

Schelling and the Meaning of Goethe's *Faust*

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1.

When, on June 21, 1797, Goethe wrote to Christian Gottlob Voigt to tell of his first meeting with the young (22-year old) Schelling, he emphasized his earnest wish that it would reinvigorate his own work.¹ Three days later (on June 24, 1797), he wrote his Dedication to *Faust: Eine Tragödie*,² which relates the story of how the poet resumes his drama after an interruption of many years. The following year, he wrote the Prelude in the Theater, in which presumably the same poet gives thanks for the restoration of his lost youth.³ If it seems too much to suggest that this emphasis on rejuvenation was Goethe's way of writing Schelling into the Prelude, it is a suggestion that, as we shall see, gains in plausibility as the drama unfolds. It was, in any event, on Goethe's recommendation that Schelling was appointed professor at the University of Jena, which was close to Weimar. It was, moreover, in the years after Schelling's arrival that Goethe turned his attention back to *Faust*. By the end of 1801, he had all but completed *Faust I*—and started work on Act One and Act Five of *Faust II*. He did not put the play aside until Schelling departed from Jena in 1803. Nor did he return to *Faust II* until he received Schelling's *On the Deities of Samothrace* (1815),⁴ which, as we shall see, played a significant role in the action of that part of the drama.

Goethe in Weimar, Schelling in Jena. Close enough for frequent meetings, far enough away that Schelling often spent the night at Goethe's house.⁵ It began with a week devoted to carrying out experiments in optics.⁶ Goethe made it his

¹ *Goethe's Briefe*, 2:615, quoted in Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Time of Goethe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002),

² GF, 1-32. I cite Goethe's *Faust* by the line numbers. Line numbering is standard and is based on Goethe, *Werke*, 1. Abt., XIV – XV (Weimar, 1884 f.). The translations are my own.

³ GF, 185-97.

⁴ Schelling's *Über die Gottheiten von Samothrake* can be found in F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling, I/8, 345-424.

⁵ Goethe celebrated New Year, 1801, the dawn of the new century, by inviting Schiller and Schelling for a week at his house in Weimar. The invitation took place at the urging of Caroline Schlegel, who two years later became Schlegel-Schelling. The full story is recounted in Arsenij Gulyga, *Schelling: Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1982), 139-140.

⁶ Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 465.

mission to reinforce Schelling's desire to look at nature instead of speculating about it, quite as if he were happy to adopt the role of Mephistopheles: "Gray, dear friend, is all theory / and green the golden tree of life."⁷ As they spent more time together, and particularly after Caroline Schlegel joined them,⁸ their relationship took on a personal dimension. It also took on the dimensions of a kind of writing competition, whereby the middle-aged poet and the young philosopher took turns testing Schelling's most un-Hegelian notion that science and poetry can be wedded in a single work.⁹

Philosophically, two shared convictions bound them together: first, that nature has to be closely observed instead of simply constructed; in other words, nature engulfs spirit, not the other way around, and second, as a direct consequence of this, that poetry (with what Wallace Stevens called its "muddy center"), not philosophy, must have the first and the final word. If nature corresponds to the idea, it is not, as idealism would have it, because it was constructed on the model of a preexisting idea, but because it arose from potencies that, poetically developed, can give birth to ideas, *but only because* (like the muddy earth itself) *they can give birth to a good deal else as well*. It was in this spirit that Schelling's early work, under the watchful eye of Goethe, was meant to prepare for the day when philosophy—and the sciences that flow out of philosophy—will be completed in such a way that "like so many individual streams, they will flow back into the universal ocean of poetry from which they had once sprang."¹⁰ To prepare for that day, the philosopher has to join Faust and leave behind the narrow walls of his Gothic study. But, needless to say, he does not have to follow Faust in losing his philosophical soul.¹¹

The story of the relationship between Goethe and the young Schelling has been told often enough that I do not need to repeat it here. Suffice it to say that it forms the background for the remarkable pages out of Schelling's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* (1802-03), in which, on the basis of the 1790 Faust Fragment (less than one half of Part One),¹² he concluded that the play could only culminate in the depiction of Faust's redemption. It would take another three decades of work on Goethe's part before the accuracy of the prediction would be confirmed.

⁷ "Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum." GF, 2038-9.

⁸ It is worth noting that Goethe claimed to have drawn his inspiration for his novel the *Wahlverwandtschaften* from the complicated relationship between Schelling, August Schlegel, and Caroline. In a footnote to her translation of Schelling's *Clara*, Fiona Steinkamp mentions the rumor that Carolina may earlier have had an affair with Goethe himself: F.W.J. Schelling, *Clara: or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. F. Steinkamp (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 89.

⁹ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 465-467.

¹⁰ SW I/3, 629. For the full context in English translation see F.W.J. Schelling, *System of transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 232.

¹¹ If Faust, the real-estate developer, was "saved" in the end, it was because of his courage and his boldness, not because of any residual philosophical sensibility.

¹² SW I/5, 731-733. The Fragment is all that was publicly available, which Schelling bemoans as inadequate for a definitive judgment about Goethe's play (I/5, 731). It is possible, of course, that Goethe could have shared the complete manuscript of Part One directly with Schelling, but there is no evidence that he did so. For an English translation of Schelling's text see F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

On this subject, too, enough—or quite nearly enough—has been said. The essence of Schelling’s argument is that the published Faust Fragment was too “cheerful” and “Aristophanic” for a tragedy. What he had in mind was presumably the fun and games in Auerbach’s Tavern and the Witch’s Kitchen. In addition, one suspects that he had been impressed with Mephistopheles’ introduction of himself as “part of the force that always wills evil and yet always creates the good.”¹³ It is a notion that accords well enough with the general project of German Idealism that Schelling shared with Fichte and Hegel, whereby the pain of finitude is but a nec-essary way station in the emergence of the Absolute. It is in terms of this compre-hensive vision that Schelling’s comparison of Goethe’s work with Dante’s *Divine Comedy* makes sense, for very little in the Fragment itself would seem to warrant such a comparison.

Although the full horror of the Gretchen Tragedy did not become apparent until Goethe published the completed version of *Faust I* in 1808, the 1790 Fragment does conclude with Gretchen’s fainting in the Cathedral, a horrific scene that presaged horrific things to come. By swooning before the evil spirit of her bad conscience, she made it apparent that she was at this point already a fallen woman, not only because she had acquiesced to Faust’s seduction, but because she was im-plicated in the murders of her own mother and brother, one of whose Requiem Masses served as the occasion for the ghastly scene. Nothing in the Fragment would enable one to predict that, at the end of *Faust II*, she would reemerge as a modern Beatrice, ready to guide Faust through heaven. The only thing that points even vaguely in that direction was the fact that, in the “Forest and Cave” scene, Faust did briefly consider following Dante in so elevating his beloved as to make her untouchable.¹⁴ But, of course, Mephistopheles put a quick end to that.

