

# Nishida and Santayana on Goethe

## An Essay in Comparative Aesthetics

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### Introduction

This essay is concerned with the reactions to the work of Goethe of two major philosophers from opposite sides of the world, Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) and George Santayana (1863-1952). It is unsurprising that each should find a great deal of philosophical and of aesthetic interest in Goethe: what is more illuminating from the standpoint of comparative aesthetics is the difference in their reactions. They differ in the focus of their interest; in what they find valuable in his work and to a considerable extent in the works on which they concentrate. Moreover, these differences are the reverse of haphazard. As one might expect of these philosophers, both concerned to develop as complete and systematic as possible an account of reality in their philosophies, their aesthetics is firmly grounded in their world-view as a whole. Indeed, though no single contrast of this kind can ever give the whole story - the world is never that neat or simple - their approaches do to a certain extent exemplify some consistent differences between eastern and western approaches to aesthetics. In what follows I will set out in outline their respective metaphysics and general views on art and then in more detail their views on Goethe. Throughout I will touch on various points concerning the nature of aesthetic experience, both of the artist and the spectator (or auditor etc) of art, and will return to this issue in more detail in the conclusion.

### (2) Metaphysics and General Views on Art

Nishida's whole philosophical endeavour throughout his entire career is unified by an intellectual project of exceptional daring, namely to try to find a way of conceptualizing zen experience. His bedrock conviction is always that ultimate reality is what is revealed in the zen experience of *satori*. Though he changed the conceptual frameworks he devised to articulate this outlook several

times, this root conviction is never questioned. In *satori* the surface ego - the self of which we are aware in all normal experience - disintegrates revealing the true self, and this true self or original face is identical with the universe. Using the vocabulary of Western philosophy, reality appears to satisfy the contradictory descriptions of being one and many simultaneously, a point Nishida insists on right from his first important work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū*, 1911): "The fundamental mode of reality is such that reality is one while it is many and many while it is one... Since these two cannot be separated, we can say that reality is the self-development of a single entity."<sup>1</sup> If reality is a single entity, it follows that what we ordinarily take to be our true self, distinct from all that is the not-self, cannot be so, and that - as has been indicated - our true self is reality itself: "Our true self is the reality of the universe, and if we know the true self we not only unite with the good of humankind in general but also fuse with the essence of the universe and unite with the will of God - and in this religion and morality are culminated."<sup>2</sup>

Metaphysical convictions of this kind often incline those who hold them towards a particular style of view of the artistic creative process; the imagination; the role of the artist and the nature and function of art - I say 'incline' because the relation is not always one of entailment, but rather one of logical coherence of views.<sup>3</sup> Where ultimate reality is conceived of as a oneness, it tends to be the case that aesthetic experience is regarded as a significant or privileged mode of access to the ultimate. The artist, with the gift of genius or a special type of imagination, is generally described as having the ability to penetrate the veil of ordinary experience and of being able to show us the way to this same insight. Art then comes to be conceived of as having a profound role as a bearer of metaphysical or religious truth (insofar as these are distinct in these systems). This style of outlook was adopted, for example, by most of the major English romantic poets<sup>4</sup> and it was also adopted, with appropriate modifications, by Nishida. Though remarks about art in general occur throughout Nishida's works, there is a helpfully concentrated discussion in *Art and Morality* (*Geijutsu to dotoku*, 1923). This work falls in the second phase of Nishida's philosophical development: in the first phase, of which *An Inquiry into the Good* is typical, Nishida uses a concept he borrowed from William James and Wundt to describe the ultimate, this concept being pure experience. In the second phase, in an attempt to avoid psychologism and under the influence of Fichte's notion of an act

(Tathandlung), he describes the ultimate in terms of the concept of the free act which underlies all acts.

Nishida summed up his key assertions concerning art and aesthetic experience in a short essay he wrote as a preface to an edition of Max Klinger's *Painting and Line Drawing*: "Art is neither a mere description of reality nor a mere subjective fancy. The so-called real world is not the only world given to us. Indeed, the world constructed by such a concept must rather be said to be the mere surface of reality. In the back of such a world is the flow of a truer reality, filled with a larger life whose depths cannot be fathomed. Precisely this reality is the object of art, and this aesthetic world, like our life itself, is infinitely free and profoundly rich."<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, aesthetic experience is not to be regarded as simply an interlude in our contact with the real world as ordinarily conceived, an experience in which we adopt a reflective, distanced or contemplative stance toward an aesthetic object of some kind. By contrast, aesthetic experience is experience of the ultimate, or put another way, of the true self which is the universe: "... we attain to an even deeper self-consciousness in aesthetic intuition than we do in mere conceptual self-consciousness. It is an error to think that aesthetic intuition is unselfconscious or nonconscious in a sense similar to perceptive consciousness. In aesthetic intuition we transcend the plane of conceptual self-consciousness, include it internally, and truly attain to self-consciousness of the free self."<sup>6</sup> It follows that the creative activity of the artist is among the most extraordinary of all activities. To create in this way is to be in contact with the ultimate, the reality underlying the world of nature: hence Nishida can say, strikingly: "The act of creation is not an act in the natural world." [A&M, p.161] Or again, in Kantian terms: "the artist lives within things in themselves."<sup>8</sup>

