

“THE PRESENT ALONE
IS OUR JOY”:
THE MEANING OF THE PRESENT
INSTANT IN GOETHE AND
IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

“And so the spirit looks neither ahead nor behind: the present alone is our joy”.¹ This verse from Goethe’s *Faust Part Two* expresses a manner of concentrating oneself on the present instant, of recognizing the value of this instant, corresponding to a type of experience of time which was felt quite strongly in ancient philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism. It is primarily this type of experience which will be considered here. But we cannot overlook the literary context in which these verses appear and the sig-

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

¹ *Faust*, verse 9381.

nificance they assumed in *Faust* Part Two and in Goethe's *oeuvre* in general. In this respect we can remark that Goethe himself is a telling witness to the type of experience that we are going to describe.

* * *

The verses quoted mark one of the high points of *Faust* Part Two, a moment in which Faust seems to reach the very summit of his "quest for the highest possible existence".² At his side, seated on the throne which he had had erected for her, is Helen, already described in the first act in order to entertain the emperor, when after a terrifying journey to the kingdom of the Mothers, he had fallen madly in love with her. "Can the source of this free-flowing beauty penetrate to the very core of my soul? To you I dedicate all my strength, all my passion, for you my love, my adoration, my delight".³ This is the Helen he sought in the second act throughout all the mythical forms of classical Greece. He spoke of her with the Centaur Chiron and with the Sibyl Manto. In the third act she comes to seek refuge in the medieval fortress, Mistra perhaps, in the Peloponnesus, where he appears as lord.

Then occurs that extraordinary encounter between Faust, who, although appearing in the form of a knight from the Middle Ages, in fact represents modern man, and Helen, described with the features of the heroine of the Trojan War but in fact the figure of antique Beauty and ultimately the Beauty of Nature. With extraordinary skill, Goethe was able to bring these images and these symbols to life, in such a way that the encounter between Faust and Helen is as emotionally packed as the meeting of two lovers, as filled with historical significance as the encounter of two ages, as charged with metaphysical meaning as the encounter of man with his destiny.

The choice of the poetic form serves marvelously well for exemplifying both the dialogue between the two lovers and the encounter between two periods of history. From the beginning of the third act, Helen spoke as if in an ancient tragedy, in the rhythms of iambic trimeter, while the chorus of Trojan prisoners answered her in strophes and antistrophes. But at the moment when Helen encounters Faust and when she hears the watchman Lynceus ex-

² *Faust*, verse 4685.

³ *Faust*, verses 6487-6500.

"The Present Alone is our Joy"

pound in rhymed distichs, she is mesmerized by this unknown poetic form. "One word has barely struck the ear when another comes along to caress it".⁴ And the birth of Helen's love for Faust is expressed, in fact, in rhymed distichs, which Faust initiates and Helen completes by finding the appropriate rhyme each time. By learning to use this new poetic form, Helen learns with Faust to spell out the ABC of love, as Mephistopheles says.⁵ "Tell me how I can express myself in such a beautiful way", says Helen. "It is easy", Faust answers her. "It must begin in the heart, and when the breast overflows with desires one turns and seeks..." "...one who shares our happiness", Helen answers. And Faust continues, "And so the spirit looks neither ahead nor behind. The present alone "... "is our joy", answers Helen. And Faust again, "It is treasure, eternal gain, possession and pledge. But who gives confirmation?" "My hand", answers Helen.⁶ The love duet concludes temporarily with Helen's abandon, and the rhyming game thus concludes with a "confirmation" which is not just the echo of the rhyme but the giving of the hand. Faust and Helen are then silent and embrace without words while the chorus describes them, assuming the tone of an epithalamium. Then the love dialogue, and also the rhyming verses, between Faust and Helen begin anew, causing us to live a moment of such intensity, of such pregnant expectation that time and the drama seem to stop. Helen says, "I feel so distant and yet so near, and I can only repeat with happiness, 'Here I am, here' ". And Faust answers, "I barely breathe, my voice trembles and hesitates. It is a dream: time and place have disappeared". Helen continues, "It seems that my life is far from me and yet I feel so new, together with you, trusting myself to the unknown". "Do not think about your destiny", answers Faust, "even though it is the most singular of all. Being here is a duty even though it only be an instant".⁷ The drama seems to stop. It appears that Helen and Faust have nothing further to desire, fully satisfied with being in the presence of one another. But Mephistopheles, who in the second act assumed the monstrous mask of Phorkyas in order to adapt himself to the Greek world, disrupts this perfect moment by an-

⁴ *Faust*, verse 9370.

⁵ *Faust*, verse 9419.

⁶ *Faust*, verses 9377-9384.

⁷ *Faust*, verses 9411-9418.

nouncing the menacing approach of the troops of Menelaus, and Faust reproaches him for this untimely interruption. The marvelous instant vanishes, but the dispositions of Faust and Helen will be reflected still in the description of an ideal Arcadia in which Faust and Helen create Euphorion, the genius of poetry.

The dialogue we have cited here can be understood at several levels. There is first of all the dialogue between two lovers, like all other lovers. Helen and Faust are lovers absorbed by the living presence of the beloved, oblivious to all else, past and present, apart from this presence. The excess of happiness gives them an impression of unreality, of a dream: time and place disappear. They enter the unknown. It is an instant of love fulfilled.

