

GOETHE'S VIEW OF IMMORTALITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

GOETHE was not a philosopher, still less a psychologist, but none the less he was a thinker. First he was a poet, and though his poetry was philosophical, he cared little for philosophy and had a positive dislike for analytical and critical investigations. So it happened that in spite of the philosophical trend of Goethe's poetry, we find no satisfactory explanation of his thoughts, and this we feel most concerning his notions of the deity and man's soul. Goethe clung to the conclusions which were forced upon him by the needs of his heart and intellect, but he did not venture into dialectics. It was an axiom with him that no thinking being could think its own non-existence, and thus he felt convinced that every one carried the proof of his own immortality in himself. However, an attempt to reduce it into dogmatic statements he deemed inadvisable because he thought that it would merely lead to contradictions.

Goethe's view of immortality was not that of the orthodox Christian. It was much more kin to Oriental philosophy, especially Buddhism. And this is the more remarkable as in Goethe's time only distant echoes of the wisdom of the East had reached Europe. But these echoes were sufficient for Goethe to say in a letter to the artist Meyer, dated August 24, 1823: "Let us only come upon the Orientals: There we find remarkable things."† But with all admiration for Orientalism Goethe was neither a mystic nor an admirer of romanticism. He was first of all a lover of clear and well-defined thought, and if he belonged to any special type, he was a Greek,—but he was a Greek because the true Greek was cosmopolitan and the genius of Greek antiquity was identical with humanitarianism. Or in other words, Goethe was convinced that

† "Man komme über die Orientalen, da findet man erstaunliche Dinge."

humanitarianism had found its purest expression in the civilization and religion of ancient Greece.

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Judging from Goethe's lines in "The Limits of Humanity,"

"We rise with the billow,
Collapse with the billow,
And we are gone."

we might be led to think that the poet did not believe in immortality, but such was not the case. Goethe denied immortality in a Utopian heaven, as an imaginary state of bliss where everything would be perfect, where battles were no longer to be fought, tasks no more to be done, dangers not to be encountered, and no suffering to be endured. He believed in activity, in doing and daring. He was a Sadducee (denying the resurrection of the dead, i. e., a resurrection of the body from the grave) in contrast to the Pharisee; and scorned the notion of an immortality in a purely spiritual beyond. Goethe says:

"A Sadducee I'll be fore'er,
For it would drive me to despair,
If the Philistines who now cramp me
Would cripple my eternity.
'Twould be the same old fiddle-faddle,
In heaven we'd have celestial twaddle."

But in spite of siding with the Sadducee in questions of resurrection, Goethe cherishes the conviction that the soul is immortal, and he insists on it again and again. He argues, we must be immortal because we need immortality. Says Goethe:

"Drop all of transciency
Whate'er be its claim,
Ourselves to immortalize,
That is our aim."

The same idea is expressed in another poem called "An Interlude" which we translate thus:

"Oh, drop the transient, drop it from our lives!
Thence help is never realized.
In past events the valiant good survives,
In noble deeds immortalized.

"And life acquires its vitality,
Throughout causation's endless chain.
For character gives man stability
Endeavor makes that he remain."

"Thus the great question of our future home
At last is for solution rife:

For the enduring while on earth we roam,
Assureth us eternal life."

This poem, which belongs to Goethe's masonic verses, has been set to music by J. N. Hummel, and was sung as a quartette in the Lodge Amalia, at Weimar, September 3, 1825. We here reproduce the song from Wernekke's book on "Goethe and the Royal Art".*

Larghetto.



1. Laßt fah-ren hin das All-zu-flüch-ti-ge; ihr sucht be-
2. Und so ge-winnt sich das Le-ben-di-ge durch Folg' aus
3. So löst sich je-ne gro-ße Fra-ge nach unserm



1. ihm ver-ge-bens Rat! In dem Ver-gang - nen lebt das
2. Fol-ge neu-e Kraft; denn die Ge - sin - nung, die be-
3. zweiten Va-ter-land; denn das Be-stän-dige der ird'sche



1. Tüch-ti-ge, ver-e-wigt sich in schö-ner
2. stän-di-ge, sie macht den Men-schen dau-er-
3. Ta-ge, ver-bürgt uns e-wi-gen Be



1. Tat, ver-e-wigt sich in schö-ner Tat.
2. haft, sie macht den Men-schen dau-er-haft.
3. stand, ver-bürgt uns e-wi-gen Be-stand.

Goethe had a high respect for Orientalism and his conception of immortality was closely akin to the Buddhist view of reincarnation.

* *Goethe und die königliche Kunst.* Von Dr. Hugo Wernekke, vormal's Meister vom Stuhl der Loge Amalia, in Weimar. Leipzig, 1905.

