

Stages of Man's Mind

By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
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The primeval phase of the world, of nations, of individual human beings is the same. At first everything is enveloped by a desolate void, but the spirit already contemplates the creation of the animate and inanimate world. While the primitive masses look about with fear and amazement in search of the barest necessities, a more advanced spirit gazes at the great phenomena of the world, perceives what occurs there, and gives utterance to what exists with profound awareness as if it came into being before his very eyes. Therefore, in the earliest stage we have the contemplation and the philosophy of nature, the defining and the poetry of nature—all in one.

The world gets brighter, and the obscure elements become clearer and take on outline. Man reaches out in order to gain mastery of them in a different way. This new man surveys the world with a simple, healthy sensuousness which sees nothing but itself reflected in things past and present. He gives new shape to old names, anthropomorphizes and personifies things, and beings living and dead, and imparts his own character to all creatures. Thus primitive faith lives and thrives, and, often recklessly, rids itself of all abstruse remnants from the primeval epoch. Poetry flourishes, and only he who has innate primitive faith or can acquire it, is a poet. This epoch is characterized by a free, robust, serious, noble sensuousness, which is elevated through the power of the imagination.

But since man knows no limit in his pursuit of self-improvement and because the enlightened aspect of existence is not always to his liking, he longs to return to mystical experience and searches for a higher power behind the world of appearances. And just as poetry creates dryads and hamadryads and makes them subjects of higher gods, so theology creates a hierarchy of demons that are envisioned to be ultimately dependent on one god. We may call this time the sacred epoch. Although it is essentially a product of reason, the rational spirit gradually loses its influence. Primitive faith is reclaimed, modified to suit the time, and the miraculous is proclaimed to have objective rather than poetic validity. To this the intelligent mind must object, although in its ideal state and form it worships the primitive beginnings, takes pleasure in the poetic primitive faith, and values the noble human need to accept a supreme being. However, intelligent man strives to clarify everything, to find reasonable explanations for even the most mysterious phenomena. To be sure, he does not reject primitive faith and organized religion, but he presumes that they are based on something comprehensible, praiseworthy and useful. He seeks significance, transforms the specific into the general, and from national, provincial and even individual traits he deduces characteristic features applicable to mankind in general. We cannot dispute the noble, pure and sensible aspirations of this epoch; yet it benefits the talented individual rather than entire nations.

As this attitude becomes more prevalent, it is immediately followed by the last epoch. We may call it the prosaic epoch because its aim is not to humanize the essence of previous epochs and make them understandable to everyone, but instead, it vulgarizes the old and

venerable. And in doing so it utterly destroys innate feelings, primitive faith and organized religion, and even the presumption of the intellect that there is a laudable purpose behind the unfamiliar phenomena.

This epoch cannot endure long. Man in his need, stimulated by events in the world, retrogresses and abandons the guidance of the intellect. He intermingles religion, primitive faith and primeval beliefs, he clings to one tradition, then to another. He delves into the mystical, replaces poetry with the merely fantastic and elevates it to dogma. Instead of teaching prudently and exerting influence patiently, he sows herb and weed indiscriminately. There is no point of reference to guide him; everyone claims to be teacher and leader and presents his perfect folly as a perfect ideal.

And so the value of any mystical idea is destroyed, and even primitive faith is desecrated. Qualities that formerly diverged naturally in their development, now interfere with each other as hostile elements. And so, chaos has returned-not the original that was fertile and life-bearing, but a chaos of death and decay which even the Spirit of God could not use as material to create another world worthy of Him.

Basic Origins

Considered in depth, appropriately defined

Poetry	Primitive Faith	Robust	Imagination
Theology	Rising to the Ideal	Sacred	Reason
Philosophy	Intellectual Doubting	Sensible	Intellect
Prose	Dissolution into the Ordinary	Common	Sensuality

Intermingling, Hostility, Dissolution