But on the second level of interpretation, this dialogue is that of Faust and Helen as symbolic figures, representing modern man in his endless effort and ancient Beauty in its calming presence, miraculously reunited by the magic of poetry which abolishes the centuries. In this dialogue modern man seeks to make Helen forget her past so that she can be entirely in this present instant that she cannot understand. She feels so far and so near, abandoned by life and yet reborn, living in Faust and one with him, trusting in the unknown. And Faust asks her not to reflect on her strange destiny but to accept this new existence which is offered her. In this dialogue between two symbolic figures, Helen "modernizes" herself, so to speak, by adopting rhyme, symbol of modern interiority, by doubting, by reflecting on her destiny, and Faust "antiquates" himself, speaking like an ancient figure when he invites Helen to concentrate her attention on the present instant and not to lose this instant in a hesitant reflection on the past and the future. For Goethe, in fact, who says so in a letter to Zelter, this is characteristic of ancient life and art: knowing how to live in the present, knowing what he calls the "the health of the moment". In Antiquity, he says, the instant was "pregnant", that is filled with significance, but also experienced in its full reality, in all its fullness and richness, sufficient unto itself. We no longer know how to live in the present, Goethe continues. For us the ideal lies in the future and can only be the object of a nostalgic desire, while the present is considered trivial and banal. We no longer know how to take advantage of the present, we no longer, as the Greeks did, know

"The Present Alone is our Joy"

how to act in the present, on the present.⁸ And in fact, if Faust speaks to Helen as a man of Antiquity, it is because the presence of Helen, that is, the presence of antique Beauty, reveals to him what the present is in itself: what the present of the world is, "the splendid feeling of the present", *Herrliches Ferfühl der Gegenwart* as the *Oriental Divan* says.⁹

And this is why the dialogue between Faust and Helen can be understood at a third level. It is no longer the dialogue between two lovers, it is no longer the dialogue between two historical figures, but it is the dialogue of man with himself. The encounter with Helen is not just the encounter with antique Beauty which emanates from nature: it is also the encounter with a living wisdom, with a way of living, this "health of the moment" we just mentioned. For Faust the nihilist, who bet Mephistopheles that he would never say to the present instant, "Stay, you are so beautiful", the ancient and noble Helen, after the humble Gretchen, reveals the splendor of being, that is, the splendor of the present instant, and teaches him to say yes to the world and to himself.

* * *

We must now define the experience of time in Antiquity as expressed in the verses of Faust we have just discussed. We might think, looking at Goethe's letter to Zelter mentioned earlier, that it is a general experience common to Antiquity and that it was natural for men of Antiquity to know what Goethe called "the health of the moment". Moreover, following Goethe many historians and philosophers, from Oswald Spengler¹⁰ to the logician Hintikka,¹¹ have alluded to the fact that the Greeks "lived in the present moment" more than did representatives of other cultures. In his book *Die Zauberflöte*, Siegfried Morenz¹² summarizes this idea when he writes, "This particular feature of Greece has never been better characterized than by Goethe... at the occasion of the dialogue between Faust and Helen: 'And so the spirit looks neither ahead nor behind. The present alone is our joy' ". It must certainly be admitted that the Greeks in general paid special attention to the present

⁸ Letter to Zelter of October, 19, 1829, *Goethes Briefe*, K.R. Mandelkow ed., Munich, Beck, vol. IV, p. 346.

⁹ In *Das Schenkenbuch, Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. II, p. 94.

¹⁰ O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. I, Munich, 1923, p. 11.

¹¹ J. Hintikka, *Time and Necessity*, Oxford, 1973, p. 86.

¹² S. Morenz, *Die Zauberflöte*, Münstersche Forschungen, Münster, 1952, p. 89.

moment, attention that could also assume several ethical and artistic meanings. Popular wisdom counselled both being content with the present and knowing how to use it well. On the one hand being content with the present meant in particular being content with earthly life, and this is what Goethe admired in ancient art, especially funerary art. The deceased was not represented with eyes raised toward heaven but accomplishing acts from his normal daily existence. On the other hand, knowing how to use the present well meant knowing how to recognize and make use of the favorable and decisive moment, *kairos*, that is, all the possibilities contained in one or another moment. The strategist knows how to strike at the right moment, and the sculptor fixes in marble the most significant instant of the scene he wished to bring to life. The Greeks, it seemed, paid particular attention to the present moment. But we should not, like Winckelmann, Goethe or Hölderlin, imagine an idealized Greece whose citizens lived in the present moment and as a result were constantly bathed in beauty and serenity. In fact men of Antiquity were distressed and they worried quite like we do. Ancient poetry often reflects their anxiety, which sometimes even becomes despair. Like us they bore the burden of the past, the uncertainty of the future, a fear of death. It is this human anguish which ancient philosophies, particularly Epicureanism and Stoicism, sought to remedy. They were therapies destined to heal anguish or to provide liberty and self-control, a means of freeing oneself from the past and from the future so as to live in the present. The experience of time is totally different from the common and general one we just described. And this experience, as we shall see, corresponds exactly to that expressed in the verses of *Faust*: “The present alone is our joy”. “Do not reflect on your destiny. To exist is an obligation”. This is a philosophical conversion which implies a voluntary and radical transformation of one’s way of living and of seeing the world. This is the true “health of the moment” leading to serenity.

Despite the profound difference between the two doctrines—Epicureanism and Stoicism—there is an extraordinary structural analogy between the experience of time as lived in one or the other school. This analogy perhaps will allow us to glimpse beneath the two doctrines a certain common experience of the present. This analogy can be defined as follows: Epicureanism and Stoicism

favor the present to the detriment of the past and especially of the future. They posit in principle that happiness must be found in the present alone, that an instant of happiness is equal to an eternity of happiness and that happiness can and must be found immediately, right away, at once. Epicureanism and Stoicism invite us to place the present moment in the perspective of the cosmos and to recognize infinite value in even the least moment of existence.