The parallel with the *Divine Comedy*, which eventually became part of the standard interpretation of Goethe’s *Faust*, requires in any case more evidence than the Gretchen-Beatrice parallel. The famous end of the Prelude in the Theatre, “from heaven through the world to hell,” might have pointed Schelling in that di-rection, but only on the unlikely assumption that Goethe had seen fit to share the text with Schelling privately. What is essential, however, was stated clearly enough in the Fragment. Faust was not going to rest content with anything in this life (thus the bet he made with Mephistopheles), for the simple reason that from the very beginning he had set his gaze higher, expressing the determination to break into the spirit world. Although in the opening scene he briefly considered the possibility that an open mind and a vital heart might carry him so far,¹⁵ as the strange night progressed he eventually broke through to the realization that death alone would do the trick. Thus the remarkably life-affirming tenor of the suicide speech that con-cluded the scene, just before he was saved by the ringing of the Easter bells: “I feel myself ready to enter a new path, to penetrate the ether and break through to new

¹³ GF, 1337.

¹⁴ GF, 3327-9.

¹⁵ GF, 443-4.

spheres of pure activity, to live a higher life, one of divine ecstasy”—hardly the words of a man in despair.¹⁶

This is presumably the passage that Schelling had in mind when he pre-dicted that Faust would eventually be “raised up to higher spheres,”¹⁷ where he would finally be able to accomplish what he could never accomplish in life, for “the subject as subject cannot enjoy the infinite as infinite.” There is tragedy in this, for as Schelling adds “this is nonetheless a necessary inclination.”¹⁸ Looked at from the perspective of a person bound to this world, the inclination to know the infinite is tragic, for it can never be fulfilled. Looked at from the perspective of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, on the other hand, the tragedy dissolves: death itself is the yearned-for awakening: the heart that cannot rest until it rests in God finds in God its place of rest. Faust, who knows nothing of God, is happy enough to rest in death itself, leaving open the question of whether that is the place of ever-new transformation or of another “infinite,” the unbounded infinite of simple void.¹⁹ That Schelling called *Faust* “more comic” than the *Divine Comedy* does not mean that he took issue with the fact that Goethe entitled his play “A Tragedy.” That the tragic lack of resolution in this life says nothing about the possibility of resolution in death is a point that Sophocles had already made when he wrote *Oedipus at Colonus* as a sequel for *Oedipus the King*. Be this as it may, what Schelling’s commentary on the Fragment makes clear is that Goethe, two years prior to Fichte’s first publication, had broken through to the central intuition of the early German Idealists: an infinite spirit resides in finite humanity.

Quite apart from any misguided attempt to “prove” either the immortality of the soul or the finality of death (Kant’s antinomies serve just as much as a re-proach to contemporary naturalists as to the metaphysical dogmatists of his own age), the idea of the spirit world clearly serves an important regulative function for reason. Fichte conceived it as a realm in which the physical finally dissolves alto-gether: spirit communes purely with spirit.²⁰ Schelling conceived it (much as Plato did in the *Phaedo*²¹) as a realm in which nature comes to its full blossoming.²² As the redemption scene at the end of *Faust Two* makes clear (with mountain peaks forming the backdrop of the entire movement through heaven), Goethe was decisively on the side of Schelling with regard to this issue. The first important obser-vation that I want to make about Schelling’s 1802/03 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* is that they really contain nothing “prophetic” on this score. Goethe had in fact set *Faust* on this trajectory from the beginning.

¹⁶ GF, 703-6.

¹⁷ SW I/5, 732.

¹⁸ SW I/5, 731.

¹⁹ GF, 719.

²⁰ This is a story that Fichte often tells. Perhaps the most popular account is in the *Bestimmung des Menschen* which is available in English as Johann Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 103-123.

²¹ This is the famous “Myth of the True Earth” that constitute Socrates’ last words before drinking his poison.

²² That nature is included in the Spirit World is the primary concern of the entirety of Schelling’s dialogue *Clara*.

Before moving on to aspects of the Goethe-Schelling relationship that have not been adequately discussed by scholars,²³ I want to make a second observation about the much-discussed issue of Schelling's youthful commentary. Scholars have been misled, I believe, when they have approached Schelling's comment on *Faust* as if it were an independent document, instead of reading the passage as the hermeneutical goal of a lecture series that begins with a discussion of Greek mythology—specifically with the assertion that “the completed forms of the gods can only first appear, after what is formless, dark and monstrous has been repressed (*verdrungen*).”²⁴ The crucial word here is “repressed”: Cronus is forced under-ground, but never abolished completely. As a past always still contending with (always still *threatening*) the present, the monstrous titan sustains the anxious edge that serves as the universal condition of art. There is no “redemption” that can cast it aside forever. This has an important consequence for the overall interpretation of *Faust*: if Cronus can return from hell, Faust can fall out of whatever form of a heaven he might attain. Schelling did not articulate this thought, but it is fully consistent with the overarching conception of his philosophy of art—notably so, since it is not consistent with the original project of German Idealism that Schelling shared with Fichte and Hegel. In art alone, Schelling found something that would eventually lead him to completely revise his entire metaphysics, from the ground up. The result is a revised understanding of nature that sees it as more than “unconscious spirit.” This “more” points in many directions. One of those directions, which I can quickly introduce by referring to Schelling's later concern with the problem of “evil,” is the real reason for my interest in investigating what Schelling's philosophy might have to do with Goethe's *Faust*. Mephistopheles' statement that he is the spirit who “always wills evil and yet always creates the good” is an impressive one. It is worth remembering, though, that it was placed in the mouth of a master of deceit.

2.

As I briefly indicated at the outset, Schelling had an impact on the actual composition of *Faust*. But before taking up the issue, I want to consider Schelling's reading of the play from the point of view of a series of quotes he uses in his Berlin Lectures on the *Philosophy of Revelation*, delivered from 1842 through 1846.²⁵ Because they prepare the way for Schelling's utterly unique interpretation of the Biblical account of Satan, they have implications that would warrant a book-length study.

²³ None of these themes are mentioned, for example, in Rüdiger Scholz's (otherwise very useful) *Goethes «Faust» in der wissenschaftlichen Interpretation von Schelling und Hegel bis heute*

²⁴ SW I/5, 394.

²⁵ The complete cycle of lectures comprises two volumes in Schelling, II/3 and II/4. Explicit quotes from *Faust* can be found in Lectures One, Two, Ten, and Eleven of the 37-lecture series. In addition, fairly explicit allusions to the play can be found in a number of other lectures, culminating in Schelling's discussion of radical evil towards the end of the second volume.

