remains to us if nature guides and guards us like helpless children tied to leading strings? No, she must deny us everything, in order that, when happiness comes to us, this shall all be the result of our free selves. Let nature destroy every day what we shape in order that we may every day experience anew the joy of creation! We would fain owe nothing to nature; everything to ourselves.

"This freedom, one may say, is only a dream! While we think that we are free, we obey the iron necessity of nature. The loftiest thoughts that we conceive are merely the fruit of the blind power of nature within us. But we surely should finally admit that a being who knows himself cannot be unfree! ... We see the web of law ruling over things, and this it is which constitutes necessity. In our knowledge we possess the power to separate the natural laws from things; and must we ourselves be nevertheless without a will, slaves to these same laws?"

These thoughts I did not evolve out of a spirit of controversy; but I was forced to set forth what my perception of the spiritual world said to me in opposition to a view of life which I had to consider as being at the opposite pole from my own, but which I none the less profoundly reverenced because it was revealed to me from the depths of true and earnest souls.

At the very time during which I enjoyed such stimulating experiences at the home of delle Grazie, I had the privilege of entering also a circle of the younger Austrian poets. Every week we had a free expression and mutual sharing together of whatever one or the other had produced. The most varied characters met in this gathering. Every view of life and every temperament was represented, from the optimistic, naïve painter of life to the leaden-weighted pessimist. Fritz Lemmermayer was the soul of the group. There was present something of the storm which the Hart brothers, Karl Henckel, and others had loosed in the German Empire against "the old" in the spiritual life of the time. But all this was tinged with Austrian "amiability." Much was said about how the time had come in which new tones must sound forth in all spheres of life; but this was done with that disapproval of radicalism which is characteristic of the Austrian.

One of the youngest of this circle was Joseph Kitir. He devoted his effort to a form of lyric to which he had been inspired by Martin Greif. He did not wish to bring subjective feelings to expression; he wished to set forth an event or situation objectively, and yet as if this had been observed, not with the senses, but with the feelings. He did not wish to say that he was enchanted; but rather he would paint the enchanting event, and its enchantment should act upon hearer or reader without the poet's statement. Kitir did really beautiful things in this way. His

soul was naïve. A little while after this he bound himself more closely to me. In this circle I now heard an Austro-German poet spoken of with great enthusiasm, and I afterward became familiar with some of his poems. These made a deep impression upon me. I endeavoured to meet the poet. I asked Fritz Lemmermayer, who knew him well, and also some others whether the poet could not be invited to our gatherings.

But I was told that he could not be dragged there with a four-horse team. He was a recluse, they said, and would not mingle with people. But I was deeply desirous of knowing him. Then one evening the whole company went out and roamed over to the place where the "knowing ones" could find him. It was a little wine-shop in a street parallel to Kärtnerstrasse. There he sat in one corner, his glass of red wine – not a small one – before him. He sat as if he had sat there for an indefinitely long time, and would continue to sit indefinitely long. Already a rather old gentleman, but with shining, youthful eyes, and a countenance which showed the poet and idealist in the most delicate and most speaking lines. At first he did not see us enter. For it was clear that in the nobly shaped head a poem was taking form. Fritz Lemmermayer had first to take him by the arm; then he turned his face in our direction and looked at us. We had disturbed him. His perplexed glance could not conceal this; but he showed it in the most amiable fashion. We took our places around him. There was not space enough for so many to sit in the cramped little room. It was now remarkable how the man who had been described as a "recluse" showed himself in a very short while as enthusiastically talkative. We all had the feeling that with what our minds were then exchanging in conversation we could not remain in the dull closeness of that room. And there was now not much difficulty in bringing the "recluse" with us to another *Lokal*. Except for him and one other acquaintance of his who had for a long time mingled with our circle, we were all young; yet it soon became evident that we had never been so young as on this evening when the old gentleman was with us, for he was really the youngest of us all.

