

1 GOETHE (1749–1832) AS AN ESOTERICIAN

¹Leibniz, Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller were initiates of the Rosicrucian Order, even if they did not advance to high degrees. What they received of the secret knowledge, however, was quite sufficient for them to rise sky-high above their contemporaries. In contrast, the much-vaunted Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were no initiates. Kant was the most acute and profound of them. But what is the good of the greatest mental genius without esoteric facts? He produced nothing but fictions. Fichte was an acute subjectivist who went totally astray. Schelling and Hegel were eclectics who lived on mishmash of the ideas of other men and beyond that produced illusions and fictions.

²Goethe was the great objectivist; Schiller, the idealist. Goethe reached the age of 83 years; and Schiller, 45 years. And still the learned dispute about who was the “greater” of them.

³The best biography of Goethe hitherto is probably the one written by Karl Viëtor, *Goethe – The Poet* (1949). It is in connection with this book that the following reflections have presented themselves.

⁴K.V.’s biography is unusual for the understanding it displays. That is the very reason why it is the best illustration of the fact that only esotericians are in a position to interpret initiates somewhat, which should be clear from what will be said in the following.

⁵“When Goethe was eighteen, Germany, too, according to his own words, had reached the age of eighteen, and it was possible to achieve something.” That was a later realization and there is justification for the statement. German “culture”, if there was such a thing, was an imitation of French culture. Tegnér’s saying about Sweden was true of Germany as well: “Only barbarism was native once.” The five “Titans” first mentioned above were the originators of the culture existing in Germany, if by culture we mean “understanding of reality”.

⁶When nineteen years old Goethe begins to take an interest in the writings of alchemists and mystics. That is an interest typical of former initiates. The learned count Paracelsus and van Helmont among the alchemists, which, even that, demonstrates that they do not know the facts of the matter.

⁷Goethe arrived rapidly at the conception “of an existence based on the wholeness of human nature”. His contemporaries, however, were not clear about the fact that this wholeness is a union of physical, emotional, and mental nature, but degenerated instead into worship of what is irrational in existence, not understanding that irrationality is the proof of human ignorance of life and that worship of irrationality finally leads to the assertion of the principle of arbitrariness.

⁸Goethe grasped what Rousseau meant by “nature”, namely “all that which modern culture was not”. Culture and unnaturalness were synonyms to Rousseau. It was not about returning to the woods and living like animals, but about returning to “old and true innocence”. Rousseau’s view that “our thinking is dependent on emotion” is correct at lower stages of development. But only when physical life is controlled by emotion, and emotion by reason is the individual an integrated human being. Goethe arrived at that clear idea, but not Rousseau.

⁹Mankind is at the emotional stage. Knowing this Goethe could say, “feeling is everything” (Gefühl ist alles). It is only when the individual has acquired mental perspective consciousness that he has reached the true stage of humanity and in so doing has achieved his liberation from dependence on emotionality, can use emotionality as impelling energy only.

¹⁰Goethe himself was too dependent on his emotionality, which was due to the fact that he had not re-acquired the independence he had won in a previous incarnation. Such a condition is very common, as is to be regretted.

¹¹Originality became a slogan for Goethe’s contemporaries: Creating something new and unique, something that had grown out of one’s own personality. This is good if you are a

personality. Goethe realized that the value of originality depends on the individual's capacity. This might give the aspirants to originality of our times some food for thought. What is individual is part of what is general, a part of the collective (group, nation, race, mankind). When the individual has identified himself with what is common, constantly expanding, and gives it a personal expression, then and only then is such originality obtained as is valuable to all.

¹²Goethe's first dramatic work was *Götz von Berlichingen*. In it he asserted "the good citizen's natural and sacred right to lead his life as it pleases him. Götz was the freedom-loving man who lives according to his own law. On the life and deeds of such people depend the continuance of society and the flowering of culture." This of course presupposes that "one's own law" is in agreement with the law of life in contradistinction to the law of human arbitrariness.