It is appropriate to note further a point which Nishida does not make explicitly but which follows from his metaphysic and which is taken for granted in what he has to say about Goethe. The one and the many are non-different: to use Nishida's phrase, they have absolutely contradictory identity (*zettai mujunteki jikodoitsu*).<sup>9</sup> Rightly regarded, therefore, ultimate reality is fully present in every particular. Just as for Blake the universe can be experienced via a grain of sand, for Nishida anything, however small, transient or insignificant, can be the vehicle for the final insight into what there is. This ultimate insight is of something which is in the last analysis beyond description: as he put this point in the vocabulary of the third and last of the conceptual frameworks he devised that of the place of nothingness, *mu no basho*, nothing can be said of the ultimate: "it

has completely transcended the standpoint of knowledge, and may perhaps be called 'the world of mystic intuition', unapproachable by word or thinking."<sup>10</sup> However, it can be hinted at obliquely by an artist who can feel the ultimate in the particular and can so depict the particular as to direct our attention in the appropriate way. To do this does not require a long description or a detailed depiction: indeed detail and expansiveness will get in the way, perpetuating our condition of being trapped in the web of conceptual discriminations, a web which veils rather than reveals the truth. A short poem is all that is needed to direct us to ultimate truth. It is perhaps no accident that the *haiku* should have been so cherished in a zen-informed culture (and this is not to underestimate the purely linguistic reasons for its viability in Japanese): since the ultimate is fully present in everything - in the one hand as in the two when clapping - any thing or event, rightly understood, can indicate the way to the ultimate. This is an issue to which I will return later when dealing directly with Nishida's reaction to Goethe.

These are the general beliefs which inform Nishida's consideration of Goethe: it is now appropriate to set out the complementary beliefs held by Santayana.

Like Nishida in one respect, Santayana adopted certain major philosophical positions at the start of his career and, though he modified the conceptual structures he used to articulate them, these bedrock convictions remain invariant in his philosophy. Most fundamental among these are his materialism and epiphenomenalism: for Santayana reality is the material world as described by science, the mind being not a separate entity or type of substance but an epiphenomenon of matter. There is no spiritual somewhat behind the material universe, no realm to which we may penetrate in moments of privileged insight. What there is matter in a state of constant flux. We are of this world, because this world is all there is: "In truth..man is an animal, a portion of the natural flux; and the consequence is that his nature has a moving centre.." <sup>11</sup> There is no room in such a system for mysticism: knowledge is knowledge of nature, and it is gained via conceptualisation of the flux of experience and representational perception.

Granted such a framework, Santayana has to take a view of art, aesthetic experience, the artist, and the function of the imagination of a kind quite other from that offered by Nishida. Most of what Santayana has to say about Goethe he set out in works from the earlier part of his career, from the period in which he elaborated his first philosophical system in the five volumes of *The Life of*

*Reason* (1905-6), and so it is necessary to say briefly what this work is about. As is also the case with Nishida's *Inquiry into the Good*, Santayana's ultimate purpose in this work is an ethical one. In this period he adopts a variety of ethical eudaemonism: happiness is the good for humankind, and it is best achieved by adopting what he calls the life of reason, the life in which our various wants, needs and desires are harmonised by the use of reason. The latter takes its data from the lessons of experience, the chief lesson being that happiness can be achieved only by accepting the conditions which bound all human endeavour. *The Life of Reason* is a survey of human institutions - of which art is one - from the point of view of this eudaemonism. Of each the question is asked: does this institution, or this form of it, help or hinder humankind in its search for rational and harmonious happiness? <sup>12</sup> Art is justified only if in some way it helps us live more rationally, which for Santayana is equivalent to saying more happily. There is not space here to consider Santayana's views on each how each of the arts does this <sup>13</sup>: granted the subject in hand, it is necessary to focus on his views on poetry.

Throughout his career Santayana defines aesthetic experience, of both artist and spectator (using that term in a broad sense to cover reception of all the arts), as immediate experience. <sup>14</sup> He never makes the sense of this phrase in this context absolutely precise, though he clearly cannot mean that in aesthetic experience the flux of experience is entirely unconceptualised. Rather, what he appears to mean is that the special gift of the artist is to be able to break free of inherited conceptual habits, to be able to escape from the grip of pre-existent conceptual sets and to see things and experience in a fresh light, exhibiting their significance to us. He applies this view to the poet in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). Great poetry - and the qualification is significant - he defines as "analysis for the sake of creation". <sup>15</sup> The great poet retains a certain innocence of vision, being able to disintegrate the conventionalities of humdrum experience, "and then out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. Our descent into the elements of our being is then justified by our subsequent free ascent toward its goal; we revert to sense only to find food for reason; we destroy conventions only to construct ideals." <sup>16</sup> No.

What Santayana is driving at becomes clearer if we concentrate on what these 'new structures' might be and how they are related to ideals, this last being a concept of central importance in his theory of poetry. Human beings are never

in perfect accord with their environment, both animate and inanimate. To be fully in accord with the environment would consist in that state in which the environment satisfied all human interests. We have concepts and beliefs which embody our notions of what this state of total accord would be like. They are our ideas of perfection, our ideals. Ideals cannot be the product of the understanding, since in Santayana's usage of the term the understanding is the faculty which most accurately records what is the case, rather than what we would prefer were the case. The faculty responsible for the production of ideals, Santayana argues, is the imagination, and indeed the formation of appropriate ideals he regards as its most important function.<sup>17</sup> To live without ideals Santayana regards as an **abject failure of rationality**: to live well we must live with them constantly in mind, otherwise we are adrift and directionless. Without ideals, "men would be horses harnessed to their own chariot, docile perhaps and hardworking, but neither knowing where they go, nor indeed going anywhere. All life in the world is also, if rational, life in the ideal..."<sup>18</sup> Moreover it is clear that for Santayana ideals are not to be regarded as logically isolated from one another: the life of reason demands that our ideal vision of life be comprehensive and inclusive, in effect that we have a complete set touching all the major areas of life. These sets of ideals are the new structures articulated by major poets.<sup>19</sup>

To live without regard for ideals, or to have few and fragmentary ones, ~~is to be in the condition~~ Santayana calls barbarism: "For the barbarian is the man who regards his passions as their own excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal. He is the man who does not know his derivations or perceive his tendencies, but who merely feels and acts, valuing his life for its force and filling, being careless of its purpose and its form...his delight is in abundance and vehemence; his art, like his life, shows an exclusive respect for quality and splendour of materials. His scorn for what is poorer and weaker than himself is only surpassed by his ignorance of what is higher."<sup>20</sup> Barbarism in this sense Santayana regarded as a central feature of the Romantic outlook, a point to which I will return in more detail presently when dealing with his interpretation of *Faust*.

