The Story of My Life
GA 28

Chapter VIII

During this time – about 1888 – I felt within me, on the one hand, the impulse to intense spiritual concentration; on the other hand, my life brought me into intercourse with a wide circle of acquaintances. Because of the interpretive introduction which I had to prepare for the second volume of Goethe's scientific writings, I felt an inner necessity to state my view of the spiritual world in a form of thought transparently clear. This required an inward withdrawal from all that bound me to the outer life. It was due in large measure to a certain circumstance that such a withdrawal was possible. I could at that time sit in a coffee-house, with the greatest excitement all around me, and yet be absolutely tranquil within, my thoughts concentrated upon the task of writing down in a rough draft that which later composed the introduction I have mentioned. In this way I led an inner life which had no relation whatever to the outer world, although my interests were still intimately bound up with that world.

It was at this time that these interests were forced to turn to the critical phenomena then appearing in the external situation of things. Persons with whom I was in frequent relation were devoting their strength and their labour to the arrangements which were then coming to completion between the nationalities in Austria. Others were occupied with the social question. Still others were in the midst of a struggle for the rejuvenation of the artistic life of the nation. When I was living inwardly in the spiritual world, I often had the feeling that the struggles toward all these objectives must play themselves out fruitlessly because they refused to enter into the spiritual forces of existence. The sense of these spiritual forces seemed to me the thing needed first of all. But I could find no clear consciousness of this in that sort of spiritual life which surrounded me.

Just then Robert Hamerling's satiric epic *Homunculus* was published. In this a mirror was held before the times in which were reflected purposely caricatured images of its materialism, its interests centred on the outer life. A man who can live only in mechanistic, materialistic conceptions marries a woman whose nature lies, not in a real world, but in a world of fantasy. Hamerling desired to represent the two aspects in which civilization has become warped. On one side he perceived the utterly unspiritual struggle which conceives the world as a mechanism, and would shape human life mechanically; on the other side the soulless fantasy which

cares not at all whether its make-believe spiritual life comes into any relation whatever to reality.

The grotesque pictures drawn by Hamerling repelled many who had esteemed him for his earlier works. Even in delle Grazie's home, where Hamerling had enjoyed unmeasured admiration, there was a certain reserve after the appearance of this epic. Upon me, however, the Homunculus made a deep impression. It showed, so I thought, those spiritually darkening forces which are dominant in modern civilization. I found in it a first warning to the time. But I had difficulty in establishing a relationship to Hamerling. And the appearance of the *Homunculus* at first increased this difficulty in my own mind.

In Hamerling I saw a person who was himself a special revelation of the times. I looked back to the period when Goethe and those who worked with him had brought idealism to a height worthy of humanity. I recognized the need to pass through the gateway of this idealism into the world of real spirit. To me this idealism seemed the noble shadow, not cast into man's soul by the sense-world, but falling into his inner being from a spiritual world, and creating the obligation to go forward from this shadow to the world which has cast it.

I loved Hamerling who had painted these idealistic reflections in such mighty pictures. But it gave me deep distress to have him remain at that stage – that his look was directed backward to the reflections of a spirituality destroyed by materialism rather than forward to the spiritual world now breaking through in a new form. Yet the *Homunculus* strongly attracted me. Though it did not show how man enters into the spiritual world, still it indicated the pass to which men come when they restrict themselves to the unspiritual. My interest in the Homunculus happened at a time when I was thinking over the problem of the nature of artistic creation and of beauty. What was then passing through my mind is recorded in the pamphlet *Goethe als Vater einer neuen Aesthetik*[1] which reproduces a paper that I had read at the Goethe Society in Vienna. I desired to discover the reasons why the idealism of a bold philosophy, such as had spoken so impressively in Fichte and Hegel, had nevertheless failed to penetrate to the living spirit. One of the ways by which I sought to discover these causes was my reflection over the errors of a merely idealistic philosophy in the sphere of aesthetics. Hegel and those who thought in his way found the content of art in the appearance of the “idea” in the sense-world. When the “idea” appears in the stuff of the senses, it is manifest as the beautiful. This was their opinion. But the succeeding period refused to recognize any reality in the “idea.” Since the idea of the idealistic world-conception, as this lived in the consciousness of the idealists, did not point to a world of spirit, it could therefore not maintain itself with the successors of these idealists as something possessing reality. Thus arose the “realistic” aesthetics,

which saw in the work of art, not the appearance of the idea in a sense-form, but only the sense-image which, because of the needs of human nature, takes on in the work of art an unreal form.