¹³It is uncertain when Goethe began working at his drama *Faust*. The first version ("Urfaust") occupied him during the years 1771–1775. He sympathized with the legendary Faust as a dauntless, tireless explorer of reality who has realized the vanity of human speculation, having an exhaustless desire for true wisdom. To Goethe, Faust became "a mythic symbol of the human soul" in its eternal quest.

¹⁴K.V. adds that Goethe's "occupation with the writings of the modern neo-Platonists, theosophists, and magicians had afforded him understanding of the unorthodox, pre-rationalistic manner of exploring nature."

¹⁵It is admirable how the learned are able to mask their ignorance with empty, impressive phrases. To an esoterician it is quite obvious that Goethe's early interest in "occult" literature indicates that he was an old initiate. The present comments have been written precisely with a view to demonstrating an aspect (the esoteric one) of Goethe's production that has been neglected up to now, and to explain that some knowledge of this is necessary for anyone who wants to understand Goethe properly.

¹⁶What you must admire in K.V. is his deep understanding of Goethe without esoteric knowledge. Thus he writes that Goethe's desire for "the highest learning and the deepest feeling, his wish to explore how far the limits to human experience can be stretched" are in themselves good and noble. Goethe was, "despite his youth, aware that the moral viewpoint does not suffice when judging man's existence and life in its complex wholeness."

¹⁷As for poetry Goethe concurred in Herder's view that the poem grows forth from thought and feeling and that the work relates to thought and feeling like body to soul.

¹⁸K.V.: Goethe was much occupied with the problem of individuality. He wondered how the world can consist of nothing but independent individuals who nevertheless are connected with infinite wholeness. Man shares in the infinitude of existence through his metaphysical nucleus, his individuality, through that which Aristoteles called "entelechy" and Leibniz "monad". Man is called a microcosm because he is an image of the universe. Every monad is a living and creative mirror that forms a picture of the world in its own manner.

¹⁹Even if an obscure saying is an obscure thought, yet it is clear from this how innate superphysical instinct (the subconscious, latency) can surmise more than it can formulate in exact terms.

²⁰The problem of pluralism or monism, how existence consisting of individuals (monads) can make up a unity, is explained by esoterics by the fact that all existence is a unity of consciousness in which every individual has a share that cannot be lost. It also explains existence as a cosmic process of consciousness through which all monads will reach the final goal of life some time: the omniscience and omnipotence of everyone.

²¹"Out of contemporary philosophical hypotheses he selected those which he thought he could find confirmed in his own experience." Goethe's world picture "crystallized eventually into a wholeness, into one of the greatest syntheses in the history of modern thought".

²²“Panthemism formed the basis of his world view. Nature and spirit, phenomenon and essence are one; infinitude is distributed among nothing but finite, independent phenomena which together form a great, all-embracing unity. Unity in diversity is the inmost nature of the world. Faith in the original value of life and nature is united in Goethe with trust in the goodness of nature and with admiration of beauty in its forms.” At the end of his *Faust*, Goethe uses the expression, ‘the ever-womanly’, of that divinity up to whom man is striving.”

²³In Weimar Goethe made the acquaintance of Charlotte von Stein, seven years his senior and already married. “The inexorable earnestness of the love he senses, a love that unites the souls, he tries to explain to himself by the idea that such an intimate union is possible only if the present fellowship is a repetition of a previous one. In a letter to Wieland Goethe wrote: ‘I cannot explain the importance of this woman for me, the power she wields over me, in any other way than by the transmigration of souls’ (the word “reincarnation” was not yet in use). ‘Yes, we were husband and wife once.’” Goethe’s production abounds with such esoteric hints long before he was initiated anew into an esoteric knowledge order. To an esoterician it is obvious that Goethe was an old esoterician.

²⁴In the chapter about Goethe’s play, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, K.V. describes the ideals that Goethe had in mind when writing the play. Clarity and balance, restraint and mental calm make up its intellectual content. As a human being and an artist he began to strive for purity and clarity of forms, outer beauty as an expression of inner beauty.

²⁵The subject of the play was taken from Euripides, but was entirely reshaped by Goethe. Euripides conceived of fate as a power acting by its own logic (or by its own freaks) without regard to the individual, “an inescapable oughtness that is only sharpened and hastened by a counteracting will”, “a despotic constraint that crushes individual man whenever he dares to defy it”.