Epicureanism, to begin with, is a therapy against anguish, a philosophy which seeks above all to procure peace of soul. It must therefore liberate itself of everything causing anguish of souls: belief in the idea that the gods are involved in the affairs of men, the fear of punishment after death, the fear of death, the worry and pain created by unsatisfied desires, the moral unease caused by the scrupulous desire to act with perfectly pure intentions. Epicureanism does away with all this by affirming that the gods themselves live in perfect tranquillity without being troubled by a desire to produce the universe or to govern it since it is the mechanical result of an encounter between eternally-existing atoms; by affirming that at death the soul does not survive the body and that death is an event of life; by affirming that desires bother us to the extent that they are artificial and useless. We must reject desires which are neither natural nor necessary, prudently satisfy natural but unnecessary desires, and above all satisfy desires which are essential for continued existence. Moral unease could be completely soothed if we do not hesitate to recognize that man, like every living being, is always led on by pleasure. If we seek wisdom, it is simply because it provides peace of soul, that is, ultimately a state of pleasure. And Epicureanism, in fact, offers wisdom which teaches how to relax, to eliminate worry, wisdom which is easy only in appearance since it implies the renunciation of many things in order to desire only what one is certain to obtain, of submitting one's desires to the judgment of reason. This requires a total transformation of one's life. However, one of the principal aspects of this transformation is the change in attitude with regard to time. For Epicureans, most men are fools and eaten up by diseases of the soul, that is by immense and hollow desires for riches, for glory, for power, for the inordinate pleasures of the flesh.¹³ What characteriz-

¹³ Cicero, *De finibus*, I, 18, 59.

es all these desires is the fact that they cannot be satisfied in the present. This is why the Epicureans say, “the fools live in expectation of future goods. Since they know these are uncertain, they are consumed by anxiety and fear. And the worst of their torments is that later they perceive that they pursue money or power or glory to no avail. For they have found no pleasure in all these things, hope for which had enflamed them and to acquire which they had worked with such effort”.¹⁴ The life of the fool is unrewarding and disturbing, says an Epicurean proverb. It is entirely turned toward the future.¹⁵

Epicurean wisdom thus proposes a radical transformation of the human attitude with regard to time, which must be in effect at every instant of life. We must know how to enjoy present pleasure without being distracted from this pleasure, by avoiding thinking about the past, if it is unpleasant, or about the future to the extent that it causes fears or inordinate hopes in us. Only thinking about the pleasant, about pleasure, past or future, is accepted in the present moment, especially when it compensates for a present sorrow. This transformation supposes a certain concept of pleasure, proper to Epicureanism, according to which the quality of pleasure does not depend on the quantity of desires it satisfies nor on the length of time it lasts.

The quality of pleasure does not depend on the number of desires satisfied. The best and most intense pleasure is that which is least mixed with worry and which most assuredly provides peace of soul. It will be procured by satisfaction of natural and necessary desires, essential desires, necessary for the continuation of existence. However, these desires can be easily satisfied without needing to wait for them in the future, without indulging in the uncertainty and the worry of a long pursuit. “Thanks be to blessed Nature which has made it so that necessary things are easy to attain and that things difficult to attain are not necessary”, says another Epicurean maxim.¹⁶ All that is related to illness of the soul, human passion, desire for wealth or power or depravity which makes one think of the past or the future. But the purest and most intense pleasure can be easily attained in the present. Not only does pleasure not depend on the number of satisfied desires, but especially it

¹⁴ Cicero, *De finibus*, I, 18, 60.

¹⁵ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 15, 9.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Arrighetti, *Epicuro, Opere*, Turin, 1973, fr. 240, p. 567.

does not depend on their length. It has no need to last to be absolutely perfect. "Infinite time cannot make us taste greater pleasure than the pleasure we are given to taste through what we perceive as limited time".¹⁷ "Finite time and infinite time bring the same pleasure if it is measured by reason".¹⁸ This may seem a paradox. It is based first of all on a theoretical representation. As the Stoics were to repeat later, a circle is no more or less a circle if it is minuscule or immense.¹⁹ Pleasure is thought by Epicureans to be a reality in itself, which is not situated in the category of time. Aristotle had already said that pleasure is complete and total at every moment it exists and that prolonging it does not change its essence.²⁰ The Epicureans had a practical attitude that went along with this theoretical representation. By limiting oneself only to what can ensure perfect peace of soul, pleasure attains a summit that cannot be exceeded, and it is impossible to increase pleasure by extending it. As J.M. Guyau says in his book *La Morale d'Epicure*, "In this way there is a sort of fullness and inner abundance in enjoyment which makes it independent of time and of all the rest. True pleasure bears its infinity within itself".²¹ Thus pleasure is completely in the present instant, and there is no need to await anything whatsoever from the future to increase it. We can summarize what we have just said by quoting these verses from Horace: *Laetus in praesens animus quod ultra est oderit curare*. "The soul finds its joy in the present and hates to worry about the future".²² The happy spirit does not look to the future. One can be happy at once if one limits one's desires reasonably. Not only one can, but one should. Yes, happiness must be found immediately, at once, in the present. Instead of reflecting on all of one's life, calculating hopes and uncertainties, happiness must be seized in the present instant. There is urgency. Says an Epicurean maxim,²³ "We are only born once; twice is not permitted. It is thus necessary that we do not exist for all eternity, but you, who are not even master over

¹⁷ Cicero, *De finibus*, I, 19, 63.

¹⁸ Cf. G. Arrighetti, *Epicuro, Opere, Ratae Sententiae*, XIX, p. 127.

¹⁹ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 74, 27.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 3, 1174 a 17 ss. Cf. H.J. Krämer, *Platonismus und Hellenistische Philosophie*, Berlin, 1971, p. 188, *et seq.*

²¹ J.M. Guyau, *La Morale d'Epicure*, Paris, 1927, p. 112 *et seq.*

²² Horace, *Odes*, II, 16, 25.