The working out and expressing of such comprehensive visions of the ideal is not easy and is not within the powers of the vast majority of human beings: those individuals who have the ability to articulate these visions are the supreme among the world's poets. They have an imagination powerful enough to articulate one of the few genuinely different world-views humanity has yet

devised. Santayana has four poets only on his list of those able to do this: Homer; Lucretius; Dante and Goethe. In their work is instantiated what he regards as the highest form of the art, rational poetry, i.e. poetry which helps us to live the life of reason. It may seem that what Santayana has termed rational poetry is in some cases philosophy rather than poetry; but in his view this distinction collapses at the highest levels of philosophical insight: In his view, philosophy is not to be confused with the technicalities which make up so much of it: such technicalities are merely the prelude to the final goal of philosophy which is *theoria* or contemplation, a vision of all things in their order and worth. Such contemplation is imaginative. A philosopher who attains it is for that moment a poet, and a poet who can grasp imaginatively the whole order of things is for that moment a philosopher.<sup>21</sup>

One basic point about the four poets on Santayana's list should be noted, namely that they are all the authors of long poems. A comprehensive vision, in Santayana's sense, cannot be stated briefly: the truth about the order of things is not quickly articulated: "Poetry must...to render all reality, render also the background of its figures, and the events that condition their acts. We must place them in that indispensable environment which the landscape furnishes to the eye and the social medium to the emotions."<sup>22</sup> In great poetry, the subject is placed in its cosmic context: hence "The distinction of a poet - the dignity and humanity of his thought - can be measured by nothing, perhaps, so well as by the diameter of the world in which he lives; if he is supreme, his vision, like Dante's, always stretches to the stars."<sup>23</sup>

Nishida and Santayana, then, might both be said to accept the belief that one of the main values of supreme art is that it acquaints us with ultimate truth. The similarity between their views, however, is little more than verbal, since their conception of what that truth is could hardly be more different. With these ideas in mind we can now turn to their reactions to Goethe.

#### Nishida on Goethe

During the period 1895-1909, before he obtained his first university teaching post, Nishida was employed as a schoolteacher, and one of his principal responsibilities was to teach German. His own knowledge of the language he put to good use, not only mastering much classic German philosophy but also reading (amongst others) the works of Goethe. References to the poet are scattered throughout Nishida's works, from the period of *Zen no kenkyu* onwards. Right from the start, Nishida believed that he discerned in Goethe a metaphysical stance

akin to his own and more generally to that which he judges to underlie oriental art forms in general, a broadly holistic approach to a reality conceived in the terms already discussed. In Goethe's case, this outlook was native to him but considerably reinforced and rendered more articulate by his reading of Spinoza.<sup>24</sup> The general Spinozist approach Nishida sees behind Goethe's concept of the original phenomenon or *Urphänomen* held to underlie all phenomena. The ability to penetrate to this depth of reality is part of the special endowment of poets and *a fortiori* of Goethe. It consists in a special sort of intuition which penetrates to "the truth of a thing and grasp[s] its unifying reality. What they [i.e. poets] then express is not a superficial fact but an unchanging noumenal reality hidden deep within things."<sup>25</sup>

This approach to Goethe is developed at length in Nishida's most extended discussion of the poet, the essay *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, written in December 1931 and published in *Thought and Experience: New Series* (1937). The term 'metaphysical' does not occur in the Japanese title, but the translator has entirely reasonably added it to the English title, since it is manifestly what Nishida has in mind.<sup>26</sup> In this essay, Nishida advances the view that the best of Goethe's poetry is informed by a world-view closely analogous to that which informs much oriental art. As has been noted above, since one and many are non-different or have absolutely contradictory identity, it follows that, in a sense, the ultimate can be said to be fully present in all things, and works of art are no exception. Put another way, Nishida notes that the real or ultimate is always present as the background to any work of art. Viewed as the one, the real is eternal, and so Nishida can say, again strikingly: "Just as Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures, or the sculptures of Rodin are hewn out of a massive block of marble, so all great art is a relief, cut out of the marble of eternity."<sup>27</sup> A relief, of course, is non-separable from the block from which it is carved; analogously, no work of art can be without a relation to the metaphysical background of the real.

This relation, however, may be more or less distant. The background of eternity is strongly present, Nishida contends, in Buddhist and early Christian art, whereas the perfect, highly articulated forms of ancient Greek art are less resonant of the depths of reality itself.<sup>28</sup> The real is in the last analysis beyond all conceptual articulation: no predicates apply to it. Accordingly, the more formless the background we discern behind (so to speak) a work of art, the closer we come to the real. Put in terms of spatial imagery, a two-dimensional



background is closer to the real than one which is three dimensional, since it more nearly approaches the formless: fewer predicates apply to the two-dimensional than to the three. Behind Goethe's lyric poetry Nishida discerns a two-dimensional background.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to highlight Nishida's isolation of the *lyric* poems of Goethe as the pinnacle of his output: though as we shall see he has things to say about *Faust*, it is the lyrics of Goethe which Nishida found came closest to his heart and to the poetry of the orient. This preference is rooted directly in his metaphysics. Ideally, art hints at or indicates to us the formless eternal one: "All this must be the reason why Goethe, despite his various talents and manifold activities, was the greatest lyrical poet. In the field of drama, where form and figure is essential, the background must be three-dimensional; only with regard to lyrics does one not know from where it comes, and to where it goes. It is an overflow of the spring of life. There is nobody but Goethe in whom personal experience has become poetry so directly."<sup>30</sup> In these lyrics there is a holistic view of the order of things deeply consonant with zen. Nature, in the lyrics, "is like an infinite space which, itself formless, produces form everywhere. Like the moonlight in *An den Mond*, like the sea in *Der Fischer*, and like the mist in *Erkönig*, Goethe's 'nature' is essentially something that harmonizes with our heart.. There is *Mitklingen* [resonance] in the very depth of our soul."<sup>31</sup>