As one immediately notices in the opening lecture of the Berlin cycle, much has changed in the forty years that transpired after Schelling's first discussion of *Faust*.²⁶ His mood has turned dark. Goethe and Hegel have now both been dead for over a decade. Any thought Schelling might have had about sharing with Hegel the common project of launching a new system of philosophy has vanished entirely. This is a Schelling who, occupying Hegel's former chair of philosophy at Berlin, was determined to distinguish himself from the latter as clearly as he could. The rational system of philosophy that Hegel had worked out to much acclaim during his lifetime was now regarded as something of a scandal, the general consensus being that he had trivialized religion by trying to rationalize it, while at the same time weakening the instrumental value of science by trying to spiritualize it. Both came to the same thing: Hegel's philosophy had lost its connection to life.²⁷ As impressive as the blossom once appeared, it had faded and no longer commanded attention. As the aging Goethe knew so well, public attention had shifted to another sphere entirely, to things like canals, railroads, and textile mills, all supported by an unthinking religion which regarded faith as just another means for pursuing private aims.

Schelling understood his task in that context as the revitalization of philosophy—not for the sake of philosophy itself, but for the sake of renewing poetry, the living root of culture. “Just as in earlier times, poetry preceded philosophy—to which especially Goethe had a truly prophetic relation—so now a revitalized philosophy is determined to bring about a new age of poetry.”²⁸ The problem, as he understood it, is that the laudable “advance of science” had come at too high a cost. From a spiritual point of view, the world had degenerated into complete nihilism. What he had in mind is much like what Goethe was alluding to when, on the subject of humanity, he told Eckermann: “I see a time coming when God will no longer have any pleasure in it; he will once more have to destroy everything to make room for a renewed creation.”²⁹

Because the advance of science has rendered old religious beliefs unacceptable to any thinking person, philosophers and poets are called upon to reconstitute religion in a way that is compatible with new knowledge. To do so, however, they have to pass through radical *skepsis*, or, in other words, the heart of nihilism itself. “In this general dissolution, there will be for a time *nothing* that is secure, to which one can rely, and on which one can build: the beautiful illusions that made past ages happy have vanished in the face of merciless truth.”³⁰ It is at this point that Schelling summons the spirit of Faust: “Truth, *pure* truth it is, which one

²⁶ The first eight lectures of the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (II/3, 3-174) form a systematic introduction to positive philosophy as such. They are available in English in F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: SUNY, 2007).

²⁷ Bruce Matthews, in the Introduction to Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, has an excellent discussion of Schelling's critique of Hegel, 54-69.

²⁸ SW II/3, 12.

²⁹ Quoted in Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, trans. David Green ((New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 26.

³⁰ SW II/3, 9-10.

demands in all relations of life and which is the only thing one still wants, so that one can only rejoice if a time has come in which war is openly declared on every lie, every deception, where it is proclaimed as a principle that truth is something to be desired at *any* price, even the most painful.”³¹ The most painful price is eternal damnation, the price that Faust, who cursed *every* lie,³² was willing to pay for help in his attempt to penetrate to the core of reality.³³

Schelling completes his opening lecture with a quick movement through the history of philosophy, in which he shows that every system, from Scholasticism to the critical philosophy of Kant, including his own earlier system of identity, is condemned to failure. Reason thus comes to know the “vanity of all human attempts to gain the highest knowledge.”³⁴ Schelling does not take this lightly. His explicit goal in the text is to reveal the despair that drives one to philosophy. In this regard, what he has to say is reminiscent of Faust’s opening speech, which begins with the litany of all of the failed sciences. When Schelling presents his own litany, he does not hesitate to depict the failure of his earlier efforts to articulate a systematic account of the whole. He makes no effort to hide the bitterness of a man who felt abandoned by the world after discovering for himself that he was unable adequately to explain his deepest and most compelling insights. To understand his summary judgment of German Idealism: “what began great ended small,”³⁵ it helps to recall his own dramatic failure: the multiple drafts of the *Ages of the World*, the literally thousands of pages that he wrote in the decade between 1810 and 1820 and then simply abandoned. This is clearly what he has in mind when he quotes Mephistopheles as saying that reality is something no human being could possibly digest. Truth can be borne only by a god.³⁶ Faust, of course, tried to make himself into such a god by appropriating for himself the “innermost” force that holds together the universe.³⁷ As *Faust II* makes clear enough, he only succeeded in making himself a monster.

The Schelling of the *Berlin Lectures*, who seeks the renewal of philosophy in the acknowledgement that civilization lies around us in ruin, is not about to repeat the judgment of his youth that Faust must emerge triumphant. What he saw before him was as dark as what Karl Marx and Charles Dickens saw before them: *homo economicus*, progressively shredding the remnants of civilization. Instead of embracing the modern project of making man over into a god, he sought a new option for modernity: understanding the death of God as the condition for the advent of a God who one day might come, whereby the word “God” means minimally this: that it become evident to human beings that they have something greater to

³¹ SW II/3, 10.

³² GF, 1586-7.

³³ By which I refer, of course, to the terms of his contract with Mephistopheles. GF, 1645-70.

³⁴ SW II/3, 14.

³⁵ SW II/3, 14.

³⁶ SW II/3, 14-15. The lines quoted by Schelling are from *Faust* (GF, 1776-84). If truth can be borne only by a God, Faust reveals the full extent of his desire by replying, “but I want it nonetheless” (GF, 1785).

³⁷ GF, 382.

live for than the constant feeding of their own avarice and greed. Positively put: love always remains an option.

Before there can be any talk of revelation, Schelling suggests, one must experience the *need* for revelation by recognizing how lost humanity is. Although one can make sense of nature by viewing it as a long, steady attempt to awaken into consciousness,³⁸ that is, to become human, the actual emergence of humanity throws everything into question. If consciousness first shows itself as fear, and freedom as the capacity for sadistic cruelty, then meaning dissolves back into meaninglessness. How can this tortured being represent the aim of creation? It is the uncanny nature of the human that first forces upon us the question, “Why is there anything at all? Why is there not simply nothing?”³⁹ And if “God” was once thought to function as the answer to this question, then we have to come face to face with the fact that “ever-progressing science has long since undermined” the possibility of believing in him.⁴⁰ Schelling’s conclusion is the stark statement I have already quoted: “the beautiful illusions that made past ages happy have van-ished in the face of merciless truth.”⁴¹ The deep premise of the philosophy of revelation is what Nietzsche later calls the death of God, a death that opens the way for two responses. The first is Faustian: if there is no God in sight then I shall have to step into his place. The Divine Magic of creation must become *my* Magic. The second constitutes Schelling’s alternative: if there is no God in sight, then we shall have to abandon our position as the knower of an objectified nature, in order to listen and wait for what nature, now a subject, might have to show on her own. He illustrates the point by contrasting the individual who, like Faust, assumes that the infinite potency of will in a person is meant to sustain an infinite (and thus never-to-be-satisfied) *wanting*, on the one hand, and, on the other, a person who, directing his will to what is highest, leaves it in complete *repose*.⁴²

To attain such repose, reason, as the thinking of potency, in a certain sense has to be *shattered*. It has to make the discovery that nature in its primal ground is unprethinkable; it is utterly incomprehensible being asserting itself *before* all idea (and thus before all understanding).⁴³ It would not be too much to say that the path to God, in the philosophy of revelation, begins in hell. Thus the introductory cycle of eight lectures which are so intent upon stripping away all ideas (the residue of 1500 years of philosophical thinking) that mask unprethinkable existence. By beginning with the radical contingency of existence as such, Schelling reintroduces a theme that was central to his 1809 essay on *Human Freedom*: precisely God, as the source of life and freedom, has to be understood as emerging from a dark ground that will always remain more unconscious than conscious. The God of classical

³⁸ SW II/3, 5.

