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Ronald Gray

Excerpt

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So they loved, as love in twain
 Had the essence but in one;
 Two distincts, division none:
 Number there in love was slain.

The Phoenix and Turtle affords the simplest indication of the present theme. Nowhere in English literature is there any closer approach to the mystical strain in German thought which makes itself felt throughout the centuries. 'Mystical' is not quite the word—it is a strain which has to do with the mystic's absorbed identity with the godhead, and yet often finds expression in quite un-mystical and even unreligious fields. The 'coincidentia oppositorum' of the fifteenth-century Nicholas of Cusa, Plotinus's 'flight of the alone to the alone', Luther's belief in a God who 'works by contraries', all these have to do with it, but so does the belief of the German Romantics in 'polarity', the Hegelian contrasts of thesis and antithesis, and the dialectical pattern of Marxism, adapted from this feature of Hegel's philosophy. And so does the combination of 'male and female' world-principles found in the Tao of Chinese religion.

One cannot help noticing how frequently these opposites, or often merely so-called opposites, recur in German thought and literature. They are found in the works of the seventeenth-century Silesian mystic, Jacob Boehme, in the form of the 'philosophic Sulphur and Mercury', which he borrowed from the alchemists and transformed into symbols of the Wrath and the Mercy of God, the Father and the Son, the Bridegroom and his Bride; and again half a century later in his compatriot Angelus Silesius. They come again in the Romantics, especially in Schelling, for whom the mysterious force of electricity, with its 'positive' and 'negative' poles seemed to be the very

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manifestation of the World-Soul. From this usage comes the name, 'polarity', by which these systematizations are often characterized. It is not until the Romantic age, however, or to be precise the age of Goethe which begins a few decades earlier, that the notion of polarity becomes really widespread. It is very familiar to Goethe himself, who had it from both the alchemists and from neo-Platonists like Giordano Bruno and perhaps Plotinus; it is most familiar to us in the 'Zwei Seelen' speech of Faust, in which he contrasts the working of the one soul within him, clutching at earthly life in all its poverty, and that of the other soul which soars aloft to reach Elysium. It is equally prominent in the Second Part of Goethe's masterpiece, where the marriage of Faust and Helen is a symbolical representation of the union between these two souls: the Northern with the Southern, the Gothic striving for the infinite with the Classical acceptance of earthliness, intellect with perfect bodily beauty, Germany with Greece. But it is also very noticeable in the play *Torquato Tasso*, where almost every speech seems designed to underline the contrast between the poet and the practical man of affairs, between heaven and earth, inspirational ecstasy and the daily round, doubt and certainty, and where once again the desired ideal is some fusion of all these, such as, it has often been felt, Goethe experienced in his own life.

From Goethe onwards the flood begins. Schiller, similarly attracted to neo-Platonist and theosophical speculation in his youth, continually employs a mode of thought in which all things are divided among two categories (and no more). Not only did he contrast himself as the 'sentimentalisch' poet—the poet constantly in search of Nature, constantly dissatisfied, constantly struggling—with Goethe as the 'naiv' poet, at one with Nature, serenely above all conflicts and quests, at home in an unquestioned world. He extended these two opposites to embrace all poets whatsoever in two universal, 'polar' categories, and he developed something very similar in his ethical theory, which rests on the contrast between 'Duty' and its opposite, 'Inclination'. Once again, there are for Schiller two types of ethical perfection, that of

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the 'Beautiful Soul' whose Duty always coincides with Inclination, and that of the 'Sublime Soul' in which such coincidence is the result of struggle and effort.

The similarities can be simplified down to the one similarity, that both Goethe and Schiller work with a duality which they seek to bring to a singularity or unity. Such a simplification is too simple, yet it will serve for the moment to indicate how many more German poets and thinkers of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century thought on parallel lines. In Hölderlin's poetry there is the contrasted symbolism of Christ and Dionysus and the attempt at their fusion, a symbolism comparable to that of Heine, in the concepts of the life-denying 'Nazarene' and the life-affirming 'Hellene', as well as to the 'Apolline' and the 'Dionysian' in Nietzsche, and the combination of 'Ecstasy' and 'Clarity' which Stefan George sought to embody. (Another division of the same kind, outside the field of German literature, is in Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*.) Schopenhauer sees the whole world as both the Will, brutal, blind and beyond all morality, and as the Imagination, reflecting and criticizing the Will in the name of morality. Thomas Mann sees the Germany of his day in terms of an unreflective (and hence in a way amoral), active, practical society of burghers, opposed to a highly reflective, morally critical but impractical group of artists and intellectuals, whose comments are incapable of doing more than make society aware of its own nature. Through all these there runs the notion of an untrammelled enjoyment of earthly existence, opposed to an ineffectual, passive, even negative denial of the worthiness of such existence. And almost everywhere the polar opposites return.