The thesis that nature and the individual are in harmony presupposes the reality of both, and that Goethe sensed this harmony, Nishida argues, sets limits to his Spinozism. The status of the individual in Spinoza's philosophy is problematic, and Spinoza's view was not acceptable to Goethe: "..Goethe was less a Spinozist than he himself believed, and less than many have said since. From a different point of view, one could even say that he took the opposite standpoint. In Spinoza's philosophy, eternity is two-dimensional, but negating the individual. Spinoza's 'substantia' negates the individual completely. In his philosophy, the individual is merely a 'modus' of the 'substantial'. There is nothing like 'time', and his philosophy does not allow for anything like individuality....On the other hand, Goethe's pantheism encloses individuality everywhere. Nature, in Goethe's sense, does not deny individuality, but produces something individual everywhere"<sup>32</sup>, and this interpretation is certainly consonant with Goethe's view that a few exceptional souls achieve a form of immortality. From Nishida's point of view of course, Goethe's view is the more accurate,

since for him individuals are non-different from the real. Put another way: "the personal is an image of eternity, mirrored in eternity."<sup>33</sup>

Concerning *Faust* Nishida has two main points to make, the first concerning the overall message of the work, the key to which (he thinks) is to be found in how one views the Helena episode. What the drama as a whole exhibits, Nishida contends, is Faust's continued endeavour towards a higher state of existence. The Helena episode is a stage on this journey, necessary no doubt, but not the goal. The classic on its own is not enough: there is a higher ideal toward which Faust moves: "When Faust embraced Helena, only her veil and robe remained in his hands. He returned home and turned to an active life for the benefit of society. Goethe was thoroughly Germanic in his essence. The Goethe who wrote the second part of *Faust* and the *Wanderjahre*, was still the author of *Götz* and *Werther*. Although he was touched and refined by the spirit of the classical world, in the depth of his soul there was not the clarity of *eidos*, but a depth of feeling, to which the vision of ideas was not sufficient."<sup>34</sup> The perfect, fully articulated forms of Greek art, in Nishida's view, could not capture fully enough the imprecise but profound and inexhaustibly suggestive ideas and feelings which he takes to be the kernel of Goethe's experience.

Secondly, if the lyric poems best exhibit the formless background which is the real, it is in the final Chorus Mysticus at the conclusion of *Faust II* that Goethe makes his most explicit statement as to the nature of his metaphysical beliefs. The Chorus states:

"Alles Vergängliche Ist nur ein Gleichnis; Das Unzulängliche Hier  
wirds Ereignis; Das Unbeschreibliche, Hier ists getan; Das  
Ewigweibliche Zieht uns hinan."<sup>35</sup>

[Everything transient is only a parable; the inaccessible here becomes actual; the ineffable is here achieved; the Eternal-Feminine draws us on.]

Nishida does not explain in detailed terms how he understands this much discussed passage, but it is not too difficult to see why these words should so have stuck him. It is manifestly assumed here that the world of ordinary experience is not all there is. There is another realm or dimension to the real, ordinarily inaccessible and indescribable in some way, perhaps by being beyond conceptual articulation. It would be too speculative to read into this passage as precise a doctrine as Nishida's thesis of the contradictory identity of the one and the many; but view expressed here is at least recognisably like Nishida's. Again, though

this is speculation, perhaps the mysterious notion of the Eternal-Feminine reminded Nishida of the description of the Tao as the Mysterious Female.<sup>36</sup>

On these grounds, Nishida finds in Goethe's work, especially the lyrics, a bridge to the art of the east: "Oriental art is essentially impersonal because the background is an integral part of it. This produces [in our hearts] a formless, boundless vibration, and an endless, voiceless echo."<sup>37</sup> Goethe's lyrics, in Nishida's view, are of a recognisably similar kind, informed by a two-dimensional background: "For Goethe there is no inward and no outward; everything is as it is; it comes from where there is nothing, and goes to where there is nothing,"<sup>38</sup> the 'nothing' here being *mu*, the oriental nothing, the predicateless real from which all things come and to which they return: "When....history is thought of as determination in the eternal Now, where past and future are extinguished in the present, then everything comes without a whence in its coming, and goes without a whither in its going, and that which is, is eternally what it is. Such a thinking flows in the depth of the civilization of the East, in which we have grown up."<sup>39</sup> When produced against such a background, "we reach something like an art of sadness without the shadow of sadness, an art of joy without the shadow of joy,"<sup>40</sup> that is, an art which exhibits perfect serenity.

### Santayana on Goethe

As is the case with Nishida, Goethe was a fairly constant presence in Santayana's thought, and his works and ideas are referred to by Santayana with some frequency, though again as with Nishida there are some concentrated essays on which one can profitably focus, notably in *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910) and *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1915). The reason for the constancy of reference in Santayana's case, however, is not one of instinctive sympathy or discernment of a kindred spirit. For Santayana, Goethe was the greatest exemplar of, and the greatest artist produced by, European romanticism. Romanticism Santayana regarded as one of the few irreducibly different major ethical outlooks produced in the European tradition, the others being materialism (which has Lucretius as its great poet) and what he calls supernaturalism (which has Dante),<sup>41</sup> and though Santayana disliked what he took to be the romantic ethic, he could find no more thoroughgoing example of it than Goethe the man or his creation, Faust.

