

## Reading Goethe at 60

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For some time now, I do not know when I put it in there, I have carried in my wallet a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, from his *Gay Science*:

One thing is needful --- to 'give style' to one's character --- a rare and great art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed --- both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime....For one thing is needful: that a human being should attain satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold.<sup>1</sup>

Although I do not remember when I photocopied the passage and inserted it into my wallet, I do remember that I liked its reference to self-development as adopting a "style," that my life could have a particular flair, quality, character.

Coming from the word for an implement for writing on wax, that had a pointed end for engraving and tracing, to style, to adopt a style, is to go through the painful process of carving out a distinctive mark, or character (even the word 'character' comes from cutting, referring both to "the *thing* engraved," "as well to the *process* by which" the thing "came into being"<sup>2</sup>), from that which is given me. "To create a life is to create a life out of the materials that history has given you," says the philosopher and social

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, #290.

<sup>2</sup> See "style," and "character," in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. And, Marjorie Garber, *Character: The History of a Cultural Obsession*. NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020, 6.

ethicist Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his book *Ethics of Identity*.<sup>3</sup> As to what is given us, at its most basic level, is our unhewn biological block that, as an organism, has certain fundamental functions. According to T.S. Eliot, these are three: “Birth, copulation, death....All the facts when you come to brass tacks.”<sup>4</sup> But this biological mass we are born with is not left neutral. “We give birth not to organisms but to kin; we copulate not with other bodies but with lovers and spouses; and the end of the organic life has a meaning...”<sup>5</sup>, says Appiah. We style ourselves not as beasts, as flesh machines, but as humans --- as thinking, willing, symbol-making, meaning-creating beings. In short, we style a character, an identity, not just by what is given us, but by what is fashioned by us.

We see this fashioning in the word “identity” itself. Today the word “identity” is a loaded and controversial term, used in coarse, bulky, forceful ways as well as in highly precise and subjective ways. Appiah says there are four elements that constitute our identity, as understood by contemporary philosophical thought. First, we have our “social identities,” the labels that society gives us. We are black, or white, Native American, or Asian, male or female, transgender, Catholic, Jewish, heterosexual or homosexual, etc.. Second, we have “certain norms” that say how men, women, Catholics, Jews, Americans should behave and think about themselves as a group. For instance, men are not to wear skirts, Catholics ought to be against abortion, Jews should support Israel. These are general and often misleading and many times wrong, but society tends to start with these. Third, our identity comes by what we “subjectively” feel we are allowed to do, as white, gay, male, etc.: as a white male I feel I can..., as a

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<sup>3</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Catholic I should be able to...., as an American I have a right to...etc. Lastly, says Appiah, and this is where I land, our identity is defined by a life plan, by a way of living that we choose for ourselves and own up to.<sup>6</sup> Our “individuality,” says Appiah, “means, among other things, choosing for myself instead of merely being shaped by the constraint of political or social sanction.”<sup>7</sup> We style our specific identity, then, not by just accepting passively what we are given, but by choosing a way forward and owning up to the decisions we make along the way, which requires a combination of persistence, guidance, and frequent recalibrations over a lifetime of uncertainties. The importance of this combination became apparent to me when I assumed a new job assignment and was unsure whether I would succeed or not. Writing in my journal (May 18, 2020) I said, “I see that my success will come by assuming the responsibility I must take on, by prioritizing the doing, to keep going even when I am not sure or convinced of my quality, and by reflecting and keeping myself in the right and strategic frame of mind, making the slight to necessary adjustments to stay on the road and at a reasonable speed, like any driver does at the wheel.”

If, then, to style an identity involves cutting and tracing a life plan, what is to guide our cut? What do we trace? What or whom do we pattern ourselves after? Do we trace what others tell us to? Or do we follow what we choose for ourselves? We know we are guided and shaped by external circumstances, environmental conditioning, inherited traits, and, as told by neuro-biology, that we do not have absolute free will.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Appiah, *Lines of Descent, W.E.B. DuBois and the Emergence of Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 147-51.

<sup>7</sup> Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> See the various various agreements and disagreements among neuroscientists on the question of free will in *Conversations on Consciousness: What the best minds think about the brain, free will, and what it means to be human*,” ed. Susan Blackmore. New York: OUP, 2006.