²³ Cf. G. Arrighetti, *Epicuro, Opere, Gnomologium Vaticanum*, § 14, p. 143.

your tomorrow, you are placing your joy in tomorrow. But life is used up in vain in these delays, and each of us dies without ever having found peace". Here, too, we find the echo of this idea in Horace: "While we are speaking, jealous time has flown; seize today without placing your trust in tomorrow".²⁴

Horace's *carpe diem* is not at all, as it is often presented, the advice of a sensual man. Quite the contrary, this is an invitation to a conversion, that is, to a coming to an awareness of the vanity of great and empty desires, a coming to an awareness also of the imminence of death, the uniqueness of life, the uniqueness of the instant. In this perspective, each instant appears like a marvelous gift, filling with gratitude the person who receives it. "Persuade yourself that every new day that dawns will be your last one", says Horace. "And then you will receive each unhoped-for hour with gratitude".²⁵ Perhaps he is echoing Philodemus the Epicurean who said, "Receive each added moment of time, recognizing its value, as if it arrived by an incredible chance".²⁶

Gratitude and wonder: we have already encountered these feelings among the Epicureans with regard to the miraculous coincidence between the needs of the living being and the facilities which Nature procures for it. The secret of Epicurean joy, of Epicurean serenity, is to live every instant as if it were unhoped-for or by welcoming it as something entirely new. Lucretius says, "If the entire world appeared to mortals for the first time today, if suddenly and unexpectedly it would spring forth before their eyes, what could we imagine as being more marvelous than this universe, whose existence men would have never dared conceive?"²⁷ The secret of Epicurean joy and serenity, finally, is the experience of that infinite pleasure which comes from the awareness of existing, if only but an instant. As an Epicurean maxim states: "Not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. Whoever enjoys this state and can hope to preserve it will be as happy as God himself".²⁸ Not being hungry and not being thirsty are the conditions for being able

²⁴ Horace, *Odes*, I, 11, 7.

²⁵ Horace, *Epistles*, I, 4, 13.

²⁶ Cf. M. Gigante, *Ricerche Filodemee*, Naples, 1983, p. 181 and pp. 215-216.

²⁷ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II, 1034.

²⁸ Cf. G. Arrighetti, *Epicuro, Opere, Gnomologium Vaticanum*, § 33, p. 146. The maxim speaks of "Zeus", which we have here replaced with "God" for reasons of clarity.

to continue to exist, for being aware of existence and for enjoying this awareness of existence. God has nothing more than this. It might be said that God's pleasure comes from the fact that he knows he has the joy to exist forever. No, answers Epicurus: the pleasure of one instant of existence is as total and as complete as infinitely lasting pleasure, and man is just as immortal as God because death is not part of life.²⁹

In order to indicate better that a single instant of existence is sufficient for giving this infinite pleasure, Epicureans repeated to themselves every day, "I have had all the pleasure I could hope for". Says Horace, "This man will live his life as master over himself; happy the man who can say to himself day after day, 'I have lived' ".³⁰ Seneca in turn picks up this Epicurean theme. "At the moment we go to sleep, we should say happily, 'I have lived, I have followed the path that fate assigned me'. He is fully happy, he has peaceful possession of himself who awaits tomorrow without concern ("without concern" because one knows that on that day one has had everything that one could possibly have and that there is nothing left to desire). Whoever says in the evening, 'I have lived', wakes up in the morning to receive an un hoped-for thing".³¹

Here too the role of thinking about death in Epicureanism can be seen. To say each evening, "I have lived", that is, my life is ended, is the same as saying each day, "today is the last day of my life". But it is precisely this exercise in being aware of the finiteness of life that reveals the infinite value of the pleasure of existing in the present instant. Faced with the prospect of death, the fact of existing, even if but for an instant, seems to be of infinite value and gives a pleasure of infinite intensity. One can say without being troubled, "my life is over", only if one is conscious of the fact that one has already had everything in this instant of existence.

There is likewise a cosmic perspective which comes into play here. The Epicurean has a vision of the universe. Thanks to the doctrine of Epicurus, which explains the origin of the universe by the fall of atoms into a void, the Epicurean sees the walls of the world open up, as Lucretius says; he sees things being born in the

²⁹ Cf. G. Arrighetti, *Epicuro, Opere, Epistula ad Menoeceum*, §§ 124-125, p. 108.

³⁰ Horace, *Odes*, III, 29, 42.

³¹ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 12, 9.

immense void.³² He explores the immensity of everything, or like Metrodorus he exclaims, "Remember that, born mortal, with a limited life, through thinking about nature, you have raised yourself up to the eternity and infinity of things and you have seen everything which has been and everything which will be".³³ Here can be found the contrast between finite time and infinite time. The wise man grasps in finite time everything which takes place in infinite time. More exactly, as Léon Robin said, commenting on Lucretius, "The wise man places himself in the unchangeability of eternal Nature, independent of time".³⁴

The Epicurean wise man thus perceives the totality of the cosmos in this awareness of existence. Nature gives him everything in the present instant, and since it has given him everything, it can give him nothing more, as it says in the poem by Lucretius, "You must always expect the same things, even if the length of your life should triumph over all generations, and even more if you should never die".³⁵

As far as Stoicism is concerned, in Marcus Aurelius we find an excellent description of the fundamental attitude that the Stoic must maintain at each instant of his life, an attitude of attention, of vigilance, of continual tension, concentrated on each moment, in order that nothing be allowed to occur that is not in accord with reason. Says Marcus Aurelius, "This is sufficient for you: 1) The judgment you have of reality of this moment, provided it is objective; 2) the action that you are engaged in at this moment, provided it is accomplished for the service of the human community; 3) the inner disposition in which you find yourself at this very moment, provided it is a joyful disposition before the confluence of events which are produced by external causality".³⁶

Marcus Aurelius thus attempts to concentrate his attention on the present moment, that is, on what he is in the process of think-

³² Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, III, 16-17.

