

AN ADLERIAN APPROACH TO GOETHE'S FAUST

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The only salvation from the continuously driving inferiority feeling is the knowledge and the feeling of being valuable which originates from the contribution to the common welfare. In the same way, it is the individual's contribution to the welfare of mankind through his children and his work which promises him the claim on immortality, in satisfaction of the general human striving not to disappear completely from the community of men.

—ADLER (3, p. 155).

To many millions let me furnish soil,
Though not secure, yet free to active toil;
Green, fertile fields, where men and herds go forth
At once, with comfort, on the newest Earth . . .
The traces cannot, of mine earthly being,
In aeons perish,—they are there!

—*Faust* (4, II, p. 241).

The picture of man presented by Goethe in *Faust* is so similar to Adler's basic conception of the human striving for "perfection of some sort" that Adler himself spoke in this connection of "Faustian wrestling" (3, p. 104). Perhaps just because Faust is such an obvious example of Adler's conception of man—to those who know both Goethe's *Faust* and Adlerian theory—this drama has to our knowledge never been discussed in Adlerian terms. The present attempt to do this is addressed to the many students of *Faust* not well acquainted with Adler, and to the many psychologists who have come to know Adler but are not so familiar with *Faust*.

Adler was keenly aware of the pertinence of literature and psychology to each other, pointing to Goethe in particular, as when he stated: "Among poetic works of art which have led me to the insights of Individual Psychology the following stand out as pinnacles: fairy tales, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Goethe" (3, p. 329).¹

¹There are four references to Goethe in Adler's first major book (1) to support some of his own observations. These references have been briefly discussed by Rom (5). When Adler on another occasion wrote directly about *Faust* and Goethe, it was, somewhat surprisingly, with regard to the problem that men often perceive women as a danger. Adler finds: "The life of Goethe is particularly instructive in this respect. Always did he see danger in woman, always did he take flight from her and from love. The guiding line of Faust is an eternal seeking of a solution of the problem of love. With his own tensions, impulses and strivings Goethe, dissatisfied with the realities of life, constructed his world, and in doing so conjured up general human problems before our eyes. The greatness of his art is that all the chords within us resonate when he sounds the eternally new song of the tension of the sexes. Entangled in this tension, people are afraid that devotion (*Hingabe*) is equivalent to loss of personality, bondage, or slavery" (2, p. 21). —Ed. note.

Among the many similarities in thinking between Adler and Goethe it is the holistic approach which we should like to mention initially, because it is most basic to their common frame of reference. For both, this approach resulted in stressing the social embeddedness of the individual, among other concepts. Adler felt that a person cannot be understood apart from the society with which he interacts, and he often stated his refusal "to recognize and examine an isolated human being" (3, p. 2). This position is also taken by Goethe when Faust, in trying to understand the meaning of nature, describes with sudden insight:

How each the Whole its substance gives,
Each in the other works and lives!

(4, I, pp. 17-18)

Within this larger frame, the present paper will briefly examine Goethe's *Faust* in the light of two basic Adlerian concepts, striving for superiority and social usefulness.

STRIVING FOR SUPERIORITY

Striving for some form of superiority as the basic dynamics of all mankind is the keystone of Adler's theory. It is also central to an Adlerian interpretation of *Faust*. Faust's entire life is a striving. Only at the end does Faust appear to achieve his goal and give up his striving. As soon as he does this, he dies.

Faust's tremendous initial striving for perfection, and his goal of superiority, are related to great inferiority feelings. In his case, the inferiority feelings were occasioned by his felt lack of a real understanding of and closeness to the essence of life in spite of having achieved a great deal of book knowledge and academic degrees and recognition.

I've studied now Philosophy
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,— . . .
And here, poor fool! with all my lore
I stand, no wiser than before: . . .
And see, that nothing can be known!
That knowledge cuts me to the bone.

(4, I, p. 15)

Shortly after this, Faust expresses that his goal is actually one of godlikeness, by comparison to which he is but a worm. This is the unreasonable "everything or nothing" principle of the neurotic that Adler has pointed out (3, p. 150).

I am not like the Gods! That truth is felt too deep:
 The worm am I, that in the dust doth creep,—
 That, while in dust it lives and seeks its bread,
 Is crushed and buried by the wanderer's tread.

(4, I, p. 24)

Faust's quest for knowledge seems to have been one of becoming godlike, to acquire omniscience for his own self-aggrandizement. Thus, when he cannot find answers to his questions either in the books of human wisdom, or through magic, he becomes fed up with scholarly pursuits altogether. He turns to Mephistopheles to come to grips with the "real" world, and accepts his propositions.