It is on *Faust* that Santayana concentrates to the exclusion of almost the whole of the rest of Goethe's output. As we have seen, Santayana's conception

of philosophy is such that he regards it as impossible to set out a fully-articulated world-view briefly: there is nothing analogous to the great matter revealed in *satori* in his conception of the final truth, and so he does not turn to the lyrics for Goethe's view of the heart of the matter. Goethe's world-view or philosophy is that of romanticism, and that requires space to be stated fully and thoroughly exemplified.

At the heart of romanticism, Santayana contends, is a mystical faith in the will and in action. The will is conceived of by the romantic as "a metaphysical entity whose business is to be vigorous and endlessly energetic while remaining perfectly plastic."<sup>42</sup> As Faust remarks when he translates the first verse of St. John: "In the beginning was the deed" (*Im Anfang war die That!*) The will believes that it can create worlds, and once created these worlds are discarded as stages on the way of the development of the ego, which must endlessly seek new challenges in its thirst for new experience.<sup>43</sup> In Santayana's view Goethe's own life exemplifies this ethic fully. His sympathies with others were only romantic or aesthetic: "they were based on finding in others an interesting variation from himself, an exotic possibility, rather than an identity with himself in thought or in fate.. The sympathy Goethe felt for things was that of a lordly observer, a traveler, a connoisseur, a philanderer; it was egotistical sympathy."<sup>44</sup> Goethe was in practice a romantic egotist, a man for whom the development of the self was the only duty: his family, his friends and his own feelings were so many stepping stones in his moral career: he expanded as he left them behind. Not that his affairs were sensual or callous or cost him nothing; but the sorrow and remorse were themselves desirable and necessary to his growth.<sup>45</sup>

As with the creator, so with the creation. *Faust* is the great epic of the romantic attitude to life. Faust himself is the epitome of the romantic hero: he thirsts for all experience, including the experience of evil. He is no vulgar pleasure seeker. He fears no hell and hopes for no happiness. He makes no bargain (as Marlowe's Dr. Faustus does) to buy earthly pleasures in exchange for eternal torment: neither Goethe nor Faust nor Mephistopheles believes such pleasures are worth having, nor such torments possible.<sup>46</sup> Each episode, from Auerbach's cellar to the founding of the kingdom, in Santayana's view, shows Faust endlessly eager for new experience but always blind to its lessons. At the end of the Gretchen episode - the end of Faust's exploration of the realm of purely private interests - the hero has learned nothing. His will remains wayward if indomitable,

and his achievements are fruitless. All he has decided is that he needs a bigger stage on which to exercise his will, the stage of history. What he has not done is to make any progress in rationality, as Santayana understands it. His purposes have not been in any way refined by his experiences.<sup>47</sup>

As we have seen, Nishida interprets the Helena episode as evidence of Goethe's dissatisfaction with the too-well-formed-precision of the classic; Santayana predictably takes a different line. For him, the Faust/Helena/Euphorion scenes show Goethe at his wisest. Our scholarship may render the Greek spirit familiar to us (Faust may marry Helen); but the product of this union of the Romantic and the classic will be a hybrid unfit to survive in the world. Euphorion is a Romantic soul in the outward garb of classicism, fated to die young. When this enthusiasm has dashed itself against the hard conditions of the world, its mother (the beauty of Greece) will, like Helen, fade before our eyes. It is to Goethe's credit, Santayana contends, that he recognised the incompatibility of the Romantic and the classic: no real marriage of the two approaches can be sustained, and so the classic, like all the other stages on the way, has to be abandoned as the will continues its lifelong quest for novelty and the development of the self.<sup>48</sup>

Equally, he has to take a quite different line from his Japanese contemporary on the interpretation of Faust's political activities. Nishida finds in these episodes evidence that Faust has reached the plane of altruism in morality, and that he is here acting to secure the good of his subjects: "above all else, Goethe's ideal was, as shown by the second part of *Faust* and by the *Wanderjahre*, action for the community of men."<sup>49</sup> Santayana rejects this interpretation - by no means unique to Nishida - entirely. It is difficult to find much altruism in the actions of Mephistopheles, doing Faust's bidding, in the suppression of the insurrection or in the Philemon and Baucis episode. Faust's motive for his political adventures is in fact no more than the boredom which constantly haunts the Romantic spirit. Once an experience has been exhausted, the self must find some new arena in which to develop and expand: "It is characteristic of the absolute romantic spirit that when it has finished with something it must invent a new interest. It beats the bush for fresh game; it is always on the verge of being utterly bored."<sup>50</sup> Faust's political activities have no steady purpose or standard behind them.

Again, Santayana has no patience with the view - accepted by Nishida for example<sup>51</sup> - that the 'message' of *Faust* is to be found in what he calls its

official moral, added under the influence of Schiller, namely that he who strives inevitably strays, but that the striving itself is salvation. [He has in mind the words spoken by the Lord in the Prologue in Heaven: *Es irrt der Mensch, solang er strebt* (So long as he strives, Man will err) and by the Angels in the final scene of *Faust II*: *Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen* (He who does not cease from striving we can redeem)] This idea is an addition to the play, Santayana argues: it is not the seed that gave rise to it, nor the spirit that it breathes. It does not consistently underlie it, inform it, or sum up its world-view, and he cites Goethe himself in defense of this claim: "...that a man, continually struggling from difficult errors towards something better, should be redeemed, is an effective, and to many, a good enlightening thought; but it is no idea which lies at the foundation of the whole, and of every individual scene."<sup>52</sup> The spirit which informs *Faust* is the spirit of romanticism, of which the categorical imperative is that the ego must develop itself through the constant renewal of experience.