³³ The most accessible version of this maxim can be found in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates*, V, 14, 138, 2 (See the commentary of A. Le Boulluc in *Clément d'Alexandrie, Stromates, V, Commentaire*, Paris (Sources chrétiennes), 1981, p. 369.

³⁴ L. Robin, Lucretius, *De rerum natura, Commentaire des livres III-IV*, Paris, 1926 (1962), p. 151.

³⁵ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, III, 947-949.

³⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IX, 6.

ing, of doing and of feeling at that very moment. "This is sufficient for you", he says, and the expression has a double meaning: 1) This is sufficient to occupy you and you need think of nothing else; 2) this is sufficient to make you happy, and there is no need to look for anything else. This is the spiritual exercise which he himself calls, "Delimiting the present".³⁷ To delimit the present means turning one's attention away from the past and the future to concentrate on what one is doing now. The present which Marcus Aurelius describes is a present defined by the experience of human consciousness. The Stoics distinguished between two ways of defining the present.³⁸ The first consisted in understanding it as the boundary between the past and the future. From this point of view there is never a present time, given that time is infinitely divisible. But this is an abstract division, in a sense a mathematical one, in which the present is reduced to an infinitely tiny instant. The second way of defining the present consists in defining it in relation to human consciousness. The present would then represent a certain slice of time, a slice which corresponds to the period of attention of actual consciousness. It is this lived present, relative to consciousness, which is being referred to when Marcus Aurelius advises to "delimit the present". The point is an important one: the present is defined in relation to man's thinking and action.

The present suffices for our happiness because it is the only thing that is ours, that depends on us. In the eyes of the Stoics it was essential to know how to distinguish between what depends on us and what does not depend on us. But the past no longer depends on us since it is definitively determined; the future does not depend on us, since it has not yet occurred. Only the present really depends on us. Therefore it is the only thing that can be good or bad since it is the only thing which depends on our will. The past and the future, since they do not depend on us, since they are not of the order of moral good or evil, must be indifferent to us.³⁹ There is no reason to be concerned by what no longer is or what

³⁷ Marcus Aurelius, VII, 29, 3 and III, 12, 1.

³⁸ The principal text can be found in the collection of Stoic fragments by H. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. II, § 509, and the commentary in P. Hadot, *Zur Vorgeschichte des Begriffs Existenz*, in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, vol. XIII, 1969, p. 118-119.

³⁹ Marcus Aurelius, VI, 32, 3.

may never be. We must “delimit the present”. “You can immediately have all the happiness you seek to achieve by such long detours”, says Marcus Aurelius. “... I mean that if you leave all the past behind, if you abandon the future to providence and if you manage the present with piety and justice”.⁴⁰

This exercise of delimiting the present is also described by Marcus Aurelius in the following manner. “If you separate from yourself, that is from your thinking (...) everything that you have done or said in the past, everything that torments you in the future, everything that escapes your free will, if you separate (from yourself) the future and the past, if you apply yourself only to living the life you live, that is the present, then you can spend all the time you have remaining until your death in peace, kindness and serenity”.⁴¹

Similarly Seneca describes this exercise in these terms. “We must separate these two things: fear of the future and the memory of difficulties in the past. One is no longer of concern to me; the other does not yet concern me”.⁴² “The wise man enjoys the present without depending on the future. Freed of the weighty concerns that torture the soul, he hopes for nothing, he desires nothing and he does not venture into the uncertain. He is content with what he has (that is, the present, the only thing that is ours). And do not believe that he is happy with little, for what he has (the present), is everything”.⁴³

Here we are witnessing the same transfiguration of the present that we encountered previously in Epicureanism. For the Stoics, we have everything in the present, and the present alone is our joy, for two reasons: first of all because, like Epicurean pleasure, Stoic happiness is completely in the present instant and is not increased by lasting longer. And then because we possess in the present instant the fullness of reality, and even infinite duration could not give us more than what we possess in the present instant.

Essentially, then, happiness, which for the Stoics is moral action and virtue, is always total, complete and fulfilled at every moment of its duration. Like pleasure for the Epicurean wise man, at every

⁴⁰ Marcus Aurelius, XII, 1, 1-2.

⁴¹ Marcus Aurelius, XII, 3, 3-4.

⁴² Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 78, 14.

⁴³ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, VII, 2, 4-5.

instant the happiness of the Stoic wise man is perfect, it is lacking nothing, just as the circle always remains a circle whether it be small or large. Like a propitious and opportune moment, a favorable occasion is an instant whose perfection does not depend on duration but precisely on the quality and harmony existing between the external situation and the possibilities one has:⁴⁴ happiness is, in fact, the instant in which man is entirely in harmony with nature.