Coupled with the notion of 'polarity', however, there is very often the notion known to Goethe and some others as 'Steigerung', meaning 'intensification' or 'heightening', but perhaps better known in the Hegelian form as 'synthesis'. It refers of course to the fusion of the opposites, or the process by which such a fusion is reached, an ideal derived perhaps from the general sense that to be only other-worldly or only this-worldly, only believing and never doubting, is to be less than wholly human:

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the complete man subsumes the opposites within himself. Thus Schiller speaks of Inclination coinciding with Duty, the poet Tasso ends by at least momentarily embracing his opposite, the diplomat Antonio; Stefan George evolves the ideal of 'der Christ im Tanz'. The fullest sense of the notion may be illustrated more vividly by means of an example drawn from Goethe's scientific work.

It is a feature of Goethe's 'Colour-Theory' (of which he once said that he rated it more highly than his literary work) that, while it appears superficially to deal solely with matters of optics and chromatics, almost every detail is capable of carrying a symbolical meaning. The colours of the spectrum are divided, for this purpose, into two contrasting groups, the one according to its affinity with Yellow, symbolizing the positive, the male, the active and so forth, the other according to its affinity with Blue, symbolizing the negative, the female, and the passive. (These are, as I have argued elsewhere, the exact counterparts of Jacob Boehme's Sulphur and Mercury, ostensibly in a more scientific dress.) Goethe speaks of them in this way, it seems, because he sees in colours one manifestation of the system or pattern of polarity and synthesis which in his view informs the universe: colours are a microcosmic and identical repetition of the patterns of the macrocosm. Seeking to trace the analogies further, however, Goethe encounters some difficulties. His intention is to show that the cycle of colours (such as interior decorators use) can be expressed also in the form of a triangle of which Yellow and Blue are the points on the base, while Red is the apex above them. Red, he maintains, can be seen to develop both from Yellow and from Blue *via* what he calls Yellow-Red and Blue-Red—the midway points on the respective sides of the triangle—and this development occurs when there is a heightening or intensification ('Steigerung') of either Yellow or Blue.

The practical aspect of this is not convincing (Goethe argues for instance that a yellow liquid in a vessel, viewed from above, takes on a tinge of red as more yellow liquid is poured in, as it were intensifying the quantity of yellowness present. Even if this

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should happen in some circumstances, it clearly would not result at length in complete redness). The figurative aspects are more revealing, especially when one sees what the colour Red symbolizes in Goethe's scheme. It is, for reasons which he does not give, the 'highest colour' (perhaps because in the parallel systems of alchemy, Red is the colour of the Philosophers' Stone). It is an 'ideal satisfaction' to the beholder, whereas Green, formed merely by the mixture of Yellow and Blue without heightening, is no more than a 'real satisfaction'. Red is the colour of the Day of Judgment, and, most strangely of all, for no evidence of this is offered, Red 'contains in itself all other colours'. It is, then, so to speak, the acme of colour, the supreme form subsuming in itself all other forms, the fusion of the opposites within the particular sphere in which it exists, but no doubt also a reflection of the same fusion in the sphere of all spheres. What is true of the world of colours is true of the universe.

Goethe's inability to demonstrate any of this in practical terms is significant in itself. The world of colour simply does not answer to this explanation. All the same, the triangular diagram Yellow–Blue–Red is useful to keep in mind as a guide to some of the complexities of later writers. What is not quite clear from Goethe's account is to what extent he thought of the opposites in this case as representing amongst other things good and evil. It is evident that, if these are indeed included, the supreme form may be thought of as actually being a fusion of even these opposites—a view which has some theological backing, but which is evidently fraught with possibilities of disastrous error.

