French thinker Pierre Hadot is famous for his claim that ancient philosophy was conceived in the Greek and Roman schools as a way of life, including existential or “spiritual” practices (such as forms of meditation, memorisation, bodily exercises and privations) to reshape students’ beliefs, desires, and actions. The vision of philosophy that emerges from his work is strikingly at odds with most contemporary conceptions and institutional practices, although it has won a wide audience both within the academy (in some measure via the later Foucault’s avowed debt to Hadot) and amongst a more general readership. “Today,” Hadot can quote Thoreau, “there are professors of philosophy, but no philosophers”: the principal products of contemporary philosophy are not philosophical men and women, but theoretical papers and monographs.

Hadot’s vision of the Hellenistic philosophers which were his principal focus after 1970 (especially the Stoics) is also markedly different than what one finds in leading angloamerican commentators on the philosophy of this period, such as Inwood, Striker, Amiss, Engberg-Pedersen, Nussbaum, Long, and Cooper. Hadot contends that texts like Marcus Aurelius’ Meditationes or Epictetus’ Encheiridion can only be critically comprehended as documents in the Stoic philosophy being ‘applied’, repetitively formulated, varied, and enjoined by an author (a Heauton or to beginners (ta propekonta), with a view to their ethical reformation. They are not, as we might otherwise suppose, attempts to construct an original theoretical system for its own sake, or for a general audience, on the model of academic philosophical writing today. Hadot’s striking claim that the cultivation of a heightened philosophical attention (prosochê) to the living present and the greater whole of nature (physis) lay at the heart of both ancient Epicureanism and Stoic philosophy finds no near parallels in contemporary analytic interpretations of these schools. Hadot’s work has indeed attracted criticism from several leading representatives of that tradition for falsely confusing philosophy with ‘religion,’ undervaluing the specific role of rational argument and theoretical construction, and projecting a determinately neoplatonic metaphilosophy back across the other ancient schools.

TO NOT FORGET: PIERRE HADOT’S LAST BOOK ON GOETHE.
PIERRE HADOT, N’OUBLIE PAS DE VIVRE: GOETHE ET LA TRADITION DES EXERCISES SPIRITUELS
(ALBIN MICHEL, 2008)

Matthew Sharpe

Yet Hadot’s last book, completed in 2008 and so just two years before his passing, was not on the ancient or Hellenistic philosophers he so loved. The work takes as its subject the modern poet, novelist, scientist, statesman and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Dedicated to his grandson and “haunted” by reflection on his own imminent mortality, Hadot’s 2008 study N’Oublie pas de vivre: Goethe et la tradition des exercice spirituels is a deeply sympathetic and beautiful book. Written in Hadot’s characteristically limpid prose, it represents both a novel intervention in scholarship on Goethe, and a revealing insight into Hadot’s distinct metaphilosophy and weltanschauung. The book’s long third chapter on Goethe’s enigmatic “Orphic” poem Urvorte underscores what the gentle sufficiency of Hadot’s prose can make his readers pass over: the way that his untimely classical style, far from reflecting any shallowness of reflection, was underwritten by the author’s extraordinary emunctitude, spanning across ancient philosophy, literature, and the West’s mystical, henemonic and esoteric traditions. (169-181, 215-220)

N’Oublie pas de vivre: Goethe et la tradition des exercice spirituels, which has remained untranslated, has hitherto attracted little scholarly recognition or critical notice, even in its native French. It is this situation that this review essay hopes to redress, in the small way permitted to any such piece of writing. In what follows, we examine in turn Hadot’s framing claims concerning the shaping ends and origins of Goethe’s species of neoclassicism (Part I), his claims concerning Goethe’s debt to the classical or Hellenistic tradition of spiritual exercises (Part II), before our closing remarks (Part III) challenge some of Hadot’s claims concerning the author of Faust, and then reflect on the significance of the fact that this last philosophical testament of Pierre Hadot’s was on a modern novelist, scientist, and poet, not an ancient philosopher.