Just as for the Epicureans, one moment of happiness, for the Stoics, is equal to eternity. Says Chrysippos, "If one has wisdom for one instant, one will not be less happy than he who possesses it for an eternity".⁴⁵

And, just like the Epicureans, according to the Stoics one can never be happy if one is not happy at once. It is now or never! The situation is urgent, death is imminent. We must hasten, and we need nothing but to desire it in order to be happy. The past and the future are of no use. What we need is to transform immediately our manner of thinking, of acting, of accepting events in order to think in truth, to act in justice, to accept events, with love. "How easy it is to find oneself at once in a perfect tranquillity of soul", says Marcus Aurelius.⁴⁶ By this he means, one need only desire it. As for the Epicurean, for the Stoic the imminence of death gives each present instant its value. "We must accomplish every action of life as if it were our last one", says Marcus Aurelius once again.⁴⁷ This is the secret for concentrating oneself on the present instant, for taking that instant seriously, giving it its full value, its full splendor, bringing out all the vanity in what one pursues with such concern and which death will snatch from us. We must live each day with such acute awareness, with such intensity of attention that we can say every evening: I have lived, that is, I have achieved my life. I have had everything that I could have expected from life. As Seneca says, "He who has lived his complete life every day possesses peacefulness of soul".⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Cicero, *De finibus*, III, 14, 45.

⁴⁵ Plutarch, *Des notions communes contre les stoïciens*, 8, 1062 a, in *Les Stoïciens* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 140.

⁴⁶ Marcus Aurelius, V, 2.

⁴⁷ Marcus Aurelius, II, 5, 2 and VII, 69.

⁴⁸ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 101, 10.

We have just seen the first reason why the present alone suffices for our happiness. An instant of happiness is equal to a full eternity of happiness. The second is that in an instant we possess the totality of the universe. The present instant is fleeting, minuscule (Marcus Aurelius strongly insists on this point⁴⁹), but in this flash, as Seneca says, we can proclaim with God: "Everything belongs to me".⁵⁰ The instant is the only point of contact with reality, but it offers us all of reality. And it is precisely because it is a fleeting metamorphosis that it makes us participate in the general movement of the occurring world, of the reality of the becoming world.

To understand this we must remember what moral action or virtue or wisdom represents for the Stoic. Moral good, which is the only good for the Stoic, has a cosmic dimension: it means harmonizing the reason within us with the Reason directing the cosmos, the Reason producing the sequence of destiny. At every moment our judgment, our action, our desires must be brought into harmony with universal Reason. It is especially necessary to welcome with joy the conjunction of events resulting from the course of Nature. At every instant, then, it is necessary that we resituate ourselves in the perspective of universal Reason so that at every instant our consciousness becomes a cosmic consciousness. In this way, at every instant, if man lives in harmony with universal Reason, his consciousness is expanded into the infinity of the cosmos, and the entire cosmos is present for him. This is possible because, for the Stoics, there is a total mixture, a reciprocal implication of all things in all things. Chrysippos described a drop of wine mixing with the entire ocean and thus being extended to the entire world.⁵¹

"He who sees the present moment", says Marcus Aurelius, "sees everything that has happened for all eternity and everything that will happen in the infinity of time".⁵² This explains the attention brought to bear on every present instant and on what happens to us at every instant. The entire world is involved in every event: "whatever happens to you, it has been prepared for you in advance, from all eternity, and the intermingling of causes has forever

⁴⁹ Marcus Aurelius, II, 14, 3.

⁵⁰ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, VII, 3, 3.

⁵¹ Plutarch, *Des notions communes*, 37, 1078 e, in *Les Stoiciens* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 169.

⁵² Marcus Aurelius, VI, 37.

woven together your substance and the encounter with this event".⁵³ Here we could speak of the mystic dimension of Stoicism. At each moment, at each instant, we must say yes to the universe, that is to the will of universal Reason. We must want what the universal Reason wants, that is, the present instant as it is. Certain Christian mystics have also described their state as being that of a continuous consenting to the will of God. Marcus Aurelius exclaims, "I say to the Universe: 'I love with you' ".⁵⁴ Here there is a profound feeling of participation, of identification, of belonging to a Whole which goes beyond the limits of the individual, a feeling of intimacy with the universe. The wise man, according to Seneca, plunges himself into the cosmos completely (*toti se inserens mundo*).⁵⁵ The wise man lives totally conscious of the world. The world is always present for him. Even more than for Epicureanism, the present moment in Stoicism is filled with infinite value. It contains in itself the entire cosmos, the full value and the full richness of being.

It is absolutely remarkable that the two schools, Stoics and Epicureans, even though so radically opposed, both place concentration on awareness of the present moment at the center of their way of living. The difference between the two attitudes lies merely in the fact that the Epicurean enjoys the present moment while the Stoic desires it intensely. For one it is pleasure, for the other a duty.

* * *

Our scene from *Faust* echoed this double motif: "The present alone is our happiness" and "Existence is a duty".⁵⁶

Goethe, in his *Conversations with Falk*,⁵⁷ spoke of certain beings who, by their innate tendencies, are half-Stoic, half-Epicurean. There is nothing surprising, he said, in the fact that they accept the fundamental principles of both systems at the same time and that they attempt to combine them as much as possible. It can be said that Goethe himself, in his way of living the present moment, was

⁵³ Marcus Aurelius, X, 5.

⁵⁴ Marcus Aurelius, X, 21.

⁵⁵ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 66, 6.

⁵⁶ *Faust*, verses 9382 and 9418.

⁵⁷ Conversation with J.D. Falk, in F. von Biedermann, *Goethes Gespräche*, Leipzig, 1910, vol. IV, p. 469).

also “half-Stoic, half-Epicurean”. He enjoyed the present moment like an Epicurean, and he desired it intensely like a Stoic.

We find in him most of the themes which we have just listed, especially the movement of delimiting the present and the expansion toward the totality of the cosmos, whose existence we have observed in both Epicureanism and in Stoicism. Goethe could have evoked in this respect the opposition between systole and diastole which he so enjoys. Concentration on the present and delimiting the present first of all. This occurs spontaneously in moments of happiness. “And so spirit looks neither ahead nor behind”. This verse of Faust is echoed in the poem addressed to Count Paar.⁵⁸ “Happiness looks neither forward nor backward, and it is in this way that the present instant in made eternal”. The present instant is perceived as being a grace given to us, an occasion offered to us.

