

Goethe's Logos and the Christian Logos: A Brief Comparative Study

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Alchemy and Mysticism in Goethe's Corpus

The attack on the concept of the logos can be traced as far back as Plato's *Phaedrus*, when "there was a growing dissatisfaction with the use of words, which was matched by growing suspicions about the use of thought."¹ It steadily developed until "the late 16th century [when] a pronounced trend had emerged toward the permeation of Christian Kabbalah with alchemical symbolism . . . [and reached] its apogee in Georg von Welling's *Opus Mago-Cabbilisticum* . . ."², a work from which Goethe derived much of his own thought.³ Thus traces of alchemy, a dualistic mysticism exhibiting a "fine disregard for logic and empirical observation,"⁴ are observable throughout *Faust*, which frequently assaults the concept of logos as conceived of in the broader literary canon of the West.

The poem's overarching binary opposition, viz. Reason vs. Experience, explicitly denounces the Logos as that which freezes and distorts the infinite ebb and flow of Nature. In this view, it is Logos which places unnatural strictures upon morality and epistemology and thereby reduces knowledge of both to linguistically expressed propositions. Faust expresses this view when he tells Wagner that the only form of communication that can "blend all hearts into a whole" is "the language of the soul."⁶ Writing, reading, and oratory, according to the eponymous hero, are "tinkling bells"⁷ and "paper decoration[s] . . . [than which] dry leaves in autumn, whirled/About by foggy winds, carry more inspiration."⁸

Goethe's concept of the Logos, however, differs in some respects from the Christian Logos he wants to critique, as the following study hopes to demonstrate through a brief comparison of both.

Goethe's Demonic Logos

Reportedly, Goethe's personal belief was that "people treat [the Divine Name] as if that incomprehensible and most high Being, *who is even beyond the reach of thought*, were only their equal."⁹ If Christians were truly in awe of God, he argued, they would "be dumb, and through reverence unwilling to name Him."¹⁰ This belief is reflected in Faust's question to Gretchen: "Who dare say God's name?"¹¹ If God transcends all intellectual activity, Gretchen can call her experience of reality in all of its fullness "joy, or [her] heart, or God . . . The name's mere noise and smoke -- what does it do/But cloud the heavenly radiance?"¹² Conversely, if God transcends all intellectual activity, the-ology, the logos about God, is not Divine in origin, but demonic.

Consequently, Goethe subverts the traditional identification of the Logos with God the Son (i.e. Jesus Christ), identifying Mephistopheles with education in general, and language and logic in particular. The demon-logos informs a student that:

Logic will train your mind all right;
Like inquisitor's boots it will squeeze you tight,
Your thoughts will learn to creep and crawl
And never lose their way at all,
Nor get criss-crossed as now, or go
Will-o'-the-wisping to and fro!
We'll teach you that your process of thinking
Instead of being like eating and drinking,
Spontaneous, instantaneous, free,
Must proceed by one and two and three.¹³

The "one and two and three" is a mocking reference to syllogistic reasoning (i.e., deductive inference), a process of thinking that Mephistopheles identifies as murder. "When scholars study a thing," he says, "they strive/To kill it first if it's alive."¹⁴ The rigid death-march of "right reason," according to Goethe, is not of Divine origin, for the event (Ger. *Ereignis*) lies outside the reach of deductive reasoning, "beyond the scope of

efficient causation.”¹⁵It is because Goethe does not think “the [logos]” is “so great and high a thing” that he has Faust believe “there is some other rendering,”¹⁶namely “the deed.” The perpetual motion of the whole of existence as it moves through positive and negative, destructive and creative, active and passive states -- this is what Goethe believes to be Divinity. Hence, Faust tells Mephistopheles that “the ever-stirring, wholesome energy/Of life is [his] arch-enemy.”¹⁷

The logos is man’s source of torment, according to Goethe, who has Faust say as much in the following words:

My spoken word must rule my life’s whole course
For ever: is this not enough?
. . . Parchments signed and sealed
Are ghosts that haunt and daunt us: the word dies
Upon the very pen we wield,
And wax and leather tyrannize our lives.¹⁸

The dynamic flow of material existence, in other words, consists of an infinite series of negations. One instant is negated by another, hence language is unable to “capture” reality-in-itself. This view of language and history was later taken up by Hegel,¹⁹ as well his arch-nemesis Kierkegaard who likewise believed that “there is nothing in language that . . . overcome[s] the infinite temporalization and universalization necessary for any communicable expression.”²⁰

Consequently, the logos cannot be conceived of as divine. Rather, the logos is earthly, sensual, demonic. The logos attempts to concretize the fluid passage of time. If one is to escape the tormenting fact that “the earth’s a prison [from which] one can’t get away,”²²therefore, one must abandon reason, logic, language, theology.

The Divine Logos

In contrast to Goethe’s demon logos, however, there is the Christian doctrine of the

Divine Logos whose words and deeds are synonymous. As Herman C. Waetjen notes, “the words and works of the incarnate Logos [are] interchangeable, manifesting the integrity of the Creator [God the Father] whose words are deeds and whose deeds are words.”²³ Whereas Heraclitus’ conception of Nature, later adopted by the Stoic philosophers, exhibited an “antiphonal logic” implicative of “the working and guidance of the Logos or Reason of the World,”²⁴ the biblical Logos is known immediately, as he works in the world, by the human mind.

Accordingly, the Divine Logos is said to “uphold the the universe by the word of his power.”²⁵ Power and word are used in conjunction with one another, indicating that the word and deed, when spoken/performed by God are one and the same thing. Elsewhere, the Scriptural account explains that God’s voice/word “thunders,” “breaks the cedars of Lebanon,” “makes the deer give birth,” and “flashes forth flames of fire.”²⁶ And prior to these later accounts, the book of Genesis records that “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and *there was light.*”²⁷

Goethe’s bifurcation of deed and word, therefore, is not derived from a proper understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Divine Logos. For as R.V. Young explains, the Divine Logos/Word

marks the convergence of Hellenic conceptions of ground, reason, discourse with the Hebraic personification of the Word and Wisdom of God, in the New Testament identified with the Second Person of the Trinity, incarnate in Christ Jesus. Regarded as the formal principle of the cosmos in the one perspective and the means of its creation and conservation in the other, it guarantees that in Western civilization reality will be endowed with an intelligible, purposive structure that is, both the material nature of the world and its historical development will be meaningful.²⁸

In this Scripturally derived understanding of the Divine Logos, there is no internal

opposition between material reality, on the one hand, and language and logic on the other hand. Faust's desire, from this perspective, is not only rooted in Goethe's misunderstanding of the Divine Logos, but is also irrational and impossible to achieve. The Divine Logos "imparts form to matter . . . permeating the universe and giving it articulation."²⁹

Conclusion

The differences between Goethe's logos and the Divine Logos of the Christian faith seem to lie primarily in Goethe's reliance upon philosophical concepts that are alien to the Biblical account of the Logos. As noted above, Goethe's own epistemological paradigm was empirico-mystical, relying heavily upon sense experience, observation, as well as the alchemical and scientific knowledge of his day. Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy which, as Ronald H. Nash explains, sees the mind as a "sausage machine" that "superimposes the notions of space and time upon all of our sense perceptions,"³¹ however, also seems to have contributed to Goethe's assault on the concept of the logos as conceived of in the broader Western literary canon.

According to Géza von Molnár, after devoting time to an intense study of Immanuel Kant's philosophical works "Goethe . . . seem[ed] to have drawn close to the conviction that all our knowledge is gained by experiment, that this knowledge is of analogous worth with reference to what must ultimately lie beyond our ken, and, finally, that we can know ourselves also only on these exact same terms."³² Knowledge, therefore, is not revealed via propositions that obtain with or without a human mind to grasp them, for they are thoughts in the very mind of God. On the contrary because reality transcends the language and logic of man, Goethe's apprehension of existence can only be accomplished

apophatically, or by negation.