Santayana's interpretation of Goethe's Spinozism is also different from that of Nishida, though he does share the latter's view that Goethe's adoption of Spinoza's views is not thoroughgoing and indeed cannot be, granted the status Goethe allows to individuals and his view on limited personal immortality already referred to. From Spinoza, in Santayana's view, Goethe took everything that is serious in the overall message of *Faust*, and in particular the doctrine of seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis*. This doctrine Santayana interprets and applies to *Faust* as follows: "A thing is seen under the form of eternity when all its parts or stages are conceived in their true relations, and thereby conceived together. The complete biography of Caesar is Caesar seen under the form of eternity. Now the complete biography of Faust, Faust seen under the form of eternity, shows forth his salvation. God and Faust himself, in his last moment of insight, see that to have led such a life, in such a spirit, *was* to be saved....To have felt such perpetual dissatisfaction is truly satisfactory; such desire for universal experience is the right experience."<sup>53</sup> Faust was all along the servant of god, as god is portrayed by Goethe.

Again it is Spinozism - and not the Catholicism which some interpreters have found in it - which in Santayana's view underlies the final scene of the drama and gives the key to the sense of the haunting Chorus Mysticus. Faust is in this scene about to pass into another world, but rather than being his salvation this is the continuance of his trial. The Chorus Mysticus

says that everything here is but an image or parable, but seen *sub specie aeternitatis* the insufficient is turned into something actual and complete. What seems as ordinarily conceived to be an endless pursuit becomes, when interpreted in the appropriate and profound Spinozist manner, a perfect fulfillment. The Eternal Feminine is the ideal of something infinitely attractive and essentially inexhaustible which draws life on from stage to stage: Gretchen and Helen are both symbols of this ideal.<sup>54</sup>

*Faust* ends on the same philosophical level on which it began, the level of Romanticism: "The worth of life lies in pursuit, not in attainment; therefore, everything is worth pursuing, and nothing brings satisfaction - save this endless destiny itself."<sup>55</sup> In *Faust* Goethe presents us with experience in its immediacy, variety and apparent groundlessness. He also presents it as a series of episodes. There is no totality in the episodes because the ground for them is not known. In a sense Goethe presents us with what is most fundamental, "the turbid flux of sense, the cry of the heart, the first tentative notions of art and science, which magic or shrewdness might hit upon."<sup>56</sup> Such knowledge, however, is impressionistic and casual, and shows sharply the limitations of romanticism as a serious ethic. It remains, Santayana contends, obstinately empirical and learns nothing from its varied experiences.

### Some Conclusions

In conclusion I would like to offer some reflections on this comparison, in particular with regard to aesthetic experience. The by and large contrasting reactions to Goethe we have found in the works of these two major philosophers seem to me to offer an admirable exemplification and confirmation of a powerful thesis concerning aesthetic properties and aesthetic experience put forward in Kendall Walton's essay *Categories of Art*.<sup>57</sup> Walton there argues that it is a mistake to assume that the aesthetic properties which we take to be present in aesthetic objects and which are the basis of our interpretation and evaluation of them are just there waiting to be read off: to assume this is to assume that the mind can be as innocent as the eye was once claimed to be. For example, my aesthetic experience of a piece of music will be different according to the descriptions under which I conceptualize it, descriptions which will vary inevitably with my experience and knowledge. I will respond a little differently to Opus 111 according as I conceptualize it as: a piece of piano music; a piece written in Europe in the early nineteenth century; a piece written within and modifying the classical style; a sonata by Beethoven; a late sonata by Beethoven;

Beethoven's last piano sonata. All of these descriptions indicate differences in experience and familiarity with the work, and these are relevant factors in conditioning how I will respond to the work and in all probability how I will estimate a given interpretation of it. Indeed, the ways in which I conceptualise the aesthetic encounter, the descriptions under which I experience the aesthetic object, are a major constituent of the aesthetic experience, together with feelings and attitudes, themselves like all mental contents having the property of intentionality, also experienced under descriptions.

In his essay Walton is specially concerned with the properties of resemblance and representation, but the point can be generalised not only across the area of the aesthetic within a tradition but, I would argue, across whole traditions. Here the differences of mental set and experience generally become deeper. Within a given tradition, there is likely to be - except for the usual disagreements concerning the avant garde - rough agreement with regard to what counts as art, as an aesthetic virtue, and as aesthetic experience, and these views are themselves located within a wider web of what one can call cultural assumptions or presuppositions. Such an assumption of in-culture rough agreement cannot safely be made across traditions. Where there are differences between cultures at very deep levels of conceptual generality and belief, these differences have a conditioning effect on the general area of the aesthetic. Since space is limited I must offer only one type of example from this rich and rewarding field of investigation.

It is well known that translators of Japanese works on what we would call aesthetics are not able to produce any neat equivalents for the Japanese terms which are central to the articulation of the Japanese aesthetic outlook. The key terms - e.g. *sabi*; *wabi*; *yugen*; *hana*; *kokoro*; *kotoba*; *sugata*; *mono no aware* and so forth - resolutely resist easy rendering into western languages, and the translators need to give generally quite extensive glosses in order to point the western reader in the right direction. The content of these glosses has to include reference to a much wider area of experience than the aesthetic, for these terms, like their western counterparts, are embedded in a network of cultural beliefs and assumptions. For example, here is a list of comments drawn from eastern and western sources about the first term on this list, *sabi*. *Sabi* is : a sense of the transitoriness of all things tinged always with sadness; it is felt in solitude; it includes a sense of spontaneity, of all things occurring without relation to others; it is a sense of deep illimitable quietude; it is more readily experienced when we



are older, when it comes without being sought; *sabi* has to do with a particular atmosphere, arising from a scene that need not involve a human being, and this atmosphere is generated when something fulfils its destiny in the vast expanse of the universe. To see a creature experiencing its root destiny of transience gives rise to *sabi*. *Sabi* is not the English loneliness which suggests a state of inward drabness; rather *sabi* is a state of being alone in which we are not lonely, but are in a state in which we and all things interpenetrate. Hence *sabi* can be said to have to do with the merging of the temporal with the eternal, the mutable with the immutable. *Sabi* involves seeing the infinite and eternal in the here and now, and so is akin to *satori*. *Sabi* involves the belief that one attains perfect spiritual serenity by immersing oneself in the ego-less life of nature and it has a connection with the concept of nirvana, the state in which all things are experienced as they really are, empty. And so forth.