Here a new aspect of my general theme emerges. The pre-occupation with polarity and synthesis in the German tradition is a certain fact. Less certain is what the precise implications of these words may be in any particular circumstances. For the very reason that the so-called opposites are differently conceived by different authors, and that in general the idea of describing them as opposites (rather than mere contrasts, or gradually differentiated groups) is somewhat vague, a variety of meanings can be supposed, all within the overall pattern. *Corruptio optimi pessima.*

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What may be noble in its best form may become hideously deformed if misused. And it is my argument that on the whole the tradition which flowered in Goethe's day, whether or not it was already undermined at that stage, had gone disastrously wrong by the early decades of the twentieth century.

The marriage of the phoenix and the turtle was not the only way in which Shakespeare envisaged the wedding of opposites. 'Two distincts, division none'—his wording calls for careful attention, and I shall try to show in a final chapter how that particular conception is revived in a work by D. H. Lawrence. Such a union in love, each partner remaining distinct, sounds moving and admirable. A not dissimilar union, like the one in the imagination of Troilus as he strives to retain in his mind the picture of the perfect, faithful Cressida, and that of the woman he has just seen, yielding herself to another man, is only sickening:

If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
If there be rule in unity itself,
This is not she. O madness of discourse,
That cause sets up with and against itself!
Bifold authority! where reason can revolt
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
Without revolt. This is, and is not Cressid!
*Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth;
And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifex for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.*

What Shakespeare describes here is not the true matrimony but the thought that haunts his hero in *Othello*, that perfection may be maggoty through and through, the thought in *Macbeth* that fair is foul and foul fair, or in *Hamlet*, that one may smile and smile and be a villain. This is not bliss but torment, yet there may be times when the two forms are outwardly indistinguishable. Where is the true form to be found and how is it to be recognized?

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Corruption within this tradition in Germany begins with the willingness to accept what Troilus finds distractingly unacceptable. Thus Heinrich von Kleist, writing in the first decade of the nineteenth century, seems to employ the same concept of synthesis as his contemporaries, and yet produces at times results far more like the vision of Troilus. More significant, he occasionally allows one to suspect that such a vision is to his way of thinking and feeling not a tragic horror but a cosmic revelation of the way things are, and therefore to be accepted. It is then not a question of two separates with one essence, but rather of one inseparable unity which appears at the same time wholly good and wholly wicked, as Cressida appears to Troilus. And then there really is madness of discourse. Kleist's story *Michael Kohlhaas* is a case in point. This is the account of a horse-dealer who is so outraged by his mistreatment at the hands of a local Junker that he swears to do everything in his power to obtain justice. Finding none, he holds society up to ransom, ravaging and pillaging across an entire countryside. The point about the story to be made here is that Kleist as narrator introduces us to Kohlhaas as 'one of the most honest (rechtschaffen) and at the same time one of the most horrifying (entsetzlich) men of his times'. The meaning of this is evidently that in his demand for justice Kohlhaas was honest, in the means he used, a horror. The reader may well be uncertain, however, at some moments in the story, whether Kleist does not mean that Kohlhaas continued in some sense to be an honest man even when he was setting whole cities on fire, as though his initial motive were still in some sense operating, and as though the combination of opposite qualities in him were in some way evidence of a superhuman stature. The intensification of both sides in him is reminiscent of the process outlined in the symbolism of Goethe's Colour-Theory, and while it is true that Kleist brings his hero ultimately to execution, the confused ending of the story allows the suspicion to form itself, that there were moments in the telling when Kleist was inclined to end it differently. The story *Die Marquise von O.* tends to confirm that suspicion. Here a woman discovers that the officer who saved her life during

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a battle also took the opportunity, while she was still lying unconscious, to get her with child. She marries him out of love, declaring that he would not seem such a devil to her when she discovered it was he who raped her if he had not appeared such an angel when she first caught sight of him. It is difficult to believe that this fantastic ending was not, in Kleist's distorted mind, a reflection of the complementary opposites which are our present theme.