Faust's striving in Part I of the drama fails, as Adler felt all striving eventually must which is purely self-centered, concerned merely with one's own self-enhancement. The ultimate failure of carnal pleasure to reduce Faust's striving and inferiority feelings is seen in the Walpurgis night episode where every conceivable worldly pleasure is offered him, all to no avail. The Walpurgis night is an excellent example of the type of striving characteristic of the neurotic or immature individual. Adler felt that in the neurotic an "original feeling of inferiority evoke[s] an attitude of aggression, the purpose of which is the overcoming of a great insecurity" (3, pp. 108-109). An atmosphere of violence and aggression runs throughout the Walpurgis night episode which follows Faust's murder of Margaret's brother, Valentine.

Self-centered striving must fail, according to Adler, because it lacks social validity. The private sense of the neurotic is opposed to the common sense of society (3, pp. 253-254). The neurotic's striving at best makes sense only to himself, and this is equivalent to no meaning at all. The neurotic breakdown occurs with the utter failure of the neurotic's striving in the face of societal demands.

SOCIALLY USEFUL VS. SOCIALLY USELESS STRIVING

Adler's definition of good and bad adjustment now becomes important. Good adjustment means striving on the socially useful side, whereas poor adjustment is striving on the socially useless side of life (3, pp. 139, 254-255). This distinction is central to an understanding of *Faust* in terms of Adlerian theory; in Part I of the drama, Faust strives on the socially useless side, and in Part II, he strives on the socially useful side. Goethe himself seems to have had some realization of this distinction when he said, speaking of *Faust*: "The First

Part is almost entirely subjective . . . But in the Second Part there is scarcely anything subjective, here there appears a higher, broader, brighter, less passionate world" (4, I, p. xiv). Goethe's use of "subjective" comes very close to Adler's concept of "private sense;" the "broader . . . less passionate world" is that of the "common sense" (3, p. 149.)

The first indication that Faust is going to give up his self-centered striving occurs at the beginning of Part II. In the opening scene, Faust has been asleep on a mountain after the debauchery of the Walpurgis night episode and his belated visit to Margaret in her dungeon cell. After awakening, Faust resolves to turn his "glances once more earthward." But first, seeing the sun, he says:

The sun comes forth! Alas, already blinded,
I turn away, with eyesight pierced and wounded!

(4, II, p. 3)

His turning away from the sun is symbolic of his giving up the attempt to gain the secret of life, an egocentric type of striving toward an exaggerated goal of self-enhancement (3, pp. 243-250) that was doomed to failure from the start. Faust's turning "earthward" instead, symbolizes his growing determination to make a positive contribution to society.

Following the failure of his symbolic attempt to unite the classical and romantic worlds through his marriage to Helen of Troy, Faust is once more forced to change the concretization of his final goal. After much deliberation he decides to attempt the fulfillment of a vision that has captivated man through the centuries—the dream of an ideal society, the millennial vision.

. . . . This sphere of earthly soil
Still gives us room for lofty doing.

(4, II, p. 192)

Faust then goes on to describe his plan:

Let that high joy be mine forevermore,
To shut the lordly Ocean from the shore,
The watery waste to limit and to bar,
And push it back upon itself afar!

(4, II, p. 193)

Here the ocean is symbolic of the long sweep of time, the destroyer of everything, and Faust wants to build something that even time cannot destroy.

Faust, with the help of Mephistopheles, begins to work toward this noble ideal. After many years of toil the dream is completed—the ideal colony is built on earth. In this magnificent area with its “dikes upraised and ditches led,” we see that work is the basis of life, for all live on

Green, fertile fields . . .
 . . . swiftly settled on the hill's firm base,
 Created by the bold, industrious race.

(4, II, p. 241)

Furthermore, there is a great sense of communality and brotherhood. When the ocean attempts to overwhelm the colony, “by common impulse [*Gemeindrang*] all unite to hem it.” Thus we see that the grand vision of Faust is entirely in accord with the views of Adler as to the requisites for a well adjusted life—it is built on the basis of free, wholesome labor reinforced by social interest and cooperation.

The achievement of the millennial vision marks the end of Faust's life, and he dies and is raised up to heaven. The fact that Faust, despite his many sins, is saved and sent to heaven at the end of the drama is the final culmination of the parallel between the world views of Adler and Goethe. Faust was brought to heaven, and not hell, because of his triumphant vision of the perfect colony and his ceaseless striving to achieve his dream.

Thus Faust's salvation is symbolic of the fact that only when his striving for superiority takes the direction of social interest can man be “saved” on earth. Striving for superiority with underdeveloped social interest did not bring Faust relief from his feelings of inferiority, or an invitation to heaven. The Faust who realized the fruitlessness of his egocentric striving and turned towards his fellowmen was lifted up to heaven—despite his many sins. In Faust's realization that self-transcendence is the only way to a positive adjustment on earth lies the entire basis for the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler.

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