The Subjective Eye: Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* and *Faust*

This article first looks to Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* in order to establish his theory of dynamic subjectivity and objectivity based upon the physical reactions of the eye. It then uses this theory to explain some of the reasons behind the main controversies surrounding *Faust*. It argues that the text cannot be read simply through one perspective but needs to be read through two, opposing ones.

Polarity is Goethe’s best known and most written-about scientific principle.¹ Like many of the most important twentieth-century philosophers, he was influenced in his understanding of this principle by the pre-Socratics. However, where many view polarities in terms of contradictions that question the existence of meaning, Goethe saw polarities as the source of creativity and “dynamic” meaning – of meaning or truth that may exist if only for a moment, only then quickly to change and metamorphose into something else. In the first part of this essay, I examine the dynamic qualities of polarities by focusing upon Goethe’s discussion of the eye in his *Farbenlehre*. There, he extensively analyzes the eye and argues that its most important functions are the result of polar actions. On one level, Goethe tries to demonstrate that Newton’s theories were wrong: where Newton argues that colors arise from the breaking up and the refracting of white light, Goethe argues that all colors arise through polar interactions of light and shade that are analogous to the polar actions of the eye itself. On another level, however, Goethe’s discussion of the eye postulates the fluidity of the subject and object relationship. The eye, as Goethe illustrates, will often create images in reaction to the objects that it sees. In the end, subjects quickly become objects and vice versa. One can therefore only speak of “a” subject or “an” object at a particular moment, because at the next moment, the relationship could very well be reversed.

The second part of my essay applies Goethe’s theory of subject and object to a literary text: his magnum opus, *Faust*. Many of Goethe’s works, especially his later ones, are characterized by the ambiguities of their most central aspects. In the case of *Faust*, there is not even scholarly consensus about who

wins the wager or whether Faust deserves to go to heaven. In this section, I analyze Faust to illustrate that the ambiguities in Goethe’s literary texts reflect the polar philosophy of his scientific texts. In other words, his literary texts present opposing strands that allow for at least two interpretations. Although these interpretations conflict, this is not to argue that they negate each other. Rather, each is correct from a particular perspective. To read the text only through one lens, therefore, is to miss half, if not in some sense, the whole story.

Polarity and the Eye

By examining several of Goethe’s discussions of polarity within his scientific texts, one can quickly see the dynamic nature of this principle. In a short scientific sketch, he provides us with a list that allows us to see how far-reaching this principle is:

Ideales und Reales [Ideal and real]
Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft [Sensuality and reason]
Phantasie und Verstand [Fantasy and understanding]