Problematically, however, semioticity-in-itself³³rears its head again in Goethe's *Faust*. The very classification of the "unclassifiable" *as* such, in other words, entails that the unclassifiable is neither absolutely-other, nor the victim of logico-linguistic reductionism. There is, then, a kind of dramatic irony observable to the reader, an irony which may have escaped Goethe's own attention. The very Logos which is under attack in Faust's changing of "word" to "deed" in the prologue to John's Gospel is effectively placed out of reach by the empirico-mystical philosophy undergirding *Faust's* assumed worldview.

Faust deplores the supposed rift between logos and energos, but the Divine Logos is the Divine Energos of God.³⁴Faust also sees logos and bios as irreconcilably opposed, but the Divine Logos tells His detractors: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."³⁵Thus, it is only within the parameters delineated by the epistemological assumptions of empiricists and mystics, assumptions that are foreign to the Biblical account of the Divine Logos, that Goethe's criticism of the Divine Logos obtains.

Faust's preoccupation with an *outside* to language intimates his desire to step beyond good and evil, ignorance and knowledge, or even the rigidly hewn contours of Kant's critical categories. In this instance, the logos does not mark a real obstacle to real human freedom. Instead, the logos precludes the agent's ascension to the role of Logos himself. If there is anything, then there is fixity, closure, confinement upheld by the Logos. Yet it is the Divine Logos which speaks and works at one and the same time, rendering even Goethe's anti-logos literary productions intelligible.

Notes

- ¹ Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence: The Rise and Fall of Logos* vol. I (Frankfurt: Hanstein, 1986), 110.
- ² Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah: A Definitive History of the Evolution, Ideas, Leading Figures and Extraordinary Influence of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 200.
- ³ Ronald Douglas Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist: A Study of the Alchemical Symbolism in Goethe's Literary and Scientific Works*, (England: Cambridge University Press), 50.
- ⁴ Gray, 10.
- ⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One*, trans. David Luke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Eckermann: Being Appreciations and Criticisms on Many Subjects* (New York: Dunne, 1901), 45. (emphasis added)
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Goethe, 109.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Goethe, 58.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Pfau, "'All is Leaf': Difference, Metamorphosis, and Goethe's Phenomenology of Knowledge," *Studies In Romanticism* 49.1 (2010): 8.
- ¹⁶ Goethe, 39.
- ¹⁷ Goethe, 43.
- ¹⁸ Goethe, 52-53.
- ¹⁹ See Ivan A. Boldyrev, "Faust and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: In the Footsteps of Lukács and Bloch," *Russian Studies in Philosophy* vol. 49, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 65 – 95.

²⁰ Geoffery A. Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.), 167.

²² Goethe, 48.

²³ “Logos προς τον θόν and the Objectification of Truth in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 63 (2001): 278.

²⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy*, ed. John Robbins (Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 1997), 33.

²⁵ Hebrews 1:3.

²⁶ Psalm 29:3, 5, 7.

²⁷ Genesis 1:3.

²⁸ “Deconstruction and the Fear and Loathing of Logos,” *Modern Age*, Winter (1992): 144.

²⁹ Rudolph Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Meridian, 1958), 135.

³¹ *Life’s Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 1999).

³² "Hidden in Plain View: Another Look at Goethe's Faust." *Goethe Yearbook* 11 (2002): 33-76. Rpt. in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Russel Whitaker. Vol. 154.

³³ See Hiram R. Diaz III, *Everything is Significant: The Christian Semiological Presuppositions of Moby-Dick*, <http://www.academia.edu/3507111/Everything_is_Significant_The_Christian_Semiological_Presuppositions_of_Moby-Dick>.

³⁴ According to John 5:16-17, “the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things [i.e. Healing the sick] on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working.’”

³⁵ John 6:63b