Commenting on the death of Wieland on the day of his funeral, January, 25, 1813, Goethe said to Falk, a well-known author and philanthropist, founder of an asylum for neglected children,

"I am sure that I, such as you see me here, have lived a thousand times, and I hope to come again another thousand times."

Goethe's notion of immortality was closely connected with his conception of evolution. He believed in growth and higher development, or what to-day we call "evolution." Immortality according to his idea depended on ourselves, and he regarded the human soul as an organic center which he sometimes called with Leibnitz "monad" and sometimes with Aristotle "entelechy." In fact he used this latter term in his first draft when speaking of Faust's ascent to heaven, and only later on replaced the phrase "entelechy of Faust" by the word "the immortal of Faust."

Goethe says in a letter to Knebel of December 3, 1781,

"It is an article of my faith that only through fortitude and faithfulness in our present condition can we rise to a higher plane of being in our next existence and thus become capable of entering upon it from this temporal existence of ours to the beyond in eternity."

In his talks with Eckermann Goethe said September 1, 1829,

"I do not doubt our continuance, for nature can not do without continuity; but we are not all immortal in the same way, and in order to manifest ourselves as a great entelechy, we must be one."

On March 3, 1830, Goethe recurs to the same subject, saying to Eckermann,

"The persistence of the individual and the fact that man rejects what does not agree with him, are proofs to me that such a thing as an entelechy exists. Leibnitz cherished similar ideas concerning such an independent being, but what we call 'entelechy,' he calls 'monad.'"

Says Goethe in his "Proverbs in Prose" (1028 and 1029),

"The highest that we owe to God and nature is life, which consists in the rotation of the monad round itself which knows no rest whatever. The impulse to cherish life and to cultivate it is indestructibly inborn in each of us, but its idiosyncrasy remains a mystery to us and to others. The second favor which we receive from the higher beings consists in our experience, our observations, the interference of living and moving monads with the surrounding world."

How the reappearance of the entelechy, or the monad, or the soul, is to be conceived, is left an open question by Goethe, and he thought an investigation of the problem as unworthy of himself. He said (February, 25, 1824):

"I leave that to aristocratic folks and especially to women who have nothing to do. An able man who needs to be useful here and who has daily to struggle, to strive, and to work, leaves the world to come, alone, and makes himself busy and useful in this one."

The present life, at any rate this world, not a beyond, demands our complete attention. Says Goethe in the second part of *Faust*:

"The sphere of earth is known enough to me;
The view beyond is barred immutably:
A fool, who there his blinking eyes directeth,
Above the clouds a place of peers detecteth!
Firm let him stand, and look around him well!
This world means something to the capable.
Why needs he through eternity to wend?
He here acquires what he can apprehend."

This passage proves that when Goethe speaks of "the beyond," he means beyond the grave, but still in this actual world of ours; when he speaks of "eternity" he means the infinite vista of higher life before us, or perhaps the condition of timelessness, but not a heaven with angelic choirs.

Even our immortalized existence is and will remain a constant struggle. Says *Faust*:

"Yes! to this thought I hold with firm persistence;
The last result of wisdom stamps it true:
He only earns his freedom and existence,
Who daily conquers them anew.
Then dared I hail the Moment fleeing:
'Ah, still delay—thou art so fair!
The traces cannot, of mine earthly being,
In æons perish,—they are there!"

—*Translated by Bayard Taylor.*

Goethe sketches his view of the soul in a fascinating poem, in which the explanation of its ascent to heaven and its descent to earth, in the sense of reincarnation, have to be taken seriously. It is entitled "Song of the Spirits Over the Waters," and reads as follows:

"The soul of man
Is like unto water:
From heaven it cometh,
To heaven it riseth,
And down again
To the earth descendeth,
Ever changing.

"Streams from the lofty
Rocky wall
Its crystal flood
As spray it drifts,
In wavy clouds
Round slippery cliffs,
Below met sprightly,

And veiling its course,
 With low murmur it rusheth
 Deeper and deeper.

"Where frowning rocks
 Impede the torrent,
 Indignant it foams
 From ledge to ledge,
 Into the gorge.
 In level meadow
 The brook meanders,
 And in the spreading lake

Mirror their faces
 The heavenly stars.

"Wind pleads with the waves
 In passionate wooing;
 Wind stirs from the bottom
 The froth-covered billows.

"Soul of man,
 How like unto water!
 Fortune of man,
 How like unto wind!"

The most vigorous poem of Goethe on the transiency of the body and our duty of immortalizing our soul, has been splendidly translated by Edgar Alfred Bowring. It reads:

"It matters not, I ween,
 Where worms our friends consume,
 Beneath the turf so green,
 Or 'neath the marble tomb.
 Remember ye who live,
 Though frowns the fleeting day,
 That to your friends you give
 What never will decay."