²⁶Goethe wants to show “what man is capable of if he accepts destiny, since he sees the will of kind gods in it”. Destiny (more exactly: the great Law) is “the only power to which the great man bows, and not only men but also the gods”.

²⁷To Iphigenia “there are no Barbarians and Greeks, there is no race or class, but only the faith that all human beings have dignity who live in a community characterized by good will”. In this play Goethe has “expressed the faith in humanity, faith in the fact that man is able, if he trusts what is divine above him and within him, to perfect himself, and that his mission is the attempt at reaching perfection”.

²⁸In his comments on Goethe’s draft of an epic about a secret order of knights templars, K.V. demonstrates his complete ignorance of the genuine Rosicrucian Order. It has already been said that he is ignorant in esoteric matters generally. He has fallen prey to the false and quite misleading data that H. Spencer Lewis, an American, managed to have entered into most encyclopedias. In 1909 he founded in the United States his own travesty of a secret knowledge order, and claimed falsely to be the sole genuine heir to the Rosicrucian Order.

²⁹A few corrections would not be out of place. The Rosicrucian Order was instituted in 1375 by Christian Rosencreutz (alias neo-Platonist Proklos, alias Francis Bacon, alias Saint Germain, to mention a few of his incarnations).

³⁰The symbol of the rosy cross has a number of meanings. The most obvious one is the cross as representing man, the rose his soul. Actually it should have been a lotus, but its closest Western equivalent was chosen instead. The five centres of the causal envelope as a whole resemble in shape the lotus flower sacred in India.

³¹K.V. passes over the reason why many secret orders appeared like mushrooms out of the ground all over Europe during the 18th century. The reason was the intellectual tyranny of the Church which many people felt increasingly hard to bear.

³²In twenty-four stanzas Goethe depicts an order of chivalry consisting of twelve knights and a grand master who goes by the significant name of Humanus. The twelve represent

twelve different religions. In this way Goethe tried to fight religious fanaticism and intolerance, a variation of that well-known saying by Shaftesbury, “men of sense are really but of one religion” (the religion of wisdom and love).

³³The play *Torquato Tasso* treated of the problem of the tragedy of the genius. K.V. limits it to dealing with the tragedy of the poet in particular. In fact, it is more profound than that. It may be extended to the disproportion between the esoterician and the exoterist, between those at the stages of humanity and civilization, respectively. Goethe felt misunderstood, as all on higher levels do, felt different from others without seeing clearly that this was due to the immense difference in innate, latent ability to understand life. He was not yet an initiate of the Rosicrucian Order. Those who have reached a higher stage of development or those who were once initiates of a genuine knowledge order often suffer from the same disproportion without understanding why. They think they are different from others, are considered eccentrics by others, and finally begin to ask themselves what is wrong with them, since their outlook on life is so completely different, begin to doubt themselves, and feel increasingly uncertain. This condition can easily turn tragic, if they do not come to see on what it all depends, for, as Goethe says, “the tragic condition is based on a disproportion that cannot be balanced”. Often such a life ends in insanity or suicide.

³⁴Thanks to Winckelmann’s epoch-making and revolutionary work on ancient Greek art, understanding of the fundamental importance of that art was roused in Europe. He presented the noble simplicity and serene greatness of the works of Greek art as the norm of true art. There was ideal beauty in Greek art, primeval beauty without parallel that puts nature itself into the shade, beauty in which divine perfection could be descried. With reference to this conception Goethe put forward in several works his view on art.

³⁵The development of natural life-forms evinces a striving towards beauty, even if perfection is achieved in rare cases only. The beautiful human being is the most perfect result of this striving. Only by regarding nature and art as a common wholeness can a true conception of beauty be reached. It is this view of wholeness that enables the artist to create beauty and to put into individual things what is universally valid with the same conformity to law and necessity as nature produces its forms. Art is “second nature”. That art, however, can be created by highly developed human beings only.

³⁶There were to Goethe only two masters: nature and Greek art. He considered sculpture to be the fundamental art, since it gives the clarity and beauty of outlines the strongest prominence. The Greeks are the unequalled models of artistic perfection. In their works are to be found the laws of true art. It is not a matter of imitating nature but of producing what surpasses nature.

