

## Forum

*Forum Policy:* Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

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### *Faust*

To the Editor:

In a key passage of his article "The Easter Cantata and the Idea of Mediation in Goethe's *Faust*" (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 963–76), Robert Ellis Dye states: "Goethe seems gradually to have moved from rejection of mediation in his youth to reverent acceptance in later life" (p. 971). I should like to suggest that the shift is rather one of relative weight, both in significance and in richness of meaning, within a polarity that exists throughout Goethe's oeuvre. In addition, it may be useful to point out that "mediation," as defined in the context of this article, is interwoven with Goethe's poetic stance as well as with his philosophical attitude.

Werther, in rejecting Christ as mediator and leaping directly, if we may put it that way, into the arms of the Father (as happens also in *Mahomets Gesang*), is perhaps more than arrogant; he is blasphemous. Yet this rejection of Christ as mediator is put into an ambiguous light by the very hysteria and despair to which Dye draws our attention (p. 964). It is further attenuated by Goethe's detachment from his hero. For Goethe leaves it up to the reader to condemn Werther, to pity him, or to admire his heroism in not compromising with life's limitations. By leaving the matter thus open, Goethe creates a moral and esthetic tension, which is not exclusive to *Werther* but recurrent in many variations throughout his work, above all in *Faust*.

But if Christ as a path to God is set aside in *Werther*, He appears very much as a mediator in the brief but powerful sketches to *Der ewige Jude*, set down during the same year as *Werther*. These verses contain the kind of irreverence mixed with faith that we find later in the *Divan*, in the Prologue in Heaven, and in the songs of the lower angels at the very end of *Faust*. Nonetheless, the fragment clearly shows Christ as mediating between the earth and heaven, as in the following passage: "Wo! rief der Heiland ist das Licht / Das hell von meinem Wort entbronnen / Weh und ich seh den Faden nicht / Den ich so rein vom Himmel rab gesponnen" (ll. 170–73). The image of the "thread"

is a metaphor similar in symbolic meaning to the "Schleier" in the *Zueignung*. It seems, therefore, that at least in a tentative way Goethe considered the figure of Christ as a symbol of mediation much earlier than in *Faust*, Part I.

At the same time, it is significant that the questions raised by Werther's suicide are not considered in the *Urfaust*, which belongs to the same creative epoch and which contains neither the temptation of suicide nor the Easter Cantata. Only in *Faust*, Part I, completed more than a decade later, is the Werther problem taken up again and given the complex solution that Dye's interpretation explains so well. Together with the multiple meanings of the end of *Werther*, the fact that Goethe returns to the problem of suicide so many years later points to a continuity, as indeed do the many other poetic variations of this theme, from the figure of the Harfner in *Wilhelm Meister* to the *Marienbader Elegie*. It appears to be the continuity of a nagging question, to which Goethe responds in a great variety of poetic contexts and with different moral accents, throughout his life.

The esthetic dimensions of mediation are again of a polar nature. The rainbow is one of the many metaphors and figures in Goethe's work that mediate between the artist and that universal Force from which he derives his gift and to which his creations in turn connect him. Dye mentions such figures in the later work, as well as poems that have mediation for their theme; the example of *Oreas*, which the author alludes to in connection with the Cantata (p. 964), is very apt, for the waters suddenly dammed up by Love form a lake that mirrors the Heavens, and create "a new life." As regards the figures of mediation, their religious-philosophical significance is often intertwined with meanings concerning artistic creation: these are the goddess-muses, from the *Zueignung* to Pandora. But this type of figure also goes far back in Goethe's work, beginning with the playlets *Künstlers Erdewallen*, *Künstlers Vergötterung*, and *Hans Sachsens poetische Sendung*. The first such figure of stature and of truly symbolic character is Minerva in the Prometheus fragment. She is the link between man as creator and the region of the divine beyond the

gods of Olympus, and it is only through her intercession that Prometheus' creatures can come to life.