³⁹ SW II/3, 9.

⁴⁰ SW II/3, 9.

⁴¹ SW II/3, 10.

⁴² SW II/3, 67-68.

⁴³ It is this thought that constitutes the end of the introductory lectures and is thus the final chapter of the Bruce Matthews translation of Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 193-212. Any-one interested in Schelling would be well advised to read closely both the opening and the final chapter of the Matthews translation.

metaphysics, all-knowing and fully in control, yields to a God closer to the one revealed in Scripture, whereby only the illusory rainbow provides assurance that he will not, as Goethe had put it, *once again* decide to destroy everything to make room for a renewed creation.

To the dark ground in God corresponds a dark ground in humanity. Lecture Nine of the *Philosophy of Revelation* begins the discussion proper with the observation that, if the ground of reality is hellish, the beginning of revelation is error. To realize his freedom, which is to realize the possibility of receiving the revelation of the freedom that is God, man shall have to be *tempted*.⁴⁴ Temptation is given in the flood of potencies that arise out of the unprethinkable ground, inclining the will to aching desire and *want*. Once again, the situation is much as Schelling had depicted it in the essay on *Human Freedom*. We have two options. On the one hand, we can simply live out the will that pulses through nature, in which case we will live in harmony with the world. Or, on the other hand, we can will the will as our own, making our own attainment into the purpose of existence, with the result that the rest of the world has to either be possessed or annihilated.

At this point, Schelling renews his running commentary on Goethe's *Faust* by drawing from the scene of Mephistopheles tempting one of Faust's students with the vision of nursing at the breast of nature.⁴⁵ Schelling alters the speech by having the student exclaim: "To this *source* [not to this "breast"] I would happily cling / so tell me, won't you, how I am to get there?"⁴⁶ Mephistopheles' answer is the sophisticated one. To get to the source requires nothing more than to move through the sciences, one by one. Rendered accessible to learning, to "cling to the source" becomes tantamount to appropriating it for oneself.

Schelling depicts the source differently by saying that "the first challenge for one who demands to be led into philosophy, is to rise above and beyond any being that is present and already in existence."⁴⁷ This must include, of course, one-self. The result is a most un-Faustian piece of advice: "A person should be thrifty with nothing more than with one's capacity (*Können*), for in it is true force and strength ... to *refrain from using it* [my emphasis] builds a treasure one will never lose."⁴⁸

Essential, from Schelling's point of view, is to understand that "all of those concepts that determine being as actual presence have no applicability to the source of being."⁴⁹ The only thing that reason tells us with regard to the ground of existence is that it stands in a positive relation to what is *not yet* being: it is the potential for being, a potential that, because it is both blind and indeterminate, is best likened to something "sinister."⁵⁰ To stand on the side of "God" is to stand not on the side of what pours things forth (the *ἀπειρον*), but on the side of what *resists*

⁴⁴ SW II/3, 183. From this point forward in Schelling's text, there is no available English translation.

⁴⁵ GF, 1894-5.

⁴⁶ As cited in SW II/3, 205.

⁴⁷ SW II/3, 204-205.

⁴⁸ SW II/3, 208-209.

⁴⁹ SW II/3, 205.

⁵⁰ SW II/3, 226.

this movement, what gives form to things otherwise inchoate and unreal. The ground itself, what stands outside of all “idea,” renders God himself finite⁵¹ and, thus, existentially at risk.

Goethe knows the “God at risk.” The Father God who appears in the “Prologue in Heaven” that opens *Faust I*, in other words, the God who attaches Mephistopheles to Faust in order to animate him (to snap him out of his suicidal depression), is no longer to be found by the end of *Faust II*, where he has been replaced by the Eternal Feminine. Goethe’s intuition is effectively that modernity plays it-self out on the field of a theological catastrophe. The death of God is real. It can be inferred from the important scene when Faust, entertaining the thought of appropriating for himself the magical source of reality, takes out a book of Nostradamus and peers at the sign of the macrocosm. He first sees in it the beauty of the same celestial vision that once freed Dante from dark memory and thirst for revenge. “What a spectacle!” he proclaims. But he then realizes what, in the wake of Copernicus, we all must realize, so that he immediately adds: “But, alas, only a spectacle!”⁵²

Science reveals the cosmic play to be no more than a beautiful illusion. The Faust who wants to know everything has already slammed his fist (*Faust*) even without knowing it. A world that appeared in the form of a luminous sphere offered to man by God in his heaven is now revealed as a material universe that, infinite in time and space, leaves no room for either God or heaven. The celestial sphere has been broken open. After Copernicus came Newton (Goethe’s nemesis), who unmasked self-levitating orbs of holy light as bodies that fall, just as all things fall. No place in heaven is sufficiently heavenly to accommodate a world of spirit. Reality as such is fallen. Schelling, like Goethe, finds himself emphatically on the Protestant side of Christianity. And, also like Goethe, he knows its danger: the turn to the secular (what else is there but the fallen world?) can simply translate into a turn to a world stripped of all meaning.

The truth is the dead infinity of boundless matter (*ἄπειρον*), what Schelling understands as the ground of being outside of all idea. If humanity makes its appearance, then that too is only an appearance. Cast forth blindly, man has been left on a rock to die.

But all is not hopeless. When Faust, baffled, turns to the symbol of the Earth Spirit (all that remains), he is both overwhelmed by its power and emboldened by its vitality. The dead infinite is not dead after all. Even stone contains the seed of life.

Here we need to be reminded that both Goethe and Schelling were committed evolutionists, aware that earth has the capacity to give birth to life, which in turn has the capacity to give birth to spirit. No one else in their age was more

⁵¹ It may be helpful to point out that Schelling cites Kant (Critique of Pure Reason, A613/B641) in making this observation (SW II/3, 163). If God constitutes the cause of the world, one cannot help but to imagine that he is perplexed over the riddle of his own existence (“But where did I come from?”).

⁵² GF, 454.

prepared to understand the significance of Faust's turn to the Earth Spirit. After Copernicus and Newton, the greening earth is the only remaining symbol of hope.