³⁷The critics of Goethe’s enthusiasm for Greek art as the one true art of course have objected that he in Italy had the opportunity of seeing only a few original works from Greek antiquity.

³⁸There was no need for him to see more. He experienced himself the conception of beauty he had acquired once in a previous incarnation as a sculptor and as a pupil of Praxiteles.

³⁹The most important problem is the choice of suitable objects. Not any objects whatever are suited for artistic representation, but only such ones as possess in themselves a certain ideality, such ones as are the expressions of ideas.

⁴⁰Holding this view on art, Goethe entered into the strongest opposition to that subjective arbitrariness which even in his times had begun to spread and which he with perfect justice termed licentiousness. Subjectivism tries by the aid of imagination to give the appearance of reality to what is impossible, what is unreal. “The artist shall work in freedom bound by law, not be the victim of obscure sensations, of ingenious arbitrariness and vagueness.” This, too, is in agreement with the concept of art of the esotericians according to which conformity to law is a condition of ideality. “How, thought Goethe, could the beautiful, perfectly shaped

form be produced where only the shapeless outlines of emotions and the mists of visions are recognized as fertile ground for the creation of art.”

⁴¹Goethe considered form to be more important than colour. There was only one style to him, there were not different styles; there was only the style that seeks to present the essence of things in a genuine and conscientious manner in so far as it is given to us to grasp this in visible forms. The purpose of art is not the expression of feelings, moods, and formless things.

⁴²The purpose of literary art, poetry, is to afford man a right view of life and of his own position in the world, a view allowing the self to rise free above that dark constraint which seeks to hinder him at every step he takes. Such a view serves man as a means for him to secure his emotional as well as mental freedom. It puts him at a distance from life and grants him strength to be the master of his existence to the extent that his level of development allows this. “You resemble the mind you understand.” But you do not see more than what you have. The grotesque feature of life-ignorance and self-deception consists in the fact that too many people believe they see “all”.

⁴³Goethe emphatically opposed such literary works as presented man as a powerless victim of dark demons within him and outside him, which delivered him over to an existence without a rational order or meaning.

⁴⁴True literary art represents reality more truly than life, since the fictitious characters are set free from all accidental qualities and sum up the tendencies, views, and modes of reaction of an entire group.

⁴⁵In his novel about Wilhelm Meister, Goethe treats of many spheres of life. The different parts of the novel occupied Goethe during some twenty years. In the meantime he was initiated into the Rosicrucian Order, a fact that of course made itself felt in many ways in the latter parts of the novel. It is a heterogeneous work and does not evince an actual structure. Goethe used this novel to incorporate with it that wisdom of life which he had gained during his long life.

⁴⁶Naturally, Goethe makes no mention of the Rosicrucian Order, but refers to Masonry of which the majority of prominent men at the time were initiates. It is remarkable how much esoteric wisdom representatives of Masonic and other orders scattered about them. It appears as if genuine esotericians were members of those social orders and worked in them. Most of the pertaining esoteric ideas were lost during the 19th century because of the skepticism gaining ground more and more under the influence of the rapid advances of scientific research and the degeneration of philosophy into agnosticism.

⁴⁷When Goethe has Wilhelm Meister invisibly supervised and unsuspectingly guided by the “Fellowship of the Tower”, there is an obvious analogy with the favours from the planetary hierarchy enjoyed by all those who were once initiates of esoteric knowledge orders. Many contemporary writers had used this idea in their novels. Literary critics of the 19th century of course turned up their noses at such “fantastry”. They knew for sure everything much better than an “antiquated” Goethe.

⁴⁸K.V.: “Out of this novel you could make a compendium, an inorganic one certainly but nevertheless comprehensive, of the faith in the humanitarian spirit and its aspirations, a guide to a cultivated life in accord with the noblest cosmopolitan ideas... It is the idea of the man who develops the most important forces of his personality and binds them together into a well-rounded whole, who makes the laws of his action himself, and who joins as an independent member the great community of those who build culture.”