But the mind can also voluntarily turn from the past and the future in order to enjoy present reality better. This is the attitude of Egmont when he says, “Do I live only to think about life? Must I forbid myself to enjoy the present moment in order to ensure myself of the one that is to follow, and to lose that one too in worries and fears (...). Is it in order to dream of what was yesterday that the sun shines on me today? To divine and to arrange what cannot be arranged and what cannot be divined, the destiny of a tomorrow?”⁵⁹ This is the secret for happiness formulated in the *Rule for Living*.⁶⁰

Do you wish to model a beautiful life for yourself?
Have no concern for the past,
Be angry as little as possible,
Rejoice always in the present,
Hate no man,
And the future abandon to God.

This is great wisdom, the great wisdom of the child in the *Elegy of Marienbad*.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *An Grafen Paar*, in *Goethes sämtliche Werke*, Cotta'sche Jubiläumsausgabe, Stuttgart, 1902, vol. III, p. 13.

⁵⁹ *Egmont*, Act II.

⁶⁰ *Lebensregel*, in *Sprüche*, 97 *et seq.*, in *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. I, p. 319.

⁶¹ *Elegie*, verse 91, *et seq.*, *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. I, p. 384.

"The Present Alone is our Joy"

"Hour after hour, like grace, life is offered us/From the past we have learned little/of tomorrow all knowledge is forbidden/and if sometimes I am afraid to see the evening arrive/Before setting the sun has seen what is the cause of my joy!/Do then as I do: with joyful wisdom/Look the present moment in the eye!/Do not wait! Quickly! Welcome it with lively care/Whether it be for action, for joy or for love!/Wherever you are, if you live in this way, ever with a child's disposition/Then you will be everything, you will be invincible".

The "rule for living" and the "great wisdom" consist, then, in looking neither backward nor forward, but in being aware of the uniqueness, of the incomparable value of the present. We find exercised in Goethe, therefore, that delimitation of the future that we encountered in ancient philosophy. But this exercise is inseparable from another exercise, which is the awareness of the inner wealth of the present, of the totality contained in the instant. By delimiting the present, consciousness, far from being diminished, is expanded to the dimensions of the world. This is because the manner of "looking the present instant in the eye" is the disinterested manner of looking at things by an artist, a poet or a wise man, who are interested in reality for itself. Above all to enjoy the present without thinking of the past nor the future does not signify living in total instantaneousness. Thinking about the past and future is not excluded except to the extent that a reassessment of past failures or fear or future difficulties provoke distraction, unease, hope or its opposite, despair, all of which turn one's attention away from the present where it should be directed. But precisely by concentrating one's attention on the present, one discovers that the present itself contains the past and the future to the extent that it is the actual moment in which the action and the movement of reality are accomplished. It is this past and this future that the artist's eye seizes in the instant he chooses to describe and to reproduce. Artists in Antiquity knew how to select a "pregnant" instant, an instant full of significance, "one which marks a decisive turning point in time and eternity",⁶² an instant which, to use a term dear to Goethe, "symbolizes" an entire past and an entire future.

⁶² Letter to Zelter of October 19, 1829, *Goethes Briefe*, ed. K.R. Mandelkow, Munich, 1967, vol. IV, p. 347.

This instant in the dancer's movement grasped by the artist makes it possible to perceive the before and after: "The marvelous smoothness with which the dancer moves from one position to another, stirring our admiration for such great artists, is thus fixed for a moment, so that we could see therein, all at the same time, the past, the present and the future, and we are in this way transported to a superterrestrial state".⁶³

A person who knows how to practice the art of living should also recognize that every instant is pregnant, filled with significance, containing the past and the future, not only of the individual but of the cosmos in which he is immersed.

Goethe brings this out in these verses of the poem *Vermächtnis*:⁶⁴ "May reason be present where life rejoices in life". The point where life rejoices in life is precisely the present instant. The poet continues, "And so the past finds consistency, the future pre-existence, the present instant in eternity". A conversation between Goethe and Eckermann is even more explicit. "Hold to the present. Every circumstance, every instant is of infinite value, for it is representative of all eternity".⁶⁵

Some commentators have thought it possible to explain Goethe's concept of the present instant as eternity through reference to a neo-Platonic or Pietist influence.⁶⁶ It is true that God is found represented as the eternal Present in these traditions. But it is precisely this representation which does not appear in Goethe's writings. For example, in the context of the poem *Vermächtnis* which we just quoted, when Goethe speaks of the eternal, he is describing the eternity of what the cosmos is becoming. "The eternal continues its course throughout all things. Being is eternal because fixed laws maintain together the living treasures with which the All has fashioned its adornment". Therefore, to explain Goethe's idea of the present instant as representative of eternity, we should think instead of the Epicurean and Stoic traditions which I described and which affirmed first of all that one instant of happiness was equal

⁶³ Letter to Sickler of April 28, 1812, *Goethes Briefe*, vol. III, p. 184.

⁶⁴ *Vermächtnis*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. I, p. 370.

⁶⁵ J.P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, November 3, 1823, Wiesbaden, Insel-Verlag, 1955, p. 61.

⁶⁶ Neo-Platonism, H. Schmitz, *Goethes Altersdenken*, Bonn, 1959, p. 152 *et seq.* Pietism, W. Schadewaldt, *Goestudien*, Zurich, 1963, p. 445.