Nevertheless, as second best, as it were, we can, though, “act as if” we do have free will, and, so, assume a “useful falsehood,” as Appiah phrases it, to direct a type of life to which we wish to aspire<sup>9</sup>. By acknowledging what constrains us (the limitations to our absolute freedom) and by adopting an “as if” life identity, we can set for ourselves a “heuristic,” says Appiah, a short-cut way to bring to mind an image and simple rules for guiding ourselves forward without having to go through the rationales each time we make a choice.<sup>10</sup> The heuristic enables us to accept our attempts as “good-enough” as we practice the virtues for our life-plan. We are not weighed down by the thought of needing to be perfect or consistent. By taking good-enough steps we can proceed in the virtues toward our flourishing, *eudaimonia*, a term rooted in Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, denoting both a process and a state of contemplation, that of being able to value the elements of our life for themselves, not as for some other end.<sup>11</sup>

Personally, I came to reflect on my limitations and possibilities and on what motivates and frames my life, the virtues I sought to practice if I was to shape my identity and facilitate my flourishing, when I approached and crossed the threshold of my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 2017. I was living in Boston at the time, having moved from Ann Arbor, Michigan five years earlier, and foresaw another transition coming, in keeping with a five to six-year rhythm I seemed to be following of moving from one employment position and place to another. If I went by the actuarial tables that put our half-way mark at fifty years of age, I was entering, at sixty, the last third of my life. My coming upon sixty was calling for an accounting. In *Lastingness: The Art of Aging*, Nicholas Delbanco notes

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<sup>9</sup> Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*. Harvard University Press, 2008, 53-55.

<sup>11</sup> *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 222-28.

that as we get older it is the past that is long, and it is the future that is within sight.<sup>12</sup> Even with change coming and my horizon, conceivably distant but shortening more than before, I was not despondent, even if I was weighted by it. If the biologist Francis Crick could shift, at sixty, from studying and discovering the DNA double-helix to studying neuro-science and the nature of consciousness<sup>13</sup> instead, then, I suppose, if I set myself well, I should be able to wring out more life still before that future deadline arrives.

John Kekes, a philosopher on the subject of character, says, in *The Art of Life*, that if we can look to an individual life as a model by which to direct our styling, we can aid our effort to achieve a good life. Not that we seek to be this person. Rather, this person becomes, to use Appiah's concept, our "heuristic." Kekes quotes Aristotle on the wisdom of adopting a model life: "every one that has the power to live according to his own choice [should]...set up for himself some object for the good life to aim at...with reference to which he will then do all his acts, since not to have one's life organized in view of some end is the mark of great folly."<sup>14</sup> Through such self-direction, Kekes says, "a process of self-transformation [occurs] that involves the gradual changing of one's character so that it will conform more closely to the requirements of one's ideal of a good life."<sup>15</sup>

One who exemplified self-transformation to achieve a good life and, through his life, embodied the fact that the brain is plastic, malleable for continued capabilities, was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), polymath, poet, scientist, administrator,

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Delbanco, *Lastingness, The Art of Old Age*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2011, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Blackmore, *Conversations on Consciousness*, 55-57.

<sup>14</sup> John Kekes, *The Art of Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Kekes, *Art of Life*, 15.

politician, a man of letters of all genres, whose literary works limned distinct character types in our culture (the most known, Young Werther and Faust), whose scientific investigations influenced more than one field of modern science, and whose philosophy integrated idealism with realism, how to channel, through the power of the imagination and through deeds, the ideal into the constraints of nature, circumstance, and duty.

“What we want...is a great teacher or a great book to call forth a sense of our true and deepest needs, to inspire confidence in ourselves, to impel us to follow after truth and love, and this is the service which Goethe renders to those who meditate [on] his life and work,” says J. L. Spaulding, on “*Goethe as Educator*”.<sup>16</sup> Whether in his person or in his writings or both --- for, frankly, they cannot be separated --- figures such as W.E.B. DuBois, Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, and Ralph Waldo Emerson saw in Goethe a person to be emulated and a thinker whose thought could reach into all domains of society. Emerson, in his collection of essays on *Representative Men*, considered Goethe “the world’s greatest writer” and “the soul of his century.”<sup>17</sup>

It was to Goethe, to his travel journal *Italian Journey*, and to his essay “The Metamorphosis of Plants,” to which I circled back to formulate a script for my life and for my projects as I moved into my 60<sup>th</sup> year. It made sense that I should turn to these texts. They had been with me for over three decades, from the time I published a book with Oxford University Press, drawing on the essay, to my keeping at bedside his journal for dip-in consultations and for inspiring my forty years of journaling. Though Goethe is not particularly prominent in our society that we should think of him, and, if thought of,

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<sup>16</sup> J.L. Spaulding, *Opportunity and Other Essays and Addresses*, Chicago: A.C. McClurry, 1906, 179-80.