⁴⁹According to esoterics, man shall be his own law. (Become what you are.) We are finished as human beings when our own law dovetails with the law of life. Our development consists in an ongoing adaptation to that law. Man’s insight into the fact that life conforms to law increases as he acquires knowledge of reality and understanding of life. Any arbitrariness

is lawlessness, and this in all spheres of life.

⁵⁰Goethe utilizes Wilhelm's apprenticeship to treat of the problem of education. He wants to show how in a slow organic process the personality develops from the germ constituted by its innate capacity, how this personality gradually asserts itself against its self-sufficient, antagonistic environment. The formation of the individual into a cultural human being is done through a complex cooperation of unpredictable forces, not through influences brought to bear on him by formal educational methods.

⁵¹Since "an intelligent human being finds his best education on travels", the young man is sent out into the world to be brought into contact with various representatives of culture and with the many different aspects of social life.

⁵²Soon enough Wilhelm thinks that it is through the theatre that he will best achieve a creative contact with the external world. Eventually he finds that the mediators of culture have nothing to do with that world of ideals which they call to life for a short while. Through the dramas of Shakespeare a new world opens up to him as if they revealed all riddles and he only now came to know life.

⁵³However, at a castle he meets a small group of "active humanists, all of them animated with the same spirit". They appeared to embody the most important of the forces that are active in man's life. Wilhelm is prepared to receive what this élite may teach him. They make it clear to him that "when the personality has reached a certain degree of development, man should begin to live for others and forget himself in an activity prescribed by duty. Only then will he come to know himself, for action forces him to compare himself with others. He will realize that life calls for determination, limitation, action, that voluntary discipline and renunciation are the conditions of all activity aimed at producing culture, that man does not become happy until his unconditional urge to activity sets its own bounds, that anyone who wants to relate all external things to his own enjoyment will waste his time in ever unsatisfied striving."

⁵⁴"He arrives at the realization that only a life filled with activity is a real life. Through his activity man is united with his fellow human beings and only in the community can he hope to realize the ideal of humanity. He becomes active and makes the one mistake after the other in a never-ending series. But inasmuch as we are in the physical world to have experiences and to learn from them, the result of all these experiences will be the best possible. Inactivity out of fear of mistakes leads to nothing."

⁵⁵The purpose of it all, according to Goethe, is to demonstrate that man is guided by a higher hand and that, despite all stupidities and aberrations, he will reach a happy end. This, too, is in agreement with the esoteric insight. The child's demand that all fairy tales must have a happy ending is an expression of the wisdom of life. Because whatever happens, all ends well, even if man will not realize it until in the next world.

⁵⁶The "Fellowship of the Tower" has been watching over him all the time. When Wilhelm finds this out he wonders why they did not prevent him from making all those mistakes. He receives the answer that it is not the duty of the educator of men to forestall mistakes, for it is through these that man learns. If man is to acquire the art of living, then he must learn how to transform all his experiences, both good and bad ones, into positive potential.

⁵⁷This, too, is esoteric. It is in the physical world and only in this world that man is able to acquire all the qualities and abilities that he can and must acquire for his further development in the next higher kingdom. In his life between incarnations man learns nothing. It is a period of rest in which he at best works at the experiences he had in the physical world. Even those possibilities are limited, however, because of the dropping out of those mental atoms that were left in the brain of the organism. When in his emotional and mental envelopes (the causal envelope may be disregarded in this connection), man is much more limited than when in his organism. Quite a different condition will obtain when he has acquired self-

consciousness in his causal envelope. But at that future time he will be practically ready for the fifth kingdom.

⁵⁸Subsequently Wilhelm learns how to put his theoretical knowledge into the practical skills of application. It is about making oneself more suited to the tasks of life, concentrating on some definite activity.

⁵⁹As he continues his novel about Wilhelm Meister, Goethe discusses emotional life, making an analysis of it in which esoteric psychology proves to be well masked.

⁶⁰According to K.V., Goethe's Faust had arrived at the realization that life could not be what the 18th century, that age of rationalism, called life. Faust had had enough of the conceited wisdom of the four faculties of the university. Aided by the unorthodox science, white magic, Faust intends to establish a direct contact with the spiritual world, which works in nature unseen. This was at the time considered to be the secret path to the mysteries of life but was on the other hand regarded by the church as the black art and as proof of a compact with the devil.