I desired to see as the reality in a work of art the same thing which appears to the senses. But the way which the true artist takes in his creative work appeared to me as a way leading to real spirit. He begins with that which is perceptible to the senses, but he transforms this. In this transformation he is not guided by a merely subjective impulse, but he seeks to give to the sensibly apparent a form which reveals it as if the spirit itself were there present. Not the appearance of the idea in the sense-form is the beautiful, so I said to myself, but the representation of the sensible in the form of the spirit. Thus I saw in the existence of art the entrance of the world of spirit within the world of sense. The true artist yields himself more or less consciously to the spirit. And it is only necessary – so I then said to myself over and over again – to metamorphose the powers of the soul, which in the case of the artist work upon matter, to a pure spiritual perception free of the senses in order to penetrate into a knowledge of the spiritual world.

At that time, true knowledge, the manifestation of the spiritual in art, and the moral will in man became in my thought the members which unite to form a single whole. I could not but recognize in the human personality a central point at which these are bound in the most immediate unity with the primal being of the world. It is from this central point that the will takes its rise. If the clear light of the spirit shines at this central point, then the will is free. Man is then acting in harmony with the spiritual nature of the world, which creates, not by reason of necessity, but in the evolution of its own nature. At this central point in man the motives of action arise, not out of obscure impulses, but from intuitions which are just as transparent in character as the most transparent thought. In this way I desired by means of a conception of the freedom of the will to find that spirit through which man exists as an individual in the world. By means of an experience of true beauty I desired to find the spirit which works in man when he so labours through the sensible as to express his own being, not merely spiritually as a free spirit, but in such a way that this spiritual being of his flows forth into the world, which is indeed of the spirit but does not directly manifest it. Through a perception of the true I desired to *experience* the spirit which manifests itself in its own being, whose spiritual reflection is moral conduct, and toward which creative art strives in the shaping of sensible form.

A “philosophy of freedom,” a living vision of the sense world thirsting for the spirit and striving toward it through beauty, a spiritual vision of the living world of truth hovered before my mind.

This was in the year 1888, just at the time when I was introduced into the home of the Protestant pastor, Alfred Formey, in Vienna. Once a week a group of artists and writers used to gather there. Alfred Formey himself had come out as a poet. Fritz Lemmermayer, speaking out of a friendly heart, described him thus: “Warm-hearted, intimate in his feeling for nature, enthusiastic, almost drunk with faith in God and blessedness, so does Alfred Formey write verse in mellow resounding harmonies. It is as if his tread did not rest upon the hard earth, but as if he mused and dreamed high in the clouds.” Such was Alfred Formey also as a man. One felt quite borne away from the earth, when one entered the rectory, and found at first only the host and hostess. The pastor was of a childlike piety; but this piety passed over in its warm disposition in the most obvious way into a lyric mood. One was, as it were, surrounded by an atmosphere of good-heartedness as soon as Formey had spoken a few words. The lady of the house had exchanged the theatre for the rectory. No one would, ever have discovered the former actress in the lovable wife of the pastor entertaining her guests with such delightful charm. Into the mood of this rectory, so other-worldly, the guests now brought “the world” from all directions of the spiritual compass. There from time to time appeared the widow of Friedrich Hebbel. Her appearance was always the signal for a festival. In high old age she developed a sort of art of declamation which took possession of one's heart with an inner fascination, and completely captivated one's artistic sensibilities. And when Christine Hebbel told a story, the whole room was permeated with the warmth of the soul. At these Formey evenings I became acquainted also with the actress Wilborn. An interesting person with a brilliant voice in declamation. Lenau's *Drei Zigeuner*[2] which one could hear from her lips with constantly renewed pleasure. It soon came about that the group which had assembled at the home of Formey would from time to time gather also at that of Frau Wilborn. But how different it was there! Fond of the world, lovers of life, thirsty for humour – such were then the same persons who at the rectory remained serious even when the “Vienna People's Poet,” Friederich Schlögel, read aloud his boisterous drolleries. He had, for instance, written a “skit” when the practice of cremation had been introduced among a small circle of the Viennese. In this he told how a husband who had loved his wife in a somewhat “coarse” manner had always shouted to her whenever anything did not please him: “Old woman, off to the crematorium.” At Formey's such things would call forth remarks which formed a sort of episode in cultural history throughout Vienna; at Wilborn's people laughed till the chairs rattled. At Wilborn's Formey looked like a man of the world; Wilborn at Formey's like an abbess. One could pursue the most penetrating reflections upon the metamorphosis of human beings even to the point of the facial expression.