Something similar, though not this time perverse, seems to be contained in the structure of Kleist's best-known work, the play *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. In this the plot concerns a young officer who, by disobeying orders during a battle, covers himself momentarily with glory but enables the enemy to escape with less than the total defeat which seemed imminent. His uncle, the Elector of Brandenburg, gives orders that whoever was responsible is to be punished with death, and does not rescind these orders even when he learns that his own nephew is involved. The young prince, however, after at first assuming that the sentence of death is a formality, comes to see that it is a necessity and actually demands that it be carried out. Meanwhile the Elector has decided on leniency—although nothing is known of this till the last possible moment—and the play ends as the prince, blindfolded and expecting to be shot immediately, learns that he is not only pardoned but is expected to join in the command of an army preparing the final assault on all the foes of Brandenburg. There could be no clearer instance than this of the coming together of opposites, the individual and the State, condemnation and pardon, justice and mercy, self-denial and self-assertion, total unworthiness and supreme worthiness. Moreover, both sides have been driven to extremes, 'gesteigert', in the Goethean sense. The Elector has been driven to realize to the full what his demand for justice and discipline involved, and the Prince, refusing the opportunity granted him to sign his own release, has been driven to recognize the unpardonable nature of his offence. With all this, there are overtones lending to the Elector a kind of godlike status, so that it also seems at times that Kleist is influenced by the

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Christian, or more particularly the Lutheran teaching, that a man must know himself damned before he can be saved. That is, after all, the situation of the prince. By recognizing that his fault is worthy of no less punishment than death, or rather, as he feels it, total annihilation, the prince makes himself worthy of the pardon which is meanwhile being prepared in the mind of the Elector. It is very close to the repentance of the sinner, especially as it has been regarded in the Lutheran Church. But there is this important difference, that the self-condemnation of the prince includes no element of love, nor, so far as one can see, does the Elector's pardon. What takes place is rather a secularization of the religious concepts in which the repentance of the sinner becomes the self-abnegation of the military subordinate or the subject of the State, and where a loving embrace becomes the self-alignment of the individual with the State in which he exists. What is at stake is never love or redemption.

In this play, therefore, there lies one of the chief turning-points in the history of the German tradition—a turning-point whose significance was not realized for many decades to come, for it was in Hitler's time that Kleist's reputation reached a climax. By transferring the idea of polarity and synthesis from the religious to the secular sphere, Kleist was accomplishing something similar to what Hegel was doing at the same time, for Hegel's philosophy in one aspect is an application of Christian theology to the world of history and politics. In those early years of the nineteenth century, years in which, under the stimulus of the Napoleonic conquests, the realization of German unity was beginning to become a possibility, the mystical and religious forms began to lose their transcendental sanction (or better, transcendental sanctions ceasing to be credible, only the systematic patterns remained, to be filled in with the analogies that came to hand).

From now on one distinguishing mark of German literature in relation to all other literatures is the consistency with which its major figures concern themselves directly or indirectly with political issues in their literary works. Kleist remains forgotten for a good long while, but as the years progress towards the

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Bismarckian era and the foundation of the Reich, others take his place. The cosmopolitanism of Goethe and Herder recedes into the background. The dramatist Grabbe sings the praise of Frederick Barbarossa and the Hohenzollerns; the Austrian Grillparzer, in a much more accomplished way, comments pessimistically on the contemporary scene through motifs drawn from Austrian history. Yet another dramatist, the North German Heibel, writes a play in defence of the tragic necessity to destroy subjects of the State, however morally innocent, who cause trouble. Heine, compelled to leave the country, delivers satirical broadsides against all its institutions, while his contemporary Büchner draws a grim picture of the impossibility of all political progress. Freytag writes a series of novels entitled *The Ancestors*, in which the whole course of German history from its beginnings to the significant period of the 'War of Liberation' is portrayed—the sense of belonging to that particular section of the past is promoted. Fichte preaches the autarkic state, which Germany was temporarily to become within not much more than a hundred years; Friedrich List follows in his wake with practical proposals.

To some extent, this very natural concern with the most pressing issues of the day (it must be clear that these writers were by no means all nationalists or reactionaries) goes hand in hand with further developments in the philosophy of polarity. The association does not become really important, however, until the closing years of the nineteenth century. Then, as I have tried to show in the early chapters of the present work, it becomes very close indeed, and the vital questions begin to impose themselves: what is happening to the tradition, what distortion is it undergoing, to what extent do these distortions assist the development towards the catastrophe of 1933–45, and, most important of all, are there any works of literature in which something sane and wholesome is retained or discovered?

These questions lead, then, first to a survey of the whole field of German literature from 1871 until 1945, the period of the Second and Third Reichs and of the intervening Weimar Republic. This is not a history of literature; it is rather a study of the