<sup>17</sup> Emerson, *Representative Men*, “Goethe: The Writer,” See also Garber, *Character*, where she quotes Emerson saying, “...I would draw characters, not write lives,” in contrast to Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, 60.

is likely to be disqualified as anachronistic when dead, white, privileged, European males of classical tastes do not speak for many, he is too protean a figure, however, to be so easily dismissed. I agree with John Williams, his translator and biographer, that “Goethe was a man of his age, indeed for many *the* man of his age. [And for this reason] he should be meaningful, and therefore relevant, to us.”<sup>18</sup>

As I circled back to Goethe’s life, thought, aesthetic, and orientation to the world, I saw how he aligned with my philosophical development that I had been working through for the past five to ten years, during which time I completed, for the Literary Club, an essay on Spinoza that resulted in a book publication on the naturalism of religion. Spinoza was a major influence on Goethe. I noted my developing alignment with Goethe when I wrote in my journal, on October 29, 2017, “I am amazed at how closely my Question ties to Goethe’s life. He...wrestled with how to be an individual and be creative. He sought to integrate learning, and he was constantly looking upon his life and world, present and past, in a way to determine its meaning or to give meaning to them.” Just as Goethe sought, at sixty, to give form to his life, so I said, “Like Goethe, so am I wrestling with defining the form of my life.” This giving “form” to life comes about, as Hannah Arendt says, as we move between “freedom” and “necessity,” where freedom refers to the life of action and necessity to that of resignation. Goethe said the same in his autobiography *Poetry and Truth*: “...life is like the allness in which we are contained, and it is put together in an unfathomable fashion out of freedom and necessity...”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Williams, *The Life of Goethe, A Critical Biography*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 278.

<sup>19</sup> Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth (Parts One to Three)*, *Goethe, The Collected Works, Volume 4*. Thomas P. Sabine and Jeffrey L. Summons, Eds. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, 355.

Moving between freedom and necessity conforms to the move between “striving” and “settling.” Whether we strive or settle, in either case, our move from one to the other is not sequential but alternating and integrative, like the turning of Taoism’s yin and yang. There is striving in settling and settling in striving. We find this dynamic between striving and settling throughout Goethe’s life and works. For him, though, striving is the more pronounced. Settling, the more quiescent. In other words, he would forever strive. He had to arrive at settling.

Striving in German is *Steigerung*. It refers to an inner drive that propels forward and sets apart. It is found in the Romantic tradition (notable in the immortal words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” 1844, from his poem *Ulysses*), is a scientific term, pertaining to an organism’s drive for definition, and is a spiritual term, to seek greater perfection and union with a higher ideal. W.E.B. DuBois, who was indebted to Goethe in *The Souls of Black Folks*, speaks of the “spiritual striving” of the “negro race.”<sup>20</sup>

For Goethe, striving was a moral philosophy. It was best and most famously articulated in his masterpiece *Faust*. In the first part of *Faust*, the most known and read of *Faust I and II*, we read that to strive is inherent to being human and that, in striving, we will also surely err. At the opening of Part I, we find the scholar Faust in his study, at sixty years of age, according to Thomas Mann, bending over his dusty books, restless and disparaging in his pensiveness, realizing that, even in having taken degrees in all forms of knowledge, he still finds himself empty.

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<sup>20</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Everyman’s Library, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

Medicine, and Law, and Philosophy---/You've worked your way through every school,/Even, God help you, Theology, And sweated at it like a fool./Why labour at it any more?/You're no wiser now than you were before. You're Master of Arts, and Doctor, too,/...Oh yes, you're brighter than all those relics, Professors and Doctors, scribblers and clerics;/No doubts or scruples to trouble you, Defying hell and the Devil too./But There's no joy in self-delusion;/Your search for truth ends in confusion."<sup>21</sup>

Faust wants to escape his boredom and isolation. He wants to find life again, to recapture, as he says, "childhood memories" and "happiness long past." (1585-86). A fortuitous (how fortuitous?) visit by the devil, Mephistopheles, who slips into Faust's study as a cur dog, offers Faust just the opportunity to escape his dry, dull life in "seclusion," and find "out in the world...a life in rich profusion." Mephistopheles says to Faust that he will "fulfill [Faust's] every wish in every way." He will "be [Faust's] companion...guide...and supply [him] with whatever [he] might crave...[be his] servant, nay [his] slave,"<sup>22</sup> but on one condition. Faust must surrender his soul to Mephistopheles, who will, at Faust's death, cart it off to hell. On making this wager, Faust pivots from striving for intellectual power, as he had been doing, to striving for sensual powers, which he feels his soul lacks. Says Faust, "I was too swollen with conceit and pride; the mighty Spirit has rejected me, And now I see my place is at your side. All nature's secrets are concealed from me, the threat of thought is broken, for henceforth all knowledge I abhor. To satisfy my seething passions I'll explore the very depths of sensuality."<sup>23</sup> Whether striving to sate his intellect or his "seething passions," in either case, he must never cease striving. For not to strive is tantamount to death while

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<sup>21</sup> Goethe, *Faust*, Trans. John R. Williams, in *The Essential Goethe*, Ed. Matthew Bell, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, lines 354-370.