All of this is anticipated in the Prologue in Heaven, when we find angels singing their ethereal song. When the song opens (in the voice of Raphael), it seems well enough attuned to the angelic song that completes the *Divine Comedy*. What destroys the attunement, however, are the words of Gabriel that follow: "And rock and ocean are swept along / in the ever quickening movement of the sphere,"⁵³ whereby the sphere in question is now simply the revolving earth. And as we know, the revolving earth is what causes the appearance of a heaven that revolves upon itself in one grand circular Amen to the glory of God above. When Michael, the last of Goethe's archangels, speaks, sky has already fallen and all he has left to proclaim is the raging tempest that makes a mockery of any attempt to praise "the gentle turning of [God's] day."⁵⁴ What remains is the up-close to hu-manity perspective voiced by Mephistopheles: "Of suns and worlds I know noth-ing to say / all I see is human beings plaguing themselves."⁵⁵ Reason, the highest thing humans have in their possession, serves only to make them "greater beasts than any beast."⁵⁶

With the celestial perspective debunked, it is a desperate God who has placed his bet on Faust. If divinity can be discerned in the lightning-thunder display of the tempest, if Faust can withstand the terror of the Earth Spirit and see through to *its* divinity, then humanity can still place its trust in the wisdom of a God now understood within the framework of a new cosmic vision. With the God of the heavens unmasked as an illusion, the living God can only be discerned in the true *Mysterium*: what pours forth from the dark bosom of earth is not simply mat-ter, it is *life*. Limitless possibility is mysteriously wedded to limit, the principle of organic form. God is the principle of restraint.

Returning now to the *Philosophy of Revelation*, we find Schelling under-scoring just how close Faust came to getting all of this right when, in a period of self-restraint, he withdrew to the forest and lived like a hermit. What we see is what the God of the Prologue saw when placing his bet that Faust was someone he could count on. But a bet, even for God, comes with a risk. In the language of the late Schelling, God's existence cannot be established "through his prius" but only "through his posterius."⁵⁷ In judging that God is indeed God, one quite simply has to wait to see how things turn out. Opportunities are not opportunities, except inso-far as they can be missed.

The opportunity as such is given in the sublimity of Faust's vision when living in a cave in the forest. Aware of Gretchen's innocence and fragility, he has retreated in an act of life-giving *renunciation*, deciding, out of love for Gretchen, to let her grow into a woman, instead of forcing her to become what she was too

⁵³ GF, 257-8.

⁵⁴ GF, 266.

⁵⁵ GF, 279-80.

⁵⁶ GF, 286. One is reminded of Schelling's statement that "man can stand only below or above ani-mals" (SW I/7, 373).

⁵⁷ SW II/3, 249.

young to be.⁵⁸ Schelling discusses the crucial passage in the context of his theory of potencies: the primordial capacity to be (the principle of will and lust) surrenders itself to pure being, when, by exercising its capacity, it loses itself *as capacity*. In mythical terms, Cronus overplays his power and is relegated to the underworld. But on Schelling's reading, it is not Zeus who counters Cronus with *greater power*, but it is love that lets Cronus shed capacity in the very act of activating it. The movement to pure being is, in other words, an act of self-surrender, whereby the primordial capacity to be "is freed and redeemed through this new relationship from its particularity (*Eigenheit*), that is to say, from its selfhood."⁵⁹ Gretchen has revealed such beauty to Faust that he feels he has no choice but to step back—and when he does so, he discerns not simply *her* beauty, but beauty as such.

Faust is on the verge of recognizing the divinity of the Earth Spirit, disclosing thereby the God who can survive the Copernican Revolution. Before the arrival of Mephistopheles, he has begun words of thanksgiving poignant enough to commence the divinization of nature:

You have given me everything I asked for....
You gave me glorious nature as my kingdom,
And strength to feel and enjoy her⁶⁰

At this juncture, Schelling inserts a remarkable aside, essentially a reference to the poems that he and Goethe once wrote celebrating the metamorphosis of plants and animals, that is to say, the principle of biological evolution. "Anyone," he says, "who knows the joys of comparative anatomy should be enthused by the words that follow."⁶¹

You lead the procession of living beings
Before me, teaching me to recognize my brothers
Amidst quiet bushes and in air and water.⁶²

With the culmination:

You then show me myself
Letting the deep miraculous secrets
Of my own breast reveal themselves to me.⁶³

On Schelling's reading, the magic is the magic of nature itself. One's heart does indeed contain "deep miraculous secrets," but they are secrets that correspond to productive principles within all of nature. In accord with this deep correspondence,

⁵⁸ GF, 3328-9.

⁵⁹ SW II/3, 230.

⁶⁰ GF, 3217-22.

⁶¹ SW II/3, 231.

⁶² GF, 3225-27.

⁶³ GF, 3232-4.

the vision is granted only to one who has been lifted out of oneself, ecstatically elevated to not-willing.⁶⁴ Put differently, what Faust discovers in his own heart is what Schelling in his Erlanger Lecture of 1821 calls *Mit-Wissenschaft*,⁶⁵ the “co-knowledge” whereby an ecstatically decentered human knowing is granted a fleet-ing intuition into the heart of knowing as such.⁶⁶ Humbled by his recognition of Gretchen’s beauty, Faust has for a moment been delivered from the principle of his own selfhood. As such, he was close to earning the trust of a God who delivered him over to Mephistopheles. He would, however, have had to turn his hymn of thanksgiving into his life’s work.

Incapable of saying to the moment, “abide forever,”⁶⁷ by saying to Gretchen, “let us live together for always,” Faust is given the even more sublime opportunity to enter the moment by stepping away from Gretchen and, as a hermit, receiving her back again in the form of lived unity with nature. But one thing stands in the way. As Faust says to the Earth Spirit, whom he longs to embrace, “But you gave me that companion whom I can no longer dispense with,”⁶⁸ Mephistopheles, who would win his bet if Faust were to embrace the moment, is the one thing that makes that impossible: for he debases every present good by constantly pointing to others that lie further away. As the principle of intelligence, Mephistopheles enhances human power and opportunity by stripping away the possibility of finding satisfaction in any form of life that is ever actually given. He points in this way to Faust’s final destiny: the hell of the billionaire titan who always wants more, the more he gets—a hell that is multiplied by all of the victims of his systematic plundering. Even if ceded the deed to the entire universe, he would not be able to rest satisfied until he had developed it fully in his own image, a necessarily impossible task—and one with horrific consequences for all those who harbor images of their own.

Entering into the bet with Faust was a questionable thing for Mephistopheles to do, since the only way to win it would be to renounce upon his claim. How, after all, could he carry a saint (someone who had found what he was looking for) into hell? The real significance of the passage is that Faust missed his opportunity at any redemption that might have been “earned.” Instead of unveiling, as his gift to humanity, the vision of God reborn from the hidden depths of nature (the God who must *reveal* himself from himself), he let himself become the symbol of a self-deified humanity that, work obsessed, constantly seeks to bring nature under its own control, with the result that, by objectifying nature, it alienates itself from the rejuvenating energies that constitute the tragically unrealized promise of modernity.

⁶⁴ SW II/3, 232.