What this list makes quite clear is why *sabi* has no neat equivalent in western languages. It is an aesthetic property which would only have been conceived of in a culture in which the ultimate values and attitudes are embodied in concepts like *satori* and nirvana; in which ordinary self-conscious awareness is a condition not to be valued or reinforced but to be subdued; in which the surface ego is regarded as an illusion. Reality or the ultimate is here something with which not only should one seek to bring oneself into harmony, but also from which ultimately one is non-different, a marked contrast to the commonest western view that nature is something out there, the not-self, material to be worked on and bent to our purposes. The root western assumption about art - and the very term is cognate with 'artifice' and 'artificial' and so on - is that art is different from nature, is nature methodised, and reflects human purposes. By contrast, eastern aesthetic terms generally, like *sabi*, reflect the alternative values and outlines here outlined.

Viewed against these considerations, the contrasting interpretations of Goethe we have been considering are the reverse of surprising, being the consistent and expected reflection in the works of two extremely intelligent and perceptive philosophers of aesthetic predispositions generated by deeply different cultural backgrounds. These backgrounds predisposed them to find different virtues in Goethe, and their aesthetic experiences of his work will have been appropriately different. What they regard as important features of his work, and the degree to which they were evidently either moved or irritated or left indifferent by other features of it, is always consonant with the values of their cultural

background. Thus we have seen that the root assumptions made by Nishida and Santayana about what art can do, and about the nature of the poetic gift, are different. For Santayana, the poet has the ability to break free of conceptual habits, and to articulate a new conceptual framework incorporating a comprehensive set of ideals appropriate for a rational life in the prevailing conditions. For Nishida the great poet has a power of intuitive insight akin to that of the seer, but with the skill so to construct poems such that this insight can be hinted at for the rest of us not so blessed. There is one timeless truth to be articulated, rather than ideals which can appropriately change with historical circumstance. Hence the consonant focus on epic drama and lyric respectively; hence the focus on the metaphysical background and the romantic ethic respectively. Again, for Santayana aesthetic experience has as one of its properties that of shaking up our mental habits in a profitable way, as the artwork articulates to us the insights of the artist into the ideal possibilities of experience. For Nishida, as for so many of those thinkers for whom the bedrock and unquestionable foundation of life is revealed in the mystical encounter, aesthetic experience is of a kind with the mystical, less intense no doubt, but as it were on the same scale : an intuition of the real, a hint of the state of supreme insight, to which no concepts apply.

Interesting as these differences are, it is important in cases of comparison such as these not to overlook the similarities, since they too are instructive: indeed, unless the two traditions we have been glancing at were not in some ways occupying common ground, the study of comparative aesthetics would be on shaky foundations. Santayana and Nishida have to operating with some community of view as to what counts as being the area of the aesthetic for a meaningful comparison to be possible at all. In the present case and at the level of aesthetic virtues, it is clear that both these philosophers assume that truth, albeit differently conceived, is such a virtue. Neither has any inclination toward aestheticism.<sup>58</sup> Both assume that it is the proper business of poetry at its highest level of accomplishment to articulate and communicate truths about the human condition, and both would regard Goethe's technical skill as a poet - incomparable though it is - as in the service of this deeper and more valuable function. Nishida singles out and praises Goethe's lyrics because they suggest what he takes to be the truth of all truths; Santayana singles out *Faust* because it is a thorough exemplification of a set of ideals which, even if unacceptable to him, is too powerful to be ignored.

One final point: none of what has been said in this essay is to be taken as a defense of any form of cultural relativism, assuming that it is possible to formulate a version of this notion which is both interesting and not obviously self-refuting. Though it is an ideal not easy of accomplishment, I would wish to argue that there is no reason why a person brought up in one culture - and there cannot be a self which is not located within a culture - cannot by means of careful study come close to understanding what it is like to view the world through the lenses of a culture which has a different language; uses some incommensurable concepts and embodies fundamentally different attitudes. If that is so, it is enough to deprive the more dramatic forms of relativism of any real bite.

### Notes and References

References to Santayana's works are where possible given to the Triton Edition, New York: Scribners 1936-40, 15 vols, in the form : title, *Works*, Vol no., page. References to any of his works not in that edition are given in the usual way.

- (1) *An Enquiry into the Good* tr. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, p.57
- (2) op cit p.145
- (3) It is of course possible to adopt a metaphysic of this kind or with an analogous logical structure but to deny that art or the imagination have any positive role to play in putting us in touch with reality. The best known example of this approach is Plato, who, in the period of his development when he believed in the reality of a realm of Forms, regarded mimetic art as the high road away from knowledge of the real, and the artist (as performer, at any rate) as having no real knowledge of either the real or the subject-matter of their art.
- (4) The matter is summed up with customary lucidity in C.M. Bowra *The Romantic Imagination* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950
- (5) *Art and Morality*, tr. D.A. Dilworth and V.H. Viglielmo. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973, p.33
- (6) Op cit, p.112
- (7) Op cit, p.161
- (8) Op cit, p.167. The same idea appears recast in the vocabulary of the third phase of Nishida's philosophical development, that of the logic of place. In these terms, he describes aesthetic intuition as that in which the noema of consciousness is submerged in the noesis. Cf the essay *The Intelligible World in Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*, tr. R.