<sup>22</sup> *The Essential Goethe*, lines 1630-1648.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 1744-1751.

living. So Faust, at the sealing of the contract, knowing he is about to get all the pleasures he wants, and, thus, be tempted to take it easy, says to Mephisto, “If I should ever choose a life of sloth or leisure, Then let that moment be my end!....If I should bid the passing moment stay, or try to hold its fleeting beauty, then you may cast me in chains and carry me away.”

The contract now made and the stage set, we are left to see how Faust will fare, and, resultingly, how err. And err he does. The devil flies Faust through a tour of ribald experiences, indulges him in gifts, grants him the seduction of a young virgin, Gretchen, and revels in the Walpurgis Night, a celebration in the devil’s honor. Out of it all, Faust is led to waste, leaving behind a trail of anger and remorse, homicide, infanticide, and a suicide, qua an execution, from guilt.

Despite the destruction that Faust’s striving brings, Goethe does not discredit striving itself. For striving is a sign of the pulsation and force of life, and through striving we are, ultimately, saved. So, in Part II, when Faust dies, and his soul is about to be taken to hell, as the contract with Mephistopheles stipulated, Faust’s soul is rescued at the last minute from Mephistopheles’ grip by heavenly hosts who proclaim, “who strives, and keeps on striving still, for him there is salvation.”<sup>24</sup>

Reading Goethe at sixty brought the concept of striving into my lexicon. It gave definition to what I had been doing over the years as I changed jobs, moved from state to state, and held anxieties over thinking and feeling I still do not know enough. As I reflected on this striving, I wondered if I might have erred along the way? Assuredly I

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<sup>24</sup> Goethe, *Faust, A Tragedy*. Trans. Martin Greenberg. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2014, line 12300.

had, but in what ways? Had I been too focused, too in my head, too singular in purpose, too desiring to rise, such that I disregarded, neglected, diminished others and failed to meet the requirements of the moment? Had my erring been not so much in bringing harm upon others, cheating and conning my way forward, not so much from sins of commission as from sins of omission? History is conditional and ironic, as the philosopher of the mind, Owen Flanigan, reminds us. In my own Faustian drive to extend the range of my intellectual interests and experiences, did I err, ironically, through ignorance and detachment, by not seeing, understanding, and attending to what was in front of me, so focused was I on striving? And did I not realize that whether I succeed or do not, other conditions are at play besides my own efforts and intentions? In associating more with the cosmopolitan, the global, the progressive mindset, with the intellectual and the privileged, the restless and the rootless to widen my realm of experiences, have I neglected the rustic, the national, the traditional, the non-book-learning, the unprivileged, the settled and contented? Goethe saw himself in Faust. He, too, realized that his desire to know all and to experience all, to seek and achieve the ideal, was an illusion of reason and of sentiment. As he said in *Poetry and Truth*, "I too had dabbled in all knowledge and had quite soon discovered the futility of this. I too had tried all sorts of things in life only to abandon them in ever greater discontent and torment."<sup>25</sup> If nature is always striving, never ceasing in its cycle of birth, growth, and death, and shows no need to arrive at a singular, finalized fulfillment, why must we strive for some fixed and assured end ourselves? Maybe we need to look to nature and modify our striving. This Goethe did.

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<sup>25</sup> Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, 306.

Goethe, says John Armstrong, saw the world objectively “as it is.” It is there to be studied in wonder “through the eyes of love,” not through fawning sentimentality, but by attending to it with care and feeling.<sup>26</sup> Goethe did not strive to conquer and dominate, to amass knowledge for its own sake, but to make what he learned his own, to absorb its nutrients and disregard all else. From an early age he wanted to observe things first-hand, to see how they were constructed and looked inside. He picked flowers apart, to see how petals fit in the calyx. He plucked the feathers off birds to see how they were attached to the wings (44). “The human being knows himself only insofar as he knows the world...He perceives the world in himself and himself only in the world. Every new object, clearly seen, opens up a new organ of perception in us,” Goethe wrote in an essay in which he took issue with the useless “important-sounding task: ‘know thyself,’” which he regarded as “a deception practiced by a secret order of priests who wished to confuse humanity with impossible demands, to divert attention from activity in the outer world to some false, inner speculation.” It is in studying and contemplating nature, both the world of nature and the nature of society, that we find ourselves not only in the natural world but in the eyes of our fellow humans as well, who “know us better than we ourselves can,” said Goethe.<sup>27</sup> We are not to strive, therefore, by burrowing into ourselves, but by actively participating in the world through “deeds.”