⁶⁵ SW I/9, 221.

⁶⁶The Erlanger Lecture has been translated by Marcus Weigelt into English under the title of “On the Nature of Philosophy as Science” and can be found in Rüdiger Bubner (ed.), *German Idealist Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 210-243. It is important to observe that the idea of co-knowledge is introduced together with the famous quote from Goethe’s *Theory of Colors*: “If the eye were not like the sun.”

⁶⁷ GF, 1700.

⁶⁸ GF, 3242.

3.

Reigniting Faust's lust with the suggestion that the rapture of the nature mystic is just a form of spiritual masturbation,⁶⁹ Mephistopheles leads Faust towards the se-duction of Gretchen and the Walpurgis Night debasement of nature worship into a senseless, if sensual, orgy. The sequence "Walpurgis Night—Walpurgis Night's Dream" represents *Goethe's* clear avowal of philosophical proximity to Schelling. As playful as the scenes are, they contain a serious enough attempt to uncover the dark side of things. It is significant that Schelling makes an appearance of sorts in the "Dream."

But before the dream comes the night. And, on the face of it, the night is dream enough. In deciding to attend the celebration of May Day Eve on Brocken Mountain, Faust and Mephistopheles give themselves over to a truly fantastical scene. With a will o' the wisp as an improbably erratic guide through the deep darkness of the night, they follow the blazing fires of Mammon, a stream of molten gold, up the hill towards the evil that is its consequence. In other words, up the hill to hell we go: this is Dante's *Inferno* standing on its head, evil at its top rather than its bottom. Although Faust, under the pretext of knowing the truth, is determined to follow the hordes of witches and warlocks to the very pinnacle, where Satan himself will preside over the most secret rites of horrific evil,⁷⁰ Mephistopheles cautions prudence, suggesting that they halt instead at a high mountain valley where those who come short of absolute wickedness are camped out—among them, some naked witches eager to dance. Faust acquiesces and seems to enjoy the little orgy until a red mouse pops out of the mouth of his lewd partner. Stunned at the apparition, he falls away and is treated to the only manifestation of evil that is truly a manifestation: and that, of course, is the sudden recognition of the evil that he himself has wrought. It comes in the form of a prophetic vision of Gretchen's final destruction. What he sees is an image of her with a tight red necklace about her neck. He recognizes in it the mark of the executioner's axe once Mephistopheles points out that "she can carry her head under her arm."⁷¹ Knowing that he has said more truth than Faust can bear, he quickly adds: "but over there I see a thea-tre."⁷² This forms the shift to the Walpurgis Night's Dream, which comes in the form of play. On the face of it, this much seems to be clear: art is a place of refuge for souls incapable of bearing the truth. Nietzsche would be pleased. Žižek would presumably respond with Lacanian commentary.

My own reading is a bit more subtle. Nature carries within itself the possibility of evil, to be sure, but just as surely the possibility of good. Deception is not mandatory. For this reason it matters when we are told that the theatre requires no artificial staging.⁷³ Mountain and valley are staging enough. The play is the play of nature, complete with an "orchestra" of buzzing flies and mosquitoes, croaking

⁶⁹ GF, 3285-92.

⁷⁰ GF, 4039-40.

⁷¹ GF, 4207.

⁷² GF, 4213.

⁷³ GF, 4224.

frogs and chirping crickets.⁷⁴ The subtitle of the Walpurgis Night's Dream, "The Golden Wedding Anniversary of Oberon and Titania," reinforces the point—at least it does so, once one realizes that these fairy spirits, in addition to being poetic imports from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, are also *what they represent*: the interplay of earth and sky. With roots deep in nature, art and poetry are more than deception. They are instead vehicles for manifesting truth.

Even before the play as such commences, the herald draws a sharp contrast between nature and convention, emphasizing that truth is on the side of the former: "To make a wedding anniversary golden, fifty years must pass by; but whenever quarrels come to an end, this is the gold that truly matters."⁷⁵ The song-filled celebration of nature that follows comes together with a very specific recipe for harmonizing opposing principles. When quarrels do arise, the trick is for her to head south and him to go north:⁷⁶ thus the principle of polarity that makes of nature a living whole. Positive and negative long for one another *in their separation*. When unity is achieved (e.g., positive on positive), then separation is the necessary result. True love, in other words, binds only those who can stand apart. Behind all of this, one can glimpse the nature philosophy that Goethe shares with Schelling: the earth gives rise to life, the process of evolution, not because of random accidents of nature, but because the earth, containing sufficient water, is itself magnetized. The contemporary quantum physicist sees half of this: subatomic particles attract one another—until they come too close together, when they repel one another with violence. What Goethe and Schelling add is the recognition that this relationship, the dance of Oberon and Titania, is always already the seed of life.

Although not explicitly named, Schelling makes an appearance, at first coupled with Fichte under the name of the "Idealist."⁷⁷ It matters, however, that in the dance of life, what comes together also flies apart. If Fichte retains the title of the idealist, Schelling makes his own renewed appearance as the "Realist."⁷⁸ In truth, of course, the little Fichte-Schelling chant does justice to neither philosopher, but simply represents the popular understanding of idealism as the raving of a solipsistic imagination:

The fantasy as I would like it
Is this time too domineering (*herrisch*);
In truth, if I am all of this
Then today I am quite foolish (*närrisch*).⁷⁹

While the stanza might seem too playful to merit serious analysis, it is nonetheless worth observing that it contains a tension between the solipsistic idea that "the world is my imaginative creation" and the recognition that, if so, it is the creation

⁷⁴ GF, 4250-55.

⁷⁵ GF, 4227-30.

⁷⁶ GF, 4249-50.

⁷⁷ GF, 4347-50.

⁷⁸ GF, 4351-54.

⁷⁹ GF, 4347-51.

of an imagination that can run wild, in other words, an imagination that has a life of its own. To be dominated by one's own fantasy is to suffer it, quite as if it had a root in nature independent of the will of the one who exercises it.

And indeed, without asserting that this was Goethe's intention, it seems that the idea of an *amalgam* between Schelling and Fichte has something to do with it. The implicit tension I have just alluded to, between nature (Schelling) and idea (Fichte), is heightened the more one contextualizes the passage. The dozen or so con-temporary voices who chant their lines in the Walpurgis Night's Dream are counterbalanced by a dozen or so nature spirits, who are themselves led on by Puck and Ariel, one with his feet on the ground and the other with his lyre tuned to the heavens. All of these in turn are rooted in the central event of the piece, the anniversary of the king and queen of the fairies. The real and the ideal belong to one another in a dynamic form of union that brings together two independent spirits who invariably fight with one another before reconciling with a kiss.