- Schinzinger. Westport (Conn.): Greenwood Press, 1973, p.111. This essay first appeared in Nishida's *Self-consciousness of the Universal*, 1930.
- (9) Cf.e.g. the essay *The Unity of Opposites* in Schinzinger, op cit, p.163
  - (10) *The Intelligible World* in Schinzinger, op cit, p.135
  - (11) *Reason in Science, Works V*, p.226. The same metaphysic appears in a new conceptual dress in Santayana's later system, the Realms of Being, cf *The Realm of Matter*, passim.
  - (12) Cf e.g. *Reason in Common Sense, Works III*, p.13
  - (13) These views are the subject-matter of *Reason in Art, Works IV*, first published in 1905. It is one of the quirks of philosophical history that Santayana's contribution to aesthetics has been more or less identified with the theory that beauty is objectified pleasure, the central thesis of his first book, *The Sense of Beauty*, 1896, *Works I*. This is only one element in a comprehensive aesthetic, developed throughout Santayana's career.
  - (14) Cf e.g. *The Sense of Beauty, Works I*, p.22
  - (15) *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Works II*, p.188
  - (16) loc cit
  - (17) Cf. e.g. op cit, p.148; *The Sense of Beauty, Works I*, pp. 139-40
  - (18) *Moral Symbols in the Bible*, [written c.1900] in Santayana (ed. Daniel Cory) *The Idler and his Works and Other Essays*. New York: Braziller, 1957, p.169
  - (19) Cf. e.g. *The Sense of Beauty, Works I*, p. 199
  - (20) *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Works II*, pp.125-6
  - (21) Cf. *Three Philosophical Poets, Works VI*, pp.8-10
  - (22) *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Works II*, p.190
  - (23) Op cit p.191
  - (24) On the endlessly debated question of the extent of Goethe's Spinozism, cf. David Bell *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe*: University of London Institute of Germanic Studies, 1984, ch.VI. In thinking about this issue it is worth keeping constantly in mind a point made by Professor Barry Nisbet: Goethe was throughout his life suspicious of systems. The universe appeared to him too complex and multifaceted to be summable up in a fashion neat enough to be exhaustively described within the conceptual framework of any one philosophical system or set of principles. In the light of the available documentation and on the evidence of his works, there can be no doubt that Spinoza's philosophy was deeply congenial to Goethe, but this does not entail that he accepted every element of the Spinozist outlook, a point taken up in the main text vis-à-vis the place of the individual in Goethe's thought. Cf. H.B. Nisbet: *Goethe and the Scientific Tradition*: University of London Institute of Germanic Studies, 1972, pp.1-2.

- (25) *An Inquiry Into the Good*, p.71
- (26) The Japanese term *haikei* means background, backdrop or backing in a literal sense. All references to the essay *Goethe's Metaphysical Background* are to the translation in Schinzinger, op.cit.
- (27) *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, p.145. Nishida's imagery inevitably recalls the description of the Tao as the uncarved block, cf. *Tao te ching* chs. 15, 19, 28, 32, and 57.
- (28) *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, p.146
- (29) Op cit, p.147
- (30) Op cit, p.150
- (31) Op cit, p.149. Nishida uses the German term in his text.
- (32) Op cit, pp. 148-9
- (33) Op cit, p. 145
- (34) Op cit, p.152
- (35) *Faust II*, ll.12104 - end.
- (36) Cf. *Tao te ching* chs 6, 10, 28. Towards the end of his life Goethe developed an interest in Chinese culture, and it is quite likely he had read a translation of the *Tao te ching*. Quite what he means by the Eternal-Feminine, however, is not an issue which can be gone into here.
- (37) *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, p. 146
- (38) Op cit, p.157. In speaking of the non-difference of inward and outward, Nishida has in mind two lines from *Epirrhema*:  
 'Nichts ist drinnen, nichts ist draussen;  
 Denn was innen, das ist aussen.'" (ll. 3-4)  
 [Nothing is inside; nothing is outside; because what is within is without]
- (39) *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, pp.158-9
- (40) Op cit, p.158
- (41) *Three Philosophical Poets, Works VI*, pp.6-7
- (42) *Egotism in German Philosophy, Works VI*, p.174
- (43) Cf. op cit, p. 173; *Three Philosophical Poets, Works VI*, pp.7-8
- (44) *Egotism in German Philosophy, Works VI*, p. 171
- (45) Op cit, p.173
- (46) *Three Philosophical Poets, Works VI*, p.112
- (47) Op cit, pp.113-6
- (48) Op cit, pp.116-9
- (49) *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, p.152
- (50) *Three Philosophical Poets, Works VI*, p.122

- (51) *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, p.153
- (52) Eckermann: *Gespräche mit Goethe* etc, 1837 and 1848. Tr. John Oxenford. London: Bell, 1975. Conversation of 6th May 1827, p.258
- (53) *Three Philosophical Poets, Works VI*, p.128
- (54) Op cit, p.131
- (55) Loc cit
- (56) Op cit, p.135
- (57) Kendall Walton Categories of Art repr in Robert Wilkinson (ed) *Theories, of Art and Beauty* The Open University, 1991, pp.544 sqq
- (58) This comment might be thought to be in tension with the identification, in Santayana's later philosophy, of the spiritual life with the aesthetic life. What he means by both terms, however, is a detached, contemplative attitude to experience; a state in which the data of experience are enjoyed for their inherent properties rather than as signs of particulars in the external world, i.e. as means to allow us to deal with the environment. This state, I would argue has (interestingly) more in common with the condition of enlightenment than with the doctrines and extravagancies of the European aesthetic movement. The relationship of Santayana's later ethics and aesthetics to eastern views, however, is another story.

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