Writing, in 1814, in a letter to the philosopher of pessimism, Schopenhauer, Goethe condensed his ecological-humanism through action into one line: “To rejoice in

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<sup>26</sup> John Armstrong, *Love, Life Goethe: How to be Happy in an Imperfect World*. NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007, 112.

<sup>27</sup> Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, in *Goethe, The Collected Works, Vol. 12*. Douglas Miller, Ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, 39.

your own worth/you must grant worth to life on earth.”<sup>28</sup> And you grant this worth by educating yourself about the world. Alfred North Whitehead, years later, said, education means literally “the process of leading out, [where all of our] faculties and capacities [are] encouraged to expand and unfold themselves.” And adds, “what is really essential [for our] development [we] must do for ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> And this Goethe did. Home schooled and educated as a lawyer, Goethe thereafter moved into all realms of knowledge through his own informal studies, encapsulating Whitehead’s dictum that education is self-education. Over the course of his long life, Goethe took ownership of his versatile abilities and expanded and unfolded them.

It may be self-evident, but bears reminding, that self-education presumes a certain amount of privilege and a healthy dose of inherent “faculties and capacities,” particularly to reach the level of productivity and influence of Goethe. Too much privilege, though, and too much of a healthy dose is not necessarily better.

Nature blessed Goethe with immense talent, and life favored him throughout, as he readily admitted. Nevertheless, as his autobiography *Poetry and Truth*, his bildungsroman novel *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*, and his dramatic tragedy *Faust* make clear, one can be tyrannized by a profusion of capabilities. Goethe contemplated suicide at one point when overtaken by an ennui from an extravagance of options. Wilhelm, himself blessed with much talent and options, found himself in despair and aimless when faced with whether to become the responsible adult he saw himself needing to be or continue to live the free-flowing, artistic, bohemian lifestyle that indulged his

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<sup>28</sup> Safranski, 127.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and Philosophy*. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1949, 179.

talents. And Faust, already with degrees in all the disciplines, despaired to the point of turning to the devil for direction and a new life. To take ownership of one's education means, in part, that one channels one's ideals, aspirations, and abilities within and through the constraints of our human finiteness and through the tiresome plodding of ordinary living. In conversation with the young Eckermann, Goethe, nearing the end of a lifetime of service, of scientific studies, and as a renowned lyric poet, lamented the outcome of the great Romantic Lord Byron, a poetic genius whom Goethe greatly admired, said Byron was unable to modulate his ideals and temperament for the real world and, so, said Goethe, he met "his ruin."<sup>30</sup> From wherever we start and with whatever we are endowed, we are fated to learn how to move between freedom and necessity, between striving and settling.

Learning how to live within these tensions has been difficult for me, both to accept and to practice, since I want my circumstances to favor my flourishing and, knowing that with each passing year I approach the terminus of my life, I want to keep driving forward. Writing about middle age, but just as applicable at sixty and later, the philosopher Kieran Setiya says, "In middle age, the limited span of human life is no longer an abstraction. You know from the inside what a decade means; those that remain to you can be counted on one hand. That can be a source of angst."<sup>31</sup> Indeed. In the end we have an end.

Goethe, who lived to eighty-two, knew about the terminus of freedom, of his striving, and that he eventually would have to succumb to the ultimate necessity, the

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<sup>30</sup> *Conversations of Goethe*, in conversation with Eckermann on Thursday, February 24, 1825. See also, Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 153-54.

<sup>31</sup> Kieran Setiya, *Midlife, A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017, 105.

cessation of life. He wanted to believe in eternal life because he had so many projects to complete; his striving did not appreciate stoppage. Though nature would not give him the time he wanted, by studying nature --- botany, mineralogy, anatomy, optics --- the philosophy of Spinoza,<sup>32</sup> who held that humans and nature are unified, countering the mind-body dualism of Descartes, and the philosophy of Kant, who said humans cannot reason and perceive outside of what nature allows,<sup>33</sup> Goethe found ongoing vigor for living. Says Goethe through Faust, “Earth spirit, we are of a kind./I feel new energies, my mind/now glows as if from new-fermented wine./Now I dare to face the world again./To share in all its joy and all its pain./Into the eyes of storms I’ll set my sail,/And in the grinding shipwreck I’ll not quail.”<sup>34</sup> Our task is to face nature squarely, Goethe would say, and see what it has to teach us and how it shall inspire us. If we ignore and sidestep nature, disregarding the facts of existence, like Faust did drawing on magic and entering into an ill-serving alliance, we will fail. Goethe knew that by aligning ourselves with nature we do not constrain our growth, our capacity to flourish, but aid it. Just as nature moves toward its fruit and flower, so can we. Just as nature develops and evolves, so do we. Just as nature is plastic, so are we.