But to return to the rainbow. The interplay of light and opacity concerns not only our "need for a bridge" (p. 971) in the philosophical sense but also the nature of beauty and of art. There is a surprising passage in a letter Goethe wrote to Friederike Oeser when he was nineteen years old: "Und was ist Schönheit? Sie ist nicht Licht und nicht Nacht. Dämmerung, eine Gebuhrt von Wahrheit und Unwahrheit. Ein Mittelding." Nearly twenty years later, Goethe writes to Charlotte von Stein (19 Sept. 1786) about poetry: "die Force des grossen Dichters, der aus Wahrheit und Lüge ein Drittes bildet, das uns bezaubert." Art is a bridge, like the rainbow, not an absolute, and the artist's is a mediating function: we can no more have Truth direct than we can look at the sun, but the artist can intimate it in his work.

There is, then, a continuity in Goethe's work that derives from the yearning for "a direct assault on ultimate values" (p. 972), and from the equally profound conviction that this direct path is barred and that an attempt to ignore that barrier leads to death, as it does for Euphorion. We have come upon one of the "many sets of polarities" (p. 967) that create both esthetic tension and poetic unity in Goethe's work. In this connection, the "very serious jests" of *Faust*, Part II, form a bridge between the desperate "no" of the soul to the harsh contingencies of human existence and the accepting "yes" of a spiritual attitude that hovers with a loving and ironic smile over both individual suffering and the never changing *Welttheater*. It is this double perspective that characterizes the Goethean poetic universe, early as well as late.

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### Rousseau's "Passion primitive"

To the Editor:

The argument of Juliet Flower MacCannell in "Nature and Self-Love: A Reinterpretation of Rousseau's 'Passion primitive'" (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 890–902) that Rousseau "throws the empirical existence of the self into radical question and finds it to be as insubstantial and empty a concept as the Western tradition has found it . . ." (Abstract, p. 869) is fallacious. Her argument comes to an erroneous conclusion because it is based upon an incomplete reading of Rousseau, particularly of *The*

*Social Contract* and *A Discourse on Political Economy*. In these political works one finds a strong concept of self.

For Rousseau it is the ability to will that distinguishes and defines man's nature and self. In *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* Rousseau notes that "It is not, therefore, so much the understanding that constitutes the specific difference between the man and the brute, as the human quality of free agency" (*The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole [New York: Dutton, 1950], p. 208). Therefore, liberty (freedom of choice and will) is the fundamental aspect of human nature and self. Man is immediately aware that he has the dynamic power of choosing. All men have an innate feeling of the vital force of will, which is beyond full comprehension or explanation. This freedom is not, as MacCannell so casually says, "arbitrarily suppressed" in the political works (p. 890) but is, rather, developed and completed in Rousseau's political theory.

It is only with the state that man gains true freedom and morality. As Rousseau says in *Emile*, man in the state of nature was not virtuous, for he simply followed his impulses. In *The Social Contract* Rousseau speaks of the remarkable change that man undergoes when he enters the state, whereby justice is substituted for instinct in his conduct and whereby duty replaces physical impulse as a basis for action. In the state man changes from a stupid, debased animal into "an intelligent being and a man" with stimulated faculties, extended ideas, ennobled feelings, and uplifted soul (*The Social Contract*, p. 19). Finally, within the state, man acquires moral liberty, whereby he becomes master of himself and gains true liberty, or selfhood. "Moral liberty . . . makes him truly master of himself; for the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty" (*The Social Contract*, p. 19).

What is this law that we prescribe to ourselves in the state? It is the general will—the real reason, will, and judgment of each individual. The general will expresses that which ought to be the content of man's true will, that is, a will not influenced by man's lower passions and instincts. Moral virtue is realized in one's conformity and identification with the general will. "Every man is virtuous when his particular will is in all things conformable to the general will . . ." (*A Discourse on Political Economy*, p. 301). Thus when we obey the general will we are in fact only obeying our own actual will, and to follow what is our own will is the essence of freedom, the subjective principle or, in other words, the self of man.