From this point of view, idealism itself is simply one of innumerable forms that flow out of the wedding of opposites. In the words of Oberon:

If spouses want to tolerate one another,
Let them learn from us;
If two should be joined in love,
All one needs is to split them apart.⁸⁰

This is not, however, to suggest that the idealist who speaks in the fanciful chant of spirits is mere fluff. Together with the realist with whom he is paired (an uncomfortable realist who concedes that for once he is no longer steady on his feet⁸¹)—he speaks out the truth of the Dream.

Or a truth: that the world is a dream, the fanciful substitute, presumably, for a Walpurgis nightmare too hellish to see through to the end.

But is it a substitute? It did not require a dream to show us that nature carries within herself an orchestra. The initial ascent up the mountain itself unfolded with its own musical accompaniment, with gushing mountain streams playing the pipe (*Hör ich Rauschen? Hör ich Lieder?*⁸²). Nature unravels its meaning, whether or not its hieroglyphics can be read. Although witches on broomsticks and flying sows represent a mixing that can be deemed plausible only in the darkest night, they represent nonetheless what lies at the bottom of both nature and art: the manifest showing and pouring forth of what in the core of reality is fused together in an invisible and unspeakable one. And this much is true: nightmarish visions, defying the order of the laws of reason, can in fact pour forth once consciousness is sufficiently dimmed. As can other visions, with different affect.

The truth of the matter is that neither heaven nor hell is somehow "ultimate." It all depends, as the Weathercock knows, on which way the wind is blowing. The truth spoken here constitutes the very center of the Walpurgis Night's

⁸⁰ GF, 4243-46.

⁸¹ GF, 4354.

⁸² GF, 3883.

Dream. Turned to the one side, the Weathercock sees weddings in store for all of the young people;⁸³ turned to the other side, hell itself opens up before him.⁸⁴

Philosopher and poet alike must learn the art of resolutely standing in the wind of truth. Both, in effect, must resist the Faustian impulse to appropriate its magic for oneself.

4.

In *Faust I*, the man who was Faust is forced to the recognition that he is not god enough to bear the full weight of truth that he is determined to make his own. In *Faust II*, he is reborn as a symbol of modern humanity: by the sin of forgetting Gretchen (being stripped of his *conscience*) he ceases to be a *person* in any truly significant sense of the word. No longer a problem to himself, he becomes simply a cipher for the always growing desire to have more. In a word, Faust becomes cold. Even his love for Helen is an empty love, for what he loves in her is the empty form of beauty. Although he freed her from the realm of death, she bears no sign of truly being alive. Cold beauty for a cold heart.

Liberated by his lack of conscience into an unlimited capacity for action, Faust prefigures the billionaire titans of our own day. The optimistic (mis)reading of Part Two of the play is that what the individual cannot accomplish humanity as a whole will accomplish. The narrow world of feudal Europe, the world that placed the beautiful and guileless Gretchen on the torture rack, will simply be swept aside. A new and better world, where tragedy is no longer possible, will be erected to take its place. Humanity will be god enough by becoming good enough. The problem though is that, like the dying Faust's utopian vision of a free community of Faustian hard-workers, "He alone earns for himself his freedom as his life / Who every day has to win it anew,"⁸⁵ it is placed irredeemably in the future. As Max Weber pointed out, the tragedy of modernity is that by placing its hope in an idealized future it makes it difficult for a person, like the Abraham of old, to look back with contentment on a life filled with love and experience and, thus satisfied, to die in peace.⁸⁶ Faust dies while articulating a crazed vision of humanity eternally pushing back the sea that must ultimately engulf it.

Goethe himself counters the idea that life is only for those who "earn it" by ushering Faust off to heaven, even while making it clear that he has by no means *earned* his salvation. From the point of view of Faust, such a salvation is an insult, a rejection of his firmest beliefs. But Faust and his *beliefs* are not what is saved in the end. Indeed, the Faust who was drawn up into the spirit world has nothing to

⁸³ GF: 4295-98.

⁸⁴ GF: 4299-302.

⁸⁵ GF, 11576-77.

⁸⁶ Max Weber draws the contrast with Abraham in his famous essay *Science as a Vocation*. One sentence in particular seems to have been rendered with Faust in mind, particularly the Faust who (like a good Calvinist) vows never to lie on a bed of leisure (GF, 1692). A loose rendition of the decisive Weber passage might read, "Because, in an age of progress and civilization, an individual life is placed in trajectory toward infinity, it can never really possess meaning or purpose."

say, whatsoever. His vision is dissolved. That said, it is not the case that all that was in him has been destroyed. In this respect, the salvation is genuine. What has been rescued is not so much the person that is Faust (this he has done a good job of destroying), but the core of goodness that sustained him through his strange career: his astonishing courage, the ability not only to face life, but to take upon himself the risk of eternal damnation. In Schelling's terms, salvation comes in the form of a "separation" of good and evil.⁸⁷ Or, what amounts to the same thing, it comes in the form of a "humbling" (what could be more humbling than death?). Because life does go on, the good in Faust is prepared for the same career that his crazed ambition aborted. The "new" Faust is to be what, in life, he had no patience to be: a teacher, one dedicated not to his best students alone, but to those who acknowledge their deep-seated fear of life.⁸⁸ What he will have to share and to teach is his courage. This is the meaning of the strange command that he attach himself to a group of unborn boys, who, given a glimpse of the world they are about to enter, draw back with a cry of terror, quite as if theirs was already the wisdom of Silenus—the best thing for human beings is never to be born in the first place.⁸⁹

All of this is relevant to an essay on Schelling, insofar as the only adequate explanation of Faust's salvation is the one that is implicit in the penultimate section of Schelling's essay on *Human Freedom*. Death is the separation of the good (which is preserved) from evil (which is abolished). The reason that Faust is not sent to eternal damnation, in other words, is that a damnation that is eternal is not conceivable. What is cast away is cast not into a hellish "forever" but into non-being. And while non-being retains the "reality" of empty potency, it is a potency so empty that it is void of all personhood.⁹⁰ There is, in other words, no such thing as a damned *soul*. Schelling, the thinker of what is *positive* in evil, turns out to be less a Manichaean than Augustine, the self-declared anti-Manichaean who, despite his doctrine of evil as privation, was still unable to surrender the idea of hell as a place of eternal damnation, so alluring to the spirit of *ressentiment*. In this way, Schelling articulates the hidden metaphysics of Goethe's *Faust*. Evil is real and positive, but it is only real as a posture asserted by a particular (and thus transient) will, the will to transform our connection with the totality (which is given to us a gift, always "hidden in the ground") into something we command for ourselves. Thus the Faustian will to be lord and master of nature, to take reality and make it *mine*.

To highlight the evil, Goethe creates the figure of Homunculus as a counterfoil to Faust. The story of this fantastical being is worth recalling here at the end of the essay, for the way it concludes reveals the full measure of Goethe's debt to Schelling. Homunculus is a little artificial man who, locked in a glass jar,⁹¹ carries

⁸⁷ SW I/7, 404.

⁸⁸ GF, 12083.

⁸⁹ GF, 11914-18.