Aside from his work as a poet, a dramatist, and a novelist, Goethe was very much the scientist. He did not just dabble as a weekend gentleman scientist. He sought to make real, recognized advances in what he studied. Armed with a powerful imagination and acute observational skills, Goethe made noted contributions to human evolutionary biology, to chromatics, and to botany. When it was believed that there was a break

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<sup>32</sup> Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Ed. Gordon L. Miller. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009, xviii.

<sup>33</sup> Goethe, “The Influence of Modern Philosophy, 1817” in *Essential Goethe*, 984.

<sup>34</sup> *Faust*, Trans. Williams, lines 460-66.

between zoological and human evolution, Goethe discovered the presence of the intermaxillary bone in both humans and animals, as in horses, thus finding a link and continuity in evolution. His “Metamorphosis of Plants,” his first scientific treatise, informed how plants ought to be studied and the general theory of evolution, influencing Darwin himself. His theory of colors, a study of the constitution of light and, therefore, of color, has been regarded as the first example of the scientific method, and was a direct assault on the mechanistic and reductionist view of Newton’s view of light. Goethe took great pride in his scientific work, wishing even to be known firstly as a scientist than as a poet, despite not getting the level of respect he coveted from the scientific establishment of his day.

For him to say that in studying nature’s way we may flourish, he did not mean that we be scientists ourselves, but that we develop a capacity to observe, to question, to test, to interpret, and, importantly, to do so with poetic, or aesthetic, attention and care. Out of our study and reflection, we proceed to give “form to” that which we have come to understand and to translate it into “deeds,” with care and polish. In as much as we strive to understand and appreciate, and give form to it through deeds, even knowing we will err, do we grow and live a life worth living.

This giving “form to” through “deeds” has led me, more than before, to press myself and others to answer, “what does an idea, a position, a philosophy, a concept, a belief, actually mean? What does it imply for my life, for our life, in relation to others and to the world? It has also come to mean, “am I bringing my idea, my intention, my belief, my observation into reality? And, am I giving it care and attention? It is interesting that as Faust neared the end of his life, he was reprimanded by an old woman,

named Care. She, as a spirit, slipped into his room and accused him of having flittered away his life, through avaricious striving, having jumped all around, with no direction, grasping here, grasping there, never content, never settled.<sup>35</sup>

As said, striving in itself is not bad. It is what nature would have us do. It should be qualified, though, by, “for what are we striving? Is this a worthy objective?” Though Faust learned the lessons of these questions too late, he did come to realize that by settling, by thoughtfully grounding himself, he could mitigate the avarice of his idealisms and desires.

I've rushed about the world for many a year,/ seized what I had a mind to,  
everywhere./ It didn't please me? --- goodbye, did I care!/ On what escaped me  
didn't waste a tear./ My sole wish has been what? --- to desire,/ sate my desire and  
desire again, all over./ I stormed through life in grand style, mightily,/ but wiser  
now, I act more thoughtfully./ I've learned enough about the world we live in,  
what lies beyond is closed to human vision./ The man's a fool who, gazing up,  
imagines/ above the clouds his like dwell in the heavens./ With feet well planted  
let him look about the earth,/ this world speaks volumes to a man of worth./ What  
business has he with eternity? What he perceives, let him make his its truth,/ and  
living so, walk his earthly path.<sup>36</sup>

Here Faust turns from that which lies beyond to the world around him. He turns earthward. Faust's shift earthward mirrors a transition in my own life from a metaphysical theology, in which I was reared, to a philosophy of naturalism (not of materialism) to which I came to on my own, where awe and wonder and salvation can be found in the world in which I find myself if I would take the time to settle and look. Goethe's essay “The Metamorphosis of Plants,” gave me a metaphor and an image for settling.

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<sup>35</sup> *Faust*, Trans. Greenberg, lines 11829-11844.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 11789-11805.

