

Goethe

Five Studies

A.Schweitzer

September 16-17, 2014

This is a collection of five pieces by Albert Schweitzer. Four of them are delivered addresses. Three of which given in 1932 on the centenary of Goethe's death, the fourth on the bicentennial of his birth in 1949. The remaining one is an article at the time of the centenary, quite close to one of the addresses.

Why Schweitzer? Schweitzer started out as a philosopher, theologian and last but not least an organ player, for which he won a lot of recognition. Then he studied medicine and went down to Africa to serve the Black man, and it is as such we usually think of him. The editor of the slight book, stresses the parallel lives lead by Schweitzer and Goethe. This is stretching it a bit I would say. When I first read them some forty years ago I was a bit shocked by Schweitzer appearing to think of himself as the same level as Goethe and censuring him for his relationship to Vulpius, with whom he had many children while still not married. Now forty years later, such admonishment on the side of Schweitzer do not raise any of my eye brows.

As with addresses they have their own cadences and are pleasant to read, and no doubt to listen to, but afterwards it is very hard to remember anything. Maybe you are not supposed to. An exercise in showmanship intended to leave no traces.

Now, if one needs to recall anything at all from the contents, it is the author's treatment of Goethe as a philosopher. He makes a big deal out of it that Goethe was no philosopher, that he in fact disliked philosophy, and especially the intellectual kind which claimed to have a complete understanding of the world. In particular Goethe could not get along with Kant. But that does not mean that Goethe was unphilosophical, he simply was a natural philosopher, in fact a nature philosopher, to whom there was no unnecessary complication. No distinction between the world of appearances and the world as such. No 'Das Ding an Sich' for Goethe. What he saw was what there were. Naive, maybe, but natural and direct. Goethe worshipped Nature, for him as for Spinoza, his favorite philosopher if any, God was not outside Nature, he was not above it, not its creator. God was Nature. Nature was God. He was present everywhere. To Goethe there is no question of a complete understanding, Nature is Nature and we can only hope to understand it fragmentarily. But this ultimate unknowability in the complete provides its charm. The charm of Nature is in its infinite variety. It is this we should celebrate.

Schweitzer remarks that this Nature worship makes Goethe appear a Pagan. But it is not so simple. There is a very strong Christian element in him. A calling to be of service to mankind, to be kind and helpful to his fellow beings, to feel 'Mitleid' above all.

So in a way the author, manages to have it both ways. Goethe as Pagan and gnome, but at heart, a Christian like Schweitzer himself. In this he underplays the Platonic element that also pervades the thought of Goethe, his convictions that there are forms, and that

they even have concrete manifestation, such as in his Ur-pflanze. Another strong element of Platonism in Goethe, which Schweizer does not bring out, is his conviction that knowledge all reside in us, waiting only to be remembered. To Goethe, everything comes to meet him to confirm his hunches and intuitions. The books he wrote in his supposedly ignorant youth, turn out to be true, as he realizes when he gets older. It was all within him. The knowledge of the world.

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