"The Present Alone is our Joy"

to an eternity, and secondly that one instant of existence contained the full eternity of the cosmos. In the language of Goethe, this second representation could be expressed by saying that the present instant is the symbol of eternity. Goethe defined symbol as "the living revelation of the unexplorable in the present instant".⁶⁷ The present instant could also be described as the "living symbol of the unexplorable". The notion of "unexplorable" corresponds to what Goethe considered the ineffable mystery that lies at the core of Nature and of all reality. It is its very evanescence and its fully perishable quality that make of the present instant a symbol of eternity because its evanescence reveals eternal movement, the eternal metamorphosis which is at the same time the eternal presence of being. "Everything perishable is symbol".⁶⁸ And this is where the idea of death can be found. For life itself is a perpetual metamorphosis, indissolubly death at every instant. Sometimes this theme takes on a mystic quality in Goethe. "In order to reach the infinite, a person willingly accepts to disappear: abandoning oneself is a rich pleasure".⁶⁹ "I wish to praise the living being who aspires to death in the flame".⁷⁰

Ultimately, then, it is eternity, that is, all of being, which gives the present moment its value, its significance and its pregnancy. "If the eternal remains present for us at every instant, we will not suffer from the evanescence of time".⁷¹ The ultimate meaning of Goethe's attitude toward the present is, as with the philosophers of Antiquity, the happiness and the obligation of existing in the cosmos, a profound feeling of participation, of identification with a reality that exceeds the boundaries of the individual. "Great is the joy of existing; even greater still is the joy one feels in front of the world's being".⁷² "The eternal continues on its course throughout all things. Attach yourself to being with rapture".⁷³ Here we should quote the entire song of Lynceus the watchman at the end of *Faust* Part Two. "Everywhere I see the eternal adornment, and since it

⁶⁷ *Maximen und Reflexionen*, No. 314 Hecker: No. 752, Hamburger Ausgabe.

⁶⁸ *Faust*, verse 12104.

⁶⁹ *Eins und Alles*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. I, p. 368.

⁷⁰ *Selige Sehnsucht, Diwan*, Hamburger Ausgabe, II, p. 18.

⁷¹ Letter to Auguste von Bernstorff of April 17, 1823, *Briefe*, vol. IV, p. 63.

⁷² In *Divan Occidental-Oriental, Buch Suleika*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. II, p. 70.

⁷³ In the poem *Vermächtnis*.

pleases me, I am pleased myself. You, my happy eyes, whatever you have seen, whatever it might be, it was truly very beautiful".⁷⁴

Goethe, in his little work on Winckelmann, presents this enchanted consent to being, to the being of the entire cosmos, as characteristic of the soul of Antiquity. "If man can feel himself in the world as in a Whole, a great, beautiful, noble and precious Whole, if the pleasure of living in harmony with this Whole procures for him a pure and free rapture, then the universe, if it could be conscious of itself, would exult with joy, having achieved its end, and it would marvel at this summit of its development and of its being. For why else should there be this luxury of suns and planets, of moons and stars, of galaxies and comets, of nebulae, of worlds becoming and already become, if ultimately there were no happy man to rejoice unconsciously in his own existence?"⁷⁵ "Unconsciously", because Goethe no doubt means that the reasons for man to be happy, the reasons for finding himself in harmony with the universe are unknown and incomprehensible to him. Here we come up against the "unexplorable",⁷⁶ to use Goethe's favored expression, but the innocent joy of living, the spontaneous and unthinking pleasure that a living being takes in existence is an original phenomenon revealing the presence of this unexplorable mystery. "A cake pleases a child without his knowing anything of the baker, and cherries please the sparrow even if it does not reflect on how they came to be".⁷⁷

We also find this "yes" to the world, this consent to being in this text from Nietzsche, whatever may have been the ideas which lay behind it: "Let us suppose that we said yes to a single unique moment, we would thereby say yes not only to ourselves but to all existence. For nothing is isolated, not in ourselves nor in things. And if even one single time happiness causes our soul to vibrate and resound, all eternity would be necessary to create the conditions for this single event, and all eternity would be approved, re-

⁷⁴ *Faust*, verses 11296-11303.

⁷⁵ *Winckelmann*, in *Hamburger Ausgabe*, vol. XII, p. 98.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Maximen und Reflexionen*, 1207 Hecker, 718 *Hamburger Ausgabe* (vol. XII), and 314 Hecker, 752 *Hamburger Ausgabe* (vol. XII).

⁷⁷ J.P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, February 28, 1831, p. 438.

“The Present Alone is our Joy”

deemed, justified and affirmed in that unique instant in which we said yes”.⁷⁸

Georges Friedmann once courageously denounced the tragic disequilibrium between “power” and “wisdom” which has come about in the modern world.⁷⁹ And in fact, if we have chosen to present these few aspects of one of the fundamental themes of the European intellectual tradition, it was not simply to satisfy a historic or literary curiosity, but to describe a spiritual attitude which seemed for us and for modern man—hypnotized by language, images, information, the myth of the future—to be one of the best means of gaining access to this wisdom, so necessary and so poorly known.⁸⁰ Socrates’ appeal, “Take care of yourself”,⁸¹ is more valid than ever for us. And his appeal is echoed by this observation from Nietzsche, “Are not all human institutions (and we might add, all our modern way of life) destined to prevent people from being sensitive to their life because of the constant dispersal of their thoughts?”⁸²

Pierre Hadot
(*Collège de France*)

⁷⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Ende 1886-Frühjahr 1887, 7 (38), *Sämtliche Werke*, Berlin, De Gruyter, vol. XII, p. 307.

⁷⁹ G. Friedmann, *La Puissance et la Sagesse*, Paris, 1970.

⁸⁰ Cf. P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris, 1981.

⁸¹ Plato, *Alcibiade*, 120 d 4 and *Socrates’ Apology*, 36 c.

⁸² F. Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, III, 4.