Written in 1790, when Goethe was forty-one, the essay describes how all varieties of plants develop from the buried seed to full flower by following the progression and unfolding of a single entity, that of a leaf. In the botanical gardens of Palermo, during his two-year escape to Italy, the idea came to Goethe that the plant is but the unraveling of a leaf that replicates itself as it moves from below the ground to its full expression above ground. On July 31, 1788, he writes, “While walking in the Public Gardens of Palermo, it came to me in a flash that in the organ of the plant which we are accustomed to call the “leaf” lies the true Proteus who can hide or reveal himself in all vegetal forms. From first to last the plant is nothing but leaf, which is so inseparable from the future germ that one cannot think of one without the other.”<sup>37</sup>

Starting in the ground as a seed in paired cotyledons, the leaf emerges, rises, and spreads as new stems and leaves sprout from developing nodes. As the stem rises to the flower, the leaf forms a calyx, a bowl-like shape of smaller leaves, from which emerges the flower, itself an arrangement of leaves, and the fruit. In time, the plant “comes to seed,” as seeds go to ground to be buried for the process to start anew. Over the course of the plant’s metamorphosis, rooted in place as it absorbs nutrients from the soil and the effects of its environment, the plant bears its history and grows toward its flourishing.

Linking the metamorphosis of plants to human metamorphosis, to the shaping and expressing of our identity, is not out of the question, certainly not as a metaphor or as an image. Scientifically, we are learning that humans are neuro and physiologically tied to nature’s processes. As for Goethe, Astrida Tantillo, writing on Goethe’s philosophy of nature, says that Goethe’s “principles...focus upon the relationships among parts and

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<sup>37</sup> Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786-1788*. Trans. W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer. San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1962, 363.

wholes, animate and inanimate objects, or nature and human beings. They therefore represent...Goethe's attempts to uncover a philosophy applicable to human beings as to nature as a whole."<sup>38</sup>

That there is a morphology, an integrative, connecting framework similar to all plants, suggests that our identity connects with the identity of others. We share elements in being human, however different we are, that allow for mutual exploration on what it means to be a human and to flourish in our own way. That the plant has in itself the simultaneity of past, present, and future, means we carry within and upon our person our own evolution and the effects from the choices we have made throughout our life. That there is nutritive and generative sap that flows through large and small stems alike, and that feeds the developing leaf as it moves to flower and fruit, refers to the generative, though inchoate, consciousness of the self, that flows through us from birth onward and gives form to the direction and choices of our life. That the plant is rooted in and is influenced by its environment, reinforces the fact that we are embedded in the material world and are, as well, shaped in small and dramatic ways by our environment, our place, our context, and our time. Flower where you are implies being rooted and drawing on the nutrients of your place and using them to thrive there. Not to draw on or not have the necessary nutrients, leads to withering, as much as drawing on them excessively. Having an excessiveness of nutrients — being over watered — one becomes parochial in outlook and too indulgent in comforts that can lead to a premature and less developed flowering.

The striving that has carried me to move from city to city, from job to more complex jobs, to flower beyond and in spite of what is given and asked for, has also

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<sup>38</sup> Astrid Orle Tantillo, *The Will To Create: Goethe's Philosophy of Nature*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002, 5.

brought along a need to settle. Knowing that I can only strive and grow where I am placed, I must learn to settle. To settle in; to settle down; to settle for; to settle on, using the categories of the political scientist, Robert Goodin.<sup>39</sup>

Settling, says Goodin, is the coming to be fixed. To be fixed does not need to mean being permanent and unyielding. Being fixed means pausing, slowing, even stopping, staying put but, all the while, taking in, evaluating, attending to what is being ignored and passed over too quickly. Then, gaining what is needed and beneficial, one starts again, perhaps in a new direction, or, if not by moving on, by becoming more centered, informed, of deeper and widened perspectives for having settled. Settling is a form of being at place, attending to place. So one settles in to a new line of work, settles down to into a new way of life, settles on a new place to live --- settles, in short, on a new, modified framework.

Goethe gave importance to place as necessary for flourishing when he left, in 1775, the major city of Frankfurt, his birthplace, for the small district of Weimar, where he would stay for the rest of his life. Though invited by Duke Karl August for his court, Goethe felt settling in the small duchy would be conducive to his development. Nevertheless, though settled in this parochial location, he did not cease to strive, as he embarked upon new literary and scientific works. Yet, after nine years of courtly and administrative duties, he felt impelled to leave, escaping in the middle of the night, for a two-year sojourn in Italy (1784-86) to find first-hand the classical roots to feed his spirit and to refresh his soul and creativity, both of which had been parched by the administrative duties of the court. Italy as a place and as a concept, as the seat of the

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<sup>39</sup> *On Settling*. Robert E. Goodin, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Renaissance and of classical virtues, was where his inner striving could be re-charged and nurtured. Returning back to Weimar after two years, now with a new orientation, a new zest, a deeper purpose, he could proceed with his fruit and flowering, his flourishing.