⁶¹The esoterician means by "white magic" the activity of the causal self, activity which presupposes that the monad has acquired self-consciousness in its causal envelope and leads a fully developed subjective and objective life in the causal world. Before this is the case there is a risk that the individual in his ignorance of life (knowledge is acquired only in the causal world) makes such fatal mistakes as to the laws of life as are summed up under the heading "black magic". Many writers distinguish between "grey" and "black" magic depending on whether the motives of ignorance are unselfish or selfish. Another way of expressing the same idea is to say that "white magic" is every action that is in agreement with the Law and "black magic" is every action that is in conflict with the Law.

⁶²If we are to speak of "magic" in this connection then it must be the case of an individual who intentionally and purposefully uses his "will" (emotional and mental energies) in the attempt at achieving material results or influencing other people's consciousness outside the modes of ordinary activity. The regulations in force for the prevention of abuse of magical power are so strict that not even the individuals in the fifth natural kingdom are allowed to use "will" without the permission of their chiefs in the sixth natural kingdom.

⁶³K.V.: Faust's ideal of life is not a fixed goal, but the essential thing is activity, endeavour, the power untiringly to break up anew, the courage constantly to make fresh attempts. He wants to know life, in its highest as well as in its lowest aspects. Wilhelm Meister considers such a desire presumptuous and leading to nothing but constant dissatisfaction. Faust never cares about the consequences. Even Mephisto warns him, which he can afford to do, since he is sure of his prey.

⁶⁴The Mephisto character is an indication of Goethe's esoteric knowledge: "Part of that Power, not understood, Which always wills the Bad, and always works the Good." Into that symbol Goethe combined Shiva of the Hindus (the energies of death, of dissolution, liberation, and evolution) with the representatives of the "black lodge".

⁶⁵There are human individuals who, when they have acquired full physical-etheric and emotional subjective and objective consciousness in their envelopes and in so doing have become sovereign in those worlds, refuse to enter the unity of life. They remain in those worlds, and in order to continue being sovereign and dominating human beings they counteract the further development of mankind by all means at their disposal. People who are ignorant of life are unsuspectingly their tools. Common sense should see that there must be such self-glorious and egoistic individuals who refuse to bow to any other law than their own, refuse to give up their power, refuse to become servants of life to become its lords instead. When they have gained the capacity required for assistants in the war against evolution as equal factors of power, they are co-opted (through the Dionysos initiation) into the black lodge in which everyone is his own law but all are united in the common struggle. They do

not know that through their activity they are in turn instruments of those elevated beings of the planetary government who are representatives of the law of destiny and the law of reaping. They are supervised unsuspectingly and “fail” in everything they do outside the limits of the bad sowing and bad reaping of human beings. They are unwittingly the agents of destiny. They are the victims of their own incurable blindness, and can never surmise the glory of higher worlds.

⁶⁶Eventually Goethe arrives at the realization that man is so ignorant of life that he largely makes nothing but mistakes. (Es irrt der Mensch so lang er strebt.) That is why all exercise of power is abuse of power at the same time. We violate unknown laws of life. That is why our motives are the most important things in a life sense, which fact does not give us the right to do evil that good may come thereof. That individual always sows the best sowing who does as best he can.

⁶⁷Goethe’s attitude to the problem of good versus evil is everywhere manifest, an attitude that has been condemned by theologians and moralists. Goethe says outright that we cannot decide what is good and what is evil, that all dogmatism in ethical matters is untenable, that the value of a human being does not equal his virtue. Character, according to Goethe, is determination and will power. According to esoterics, our moral concepts belong to our level of development and indicate how far we have advanced in our understanding of life.

The above text constitutes the essay *Goethe as an Esoterician* by Henry T. Laurency.

The essay is part of the book *Knowledge of Life Five* by Henry T. Laurency, published in Swedish in 1995. Translation by Lars Adelskog.

Copyright © 2015 by the Henry T. Laurency Publishing Foundation.