To Formey's came also Emilie Mataja, who, under the name of Emil Marriot, wrote her romances marked by penetrating observation of life: a fascinating personality, who in the manner of her life revealed the cruelties of human existence clearly, with genius, and often charm-

ingly. An artist who knew how to represent life when it mingles its riddles with everyday affairs, where it hurls the tragedy of fate ruinously among men.

We often had the opportunity to hear also the four women artists of the Austrian Tschamper quartette; there Fritz Lemmermayer melodramatically recited Hebbel's Heideknabe, to a fiery piano accompaniment by Alfred Stross.

I loved this rectory, where one could find so much warmth. There the noblest humanity was actively manifest.

At the same period I realized that I must busy myself in a more serious manner with the situation of public affairs in Austria. For during a brief period in 1888 I was entrusted with the editorship of the *Deutsche Wochenschrift*.[3] This journal had been founded by the historian, Heinrich Friedjung. My brief editorial experience came during a time when the interrelationships between the races in Austria had reached a specially tense condition. It was not easy for me to write each week an article on public affairs; for at bottom I was at the farthest possible remove from all partisan conceptions of life. What interested me was the evolution of culture in the progress of humanity. And I had so to handle the point of view resulting from this fact that the complete justification of this view should not cause my article to seem the product of a person alien to the world. Besides, it happened that the “educational reform” then being introduced into Austria, especially by Minister Gautsch, seemed to me injurious to the interests of culture. In this field my comments seemed questionable to Schröer, who always felt a strong sympathy for partisan points of view. I praised the very suitable plans which the Catholic clerical Minister, Leo Thun, had brought about in the Austrian *Gymnasium* as early as the fifties, as opposed to the measures of Gautsch. When Schröer had read my article, he said, “Do you wish, then, to have again a clerical educational policy for Austria?”

This editorial activity, though brief, was for me very important. It turned my attention to the style in which public affairs were then discussed in Austria. To me this style was intensely antipathetic. Even in discussing such situations I desired to bring in something which should be marked by its comprehensive relation to the great spiritual and human objectives. This I missed in the style of the daily paper in those days. How to bring this characteristic into play was then my daily care. And it had to be a care, for at that time I did not possess the power which a rich life experience in this field would have given me. At bottom I was quite unprepared for this editorial work. I thought I could see whither we ought to steer in the most varied departments of life; but I had not the formulae so systematized as to be enlightening to newspaper readers. So the preparation of each week's issue was a difficult struggle for me.

Thus I felt as if I had been relieved of a great burden when this activity came to an end through the fact that the owner of the paper got into a controversy with the founder over the question of the price at which the property had been sold.

Yet this work brought me into a rather close relationship with persons whose activities had to do with the most diverse phases of public life. I became acquainted with Victor Adler, who was then the undisputed leader of the Socialists in Austria. In this slender, unassuming man, there resided an energetic will. When he talked over a cup of coffee I always had the feeling: "The content of what he says is unimportant, commonplace, but his way of speaking marks a will which can never be bent." I became acquainted with Pernerstorffer, who was then changing over from the German National to the Socialist camp. A strong personality possessed of comprehensive knowledge. A keen critic of misconduct in public life. He was then editing a monthly, *Deutsche Worte*. I found this stimulating reading. In company with these persons I met with others who either for scientific or for partisan reasons were advocates of Socialism. Through these I was led to take up Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Rodbertus, and other writers on social economics. To none of these could I gain any inner relationship. It was a personal distress to me to hear men say that the material economic forces in human history carried forward man's real evolution, and that the spiritual was only an ideal superstructure over this substructure of the "truly real." I knew the reality of the spiritual. The assertions of the theorizing Socialists meant to me the closing of men's eyes to true reality.

In this connection, however, it became clear to me that the "social question" itself had an immeasurable importance. But it seemed to me the tragedy of the times that this question was treated by persons who were wholly possessed by the materialism of contemporary civilization. It was my conviction that just this question was one which could be rightly put only from the point of view of a spiritual world-conception.

Thus as a young man of twenty-seven years I was filled with "questions" and "riddles" concerning the outer life of humanity, while the nature of the soul and its relationships to the spiritual world had taken on, in a self-contained conception, a more and more definite form within me. At first I could work only in a spiritual way from this perception And this work took on more and more the direction which some years later led me to the conception of my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.

1. *Goethe as the Founder of a New Science of Aesthetics.*
2. *Three Gipsies.*
3. *The German Weekly.*