For myself, I left Cincinnati first for Ann Arbor, then for Boston, and now have returned to assume a post in the museum industry, at the Contemporary Art Center. This new step into the museum industry and this art form, the contemporary arts, is the flower at the top of the stem that has been my thirty-one years of employment in the college, university, research-center setting. Over the years, my metamorphosis has come as my striving has gone through the stages of settling in at different places. This striving-to-then-settle dynamic, to learn about and evolve where I am planted, to see and feel its details, brought to me, first in Boston, the concept of the “flaneur,” the aimless wanderer, given definition and literary respectability by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and by the writer Franz Hesse, in his *Walking in Berlin: A Flaneur in the Capital*,<sup>40</sup> an example of the practice and genre.

From the French word *flaneur*, meaning an idler, an aimless wanderer, the flaneur was adopted within the concept of urbanism to refer to a person who allows himself to explore his surroundings, his place, guided only by his curiosity and confidence to move into what is not known. The flaneur realizes the importance of place by recognizing that place makes him and it is place that holds the mystery of his settling. Goethe speaks of flaneuring in Rome during his sojourn in Italy.

I have been here seven days now, and a general concept of [Rome] is gradually forming in my mind. We walk diligently here and there, I acquaint myself with the street plans of ancient and modern Rome, view the ruins, the buildings, visit this and that villa, and deal quite unhurriedly with the main objects of interest. I

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<sup>40</sup> Franz Hessel, *Walking In Berlin, A Flaneur in the Capital*. MIT Press, 2017.

just keep my eyes open, look, and go, and come again, for only *in Rome* can I prepare oneself for Rome.... And the immensity of all this affects us very quietly as we hurry back and forth in Rome to get to the most outstanding sights. In other places one has to search for what is significant, here we are overwhelmed and surfeited with it. Go where we will, there is always a scene of some kind to look at, palaces and ruins, gardens and wilderness, vistas and confined areas, little houses, stables, triumphal arches and columns, often so close together that they could be drawn on one sheet of paper. A pen is useless here, one needs to write with a thousand slate pencils! And then in the evening I am tired out and exhausted from looking and marveling.”<sup>41</sup>

By attending to where he is planted, the flaneur learns about his present, but also how the past, present, and future flow into each other and co-exist. The past is ever present; it’s not even past, as William Faulkner said, but is now interpreted within the contemporary moment and context. Once, when flaneuring through the streets of Cincinnati, down 9<sup>th</sup> street, I saw, next door to Woods Hardware, a portal with two elephant heads in high relief on either side at the top of the door frame. Looking down, I saw, etched in the frame, at the sidewalk level, the words, “Dedicated to the Republican Party, A.D. 1928.” Formerly the prominent party in the city, the Republican Party now is no longer recognized as of the city but of the suburbs and especially of outlying regions.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Essential Goethe*, 833-34.

<sup>42</sup> Hamilton County historically elected [Republican](#) candidates in national elections, but has trended [Democratic](#) in recent years. In 2008, [Barack Obama](#) was the first Democratic presidential candidate to win the county since 1964. The county continued to lean Democratic, voting for Obama again in 2012 and for Democratic candidate [Hillary Clinton](#) in 2016. In fact, it was one of the few counties in Ohio to swing toward the Democrats in 2016 even as the state as a whole had swung toward the Republicans. In the 2018 midterm elections, with the election of Democrat Stephanie Summerow Dumas, the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners was completely under Democratic control for the first time ever.<sup>[23]</sup> They had previously regained a 2/3rds majority control of the Board of Commissioners in 2016 with the election of [Denise Driehaus](#). In 2019, longtime Democratic Commissioner [Todd Portune](#) announced his resignation from the Board due to health problems. Portune's Chief of Staff, Victoria Parks, was appointed to serve the remainder of his term (through the November 2020 general election). With Parks' appointment, the Board of Commissioners became for the first time all-female and majority black (from Wikipedia, “Hamilton County, Ohio”).

And with Woods Hardware, a well-stocked hardware store, thriving in the heart of the city, indicates that people are moving back into the urban core, as condos and apartments all around attest, prefiguring a future of urban growth.

Among the various art forms, the contemporary arts most approximate flaneuring, since they, too, are given to discovering — and representing — in the moment the place and time wherein they (the artists) are planted. The contemporary arts emerge now as an expression of my metamorphosis. They constitute a branch of my plant, just as each place where I have lived and worked also constitute branches and stems of my plant, as DO the dead stems and stubs, the bad experiences and periods of my life, that I must not allow to divert my attention and my generative nutrients from where I can bud and grow next.

So as I navigate my place as a flaneur, observing and reflecting on and being receptive to what goes on around me, and as I draw upon the contemporary arts to inspire me to give form to the world as I interpret and live it, I develop a capacity to move meaningfully through life and be lithe enough to navigate and style my life to flourish, and benefit not just me but others as well where I have settled. Such are some of the lessons I have gained on reading Goethe at sixty.

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