⁹⁰ SW I/7, 404-05.

⁹¹ Homunculus was not entirely artificial. He was grown, not fabricated, by Faust's former assistant Wagner. For a detailed description of how to grow such beings from a drop of male sperm, see Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest Books, 2007), 14.

within him the knowledge of Google. He is, in a word, a “universal calculator.” To this distillation of pure intelligence, an unaccountable will (one that could not possibly have been concocted in a scientific laboratory) has, interestingly enough, attached itself: the will to have a real life. In the pursuit of this goal, Homunculus teams up with a Faust who is similarly in pursuit of Helen. For both goals, one place has the answer: ancient Greece.

Before Goethe completed the composition of the Classical Walpurgis Night in which this world is disclosed (and from its very root!), he completed a reading of Schelling’s last significant publication, a philosophical attempt to lay that world open.⁹² The reading was compelling enough to have inspired Goethe to insert a parody of Schelling’s narrative into the text.⁹³ It occurs in the course of Homunculus’s search for real existence, a search that took him through the mythical underbelly of classical antiquity and culminated in an encounter with the philosophers Thales and Anaxagoras, who argue about whether the source of real life is to be found by looking up, into the fire of the sun, or down, into the waters of the ocean.⁹⁴ Although Anaxagoras’s love of fire seems buoyed by an impressive volcanic eruption, Homunculus places his trust not in him but in Thales, who prefers to go the slow way that nature goes. It is fitting then that Thales, rather than pretending to answer Homunculus when he asks how to begin life, takes him instead to an older kind of authority than philosophy, the old sea god Nereus, who is watching his daughters, the Sirens, as they head off to the Cabiri. The Cabiri are archaic deities “who remake themselves ever anew.”⁹⁵ It is at this point that Goethe draws directly from Schelling’s treatise, which was devoted to a philosophical exposition of just these deities.

Meanwhile, back in Goethe’s narrative, Nereus, who is busy with his daughters, says he has no interest in resolving Homunculus’s problem. Instead, he suggests they find Proteus to solve the riddle. Unbeknownst to him, poetry has now gone back to philosophy for an answer, for Proteus is none other than the philosopher Schelling,⁹⁶ an unusual philosopher, however, who reads his own truths out of poetry. Thales expresses skepticism about Proteus—and with the same terms that led Hegel to attach the name of Proteus to Schelling in the first place: “If one meets Proteus, he as quickly dissolves away . . . what he propounds is what confuses and astounds.”⁹⁷ Proteus, being Proteus, does not show himself immedi-

⁹² SW, I/8, 209-246. See footnote 3.

⁹³ It is a measure of just how “wounded” Schelling felt by the parody of him that Hegel inserted into the Preface of the *Phenomenology* that he seems not to have taken kindly to the way Goethe memorialized him in *Faust II*. This would account for why he never made any kind of reference to this most “Schellingian” of Goethe’s works.

⁹⁴ GF, 7830-55.

⁹⁵ GF, 8075.

⁹⁶ According to Hegel, Schelling was the “Proteus of philosophy,” who lacked the patience and discipline to stick to one system. I still remember my excitement when (on a plane of all places) I first realized this connection—my first-ever scholarly discovery. Sobriety was restored when months later I discovered that Schelling’s Russian biographer, Arsenij Gulyga, had already made the connection. See Gulyga, *Schelling: Leben und Werke*, 279-283.

⁹⁷ GF, 8155-58.

ately. He emerges only with the siren song that awakens Schelling's Cabiri.⁹⁸ As for the Cabiri, they appear in the form of clay urns, adorned with the figures of the deities etched upon them. They represent, in other words, the meeting place of death and life. The passages is rife with explicit references to Schelling's essay.⁹⁹

It is thus Homunculus who summons Proteus-Schelling by delivering what Schelling might very well have understood as Goethe's sarcastic dismissal of his essay. After describing the clay pots, Homunculus says, "Now sages clash with them, and lots of hardened heads are shattered."¹⁰⁰ With that, the sage appears, in the form of Proteus, the spirit who constantly changes forms in the same way that, according to Hegel, Schelling constantly changes systems.

When pressed for an answer as to how Homunculus can join with the "sol-id clay of earth" (in which the clay-urns of the Cabiri are once again evoked), Proteus-Schelling has a clear answer. The glass jar (the implicit solipsism of fully self-transparent reason) must be shattered, not on the beach, however, but only in the water. In this way, given that water is his element, Thales the philosopher gets vindicated along the way. As for life:

In the wide sea, you must find your beginning!
Begin with the very small,
Gladly consuming even the tiniest,
Until you slowly grow larger
And prepare yourself for higher accomplishments.¹⁰¹

Homunculus must recapitulate, for himself, the long and painful path of evolution.¹⁰² The price of admission for "real existence" is a billion years of working one's way through the chain of fish eating fish until, climbing out to land, one is ready for the climb up to being fully human. Against contemporary philosophers and computer scientists who are hard at work trying to realize the ideal of disembodied, fully self-transparent intelligence, Proteus-Schelling recognizes that, instead of trying so hard to become like Homunculus ourselves (presumably in an attempt to escape the pain of existence) we should instead join him in a wish for life that is so earnest that it involves the willingness to surrender oneself into cold darkness, in order to repeat from the beginning the long trek through nature that constituted intelligence in the first place.

To do this, we must shatter the glass walls that now encase us: "This is the character of things: The universe scarcely suffices for the natural;/ What is artificial, however, requires a closed space."¹⁰³ The safety of solipsistic self-

⁹⁸ GF, 8212-18.

⁹⁹ GF, 8175-215.

¹⁰⁰ GF, 8221-2.

¹⁰¹ GF, 8260-65.

¹⁰² For the full story of the connection between Goethe, Schelling, and Darwin's Theory of Evolution, see Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

¹⁰³ GF, 6883-5. This is the translation I found in Manfred Frank, "Schelling's Late Return to Kant," *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus: International Yearbook of German Idealism*,

encapsulation must be surrendered for the sake of occupying the dangerous outer zone, populated everywhere by beings that are genuinely other. It is fear of the strange and genuinely other that makes the glass so hard. Shattering it requires the greatest possible act of courage. Courage that had only been voiced by Faust (in the suicide speech and in the descent to the Mothers) is now exemplified by Homunculus who, by shattering his little glass-jar chariot against the hard shell of Galatia, goddess of beauty, reconciles himself with the strangest of the strange, death itself—the only possible doorway to new and vital life. Only the love that binds together the clearest self-understanding with the darkest and most impene-trable ground suffices to give birth to real life.¹⁰⁴ It is this love that both Goethe and Schelling celebrated and it is with this love that they, poet and philosopher, joined together to give birth to works of magnificent scope and beauty.

vol. 6 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 29. Frank uses the image of Homunculus in a jar in order to sum up the solipsistic dimension of Fichte's thinking.

¹⁰⁴SW I/7, 409.