I was completely captivated by the charm of this personality. It was at once clear to me that this man must have produced much that was more significant than what he had published, and I pressed him with questions regarding this. He answered almost timidly: "Yes, I have besides at home some cosmic things." I succeeded in persuading him to promise that he would bring these the next evening that we could see him.

It was thus that I became acquainted with Fercher von Steinwand. A poet from the Karntnerland, pithy, full of ideas, idealistic in his sentiments. He was the child of poor people, and had passed his youth amid great hardships. The distinguished anatomist Hyrtl came to know his worth, and made possible for him the sort of existence in which he could live wholly in his poems, thoughts, and conceptions. For a considerable time the world knew very little of

him. After the appearance of his first poem, *Gräfin Seelenbrand*, Robert Hamerling brought him into full recognition.

After that night we never needed again to go for the "recluse." He appeared almost regularly on our evenings. I was extremely glad when on one of these evenings he brought along one of his "cosmic things." It was the *Chor der Urtriebe* [5] and the *Chor der Urträume*,[6] poems in which feelings live in swinging rhythm which seem as if they penetrated into the very creative forces of the world. There hover ideas as if actual beings in splendid euphony, forming themselves into pictures of the Powers which in the beginning created the world. I consider the fact that I came to know Fercher von Steinwand as one of the most important events of my youth; for his personality acted like that of a sage who reveals his wisdom in genuine poetry.

I had struggled with the riddle of man's repeated earth lives. Many a perception in this direction had come to me when I came close to men who in the habit of their lives, in the impress of their personalities revealed clearly the signs of a content within their beings which one would not expect to find in what they had inherited through birth or acquired afterward through experience. But in the play of countenance, in every gesture of Fercher, I saw the essence of a soul which could only have been formed in the time from the beginning of the Christian evolution, while Greek paganism was still influencing this evolution. One does not arrive at such a view when one thinks only of those expressions of a personality which press immediately upon one's attention; it is aroused in one rather by the intuitively perceived marks of the individuality which seem to accompany such direct expressions but which in reality deepen these expressions immeasurably. Moreover, one does not attain to this view when one seeks for it, but only when the strong impression remains active in retrospect, and becomes like the memory of an experience in which that which is essential in the external life falls away and the usually "unessential" begins to speak a deeply significant language. Whoever observes men in order to solve the riddle of their previous earth-lives will certainly not reach his goal. Such observation one must feel to be an offence which does injury to the one observed, for one can hope for the present disclosure of the long past of a man only through the dispensation of fate coming from the outer spiritual world.

It was in the very time of my life which I am now describing that I succeeded in attaining to these definite views of the repeated earth-lives of man. Before this time I was not far from the conceptions, but they had not yet come out of indeterminate lines to sharply defined impressions. Theories, however, in regard to such things as repeated earth-lives, I did not form in my own thoughts; I took them into my understanding out of literature or other sources of information as something illuminating, but I did not theorize about them. And now, since I was con-

scious within myself of real perception in this region, I was in a position to have the conversation mentioned above with Professor Neumann. A man is not to be blamed if he becomes convinced of the truth of repeated earth-lives and other insights which can be attained only in supersensible ways; for a complete conviction in this region is possible also to the sound and unprejudiced human understanding, even though the man has not yet attained to actual perception. Only the way of theorizing in this region was not my own way.

During the time when concrete perceptions were more and more forming within me in regard to repeated earth-lives, I became acquainted with the theosophical movement, which had been initiated by H. P. Blavatsky. Sinnett's Esoteric Buddhism came into my hands through a friend to whom I had spoken in regard to these things. This book, the first from the theosophical movement with which I became familiar, made upon me no impression whatever. And I was glad that I had not read this book before I had experienced perception out of the life of my own soul. For the content of the book was repellent to me, and my antipathy against this way of representing the supersensible might well have prevented me from going farther at once upon the road which had been pointed out to me.

1. *The Gipsy.*
2. *Nature and Our Ideals.*
3. *The Alchemist.*
4. *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity.*
5. *The Chorus of Primal Instincts.*
6. *The Chorus of Primal Dreams.*