I. ORIGINS, ENDS, FOUNDATIONS

Hadot takes the title of N’Oublie pas de vivre from Goethe’s characteristic, brief poem of 1826:

One knows of the momento mori
I love best to not essay
Why I must in the flight of life
Torture you with the limit!
This is why, an aging barbarian
I recommend to you
My dear friend, according to the manner which is yours
No more than vivere memento! (Goethe at 11, 147)

Reflecting this poetic counsel, N’Oublie pas de vivre’s culminating fourth chapter is given over to expounding what for Hadot represents the core of Goethe’s philosophical message. This in Hadot’s eyes is a full-blooded affirmation of this life and all it contains (“Le Oui à la vie et au monde”), as per the key poem “One and All”:

Into the limitless to sink.

No one, I know, will ever blink,
For there all sorrow we dismiss.
Instead of cravings and wants untold,
Surrender of one’s self is bliss. (Goethe at 249-250)

For Hadot, the overwhelming tonality of Goethe’s work is one of a conscious joy in being-there (“Le Oui à la vie et au monde”), captured well in Goethe’s comments to Schiller in a letter of June 1796:

Pleasure, joy, communion with things, it is that which is uniquely real, and all of what produces [true] reality. All the rest is only vanity and deception. (Goethe at 244)
The basis of this celebration of being-there, Hadot notes, lies in a species of pantheistic naturalism: one which found voice in Goethe's biological studies as in his novels and poetry—a remarkable conjunction Hadot examines in his previous work on natural philosophy, The Veil of Isis. Goethe's species of pantheism, Hadot underscores, embodies a highly dynamic vision of nature, anticipating later Lebensphilosophie, but observant of, and responsive to, a primordial register of physis beyond what humans, one passing part of the natural whole, typically evaluate as good and evil:

What we see of nature is force devouring force: nothing remains present, all passes, all germs are destroyed at each instance, a million germs born ... beauty and ugliness, good and bad, all exist side by side with the same right. (Goethe at 248)

Goethe's joyous Oui to existence thus extends even to affirming the terrifying (au terrifiant/des Ungeheuer). The highest "sentiment of existing" for Hadot's Goethe is thus—as it would later be for Schelling (253) and many of the later modern existentialists—a joy at once tinged with a certain "astonishment [aussiessentiment] or even angoisse before that which is "more profound than our selves" (sic.): an angoisse with which his Faust identifies "the better part of man" (Goethe, Faust I, 6727-4), and Goethe the "primal experience" of life and being:

The immediate perception of originary phenomena plunges us into a sort of anguish ... Before the originary phenomena, when, as they must, they appear to our senses, we feel a sort of fear which can pass into anguish ... (255)

The cultivating section of N'Oublie pas de vivre hence sees Hadot highlighting the deep proximity of Goethe to his admired, Friedrich Nietzsche. (11, 235-267) Unlike Nietzsche himself, and most other commentators, Hadot has less than we might expect to say concerning Goethe's well-known debts to Spinoza. (11; 48; 240; 269) More time is spent by Hadot on Goethe's reading of the great German philologist Winckelmann's influential work on the Greeks. (34-9) Some fine pages are devoted to Goethe's observations of classical ruins in his journey to Italy, and his captivation by representations of ancient life in the mural art at Pompeii and Herculanum (26-31; 38)—all of which Hadot positions as decisive in moving Goethe away from the Sturm und Drang of The Sorrows of Young Werther. (31) We also find in his conversations with Eckermann: "the classical is what I call the healthy; and the romantic the sickly ..." (cf. 22-3; 25)

Indeed, while Hadot situates Goethe within a lineage of modern pantheistic philosophical naturalist thinking, his more idiosyncratic claim in the book is to resituate Goethe as what we might almost call an "ancient": the legatee of a much older Greek heritage of thought. As his subtitle, Goethe et la tradition des exercices spirituels, suggests, however, this heritage is not that of the Greeks as envisaged in the idealizations of Winckelmann and Schiller, those untroubled lovers of natural beauty and mesure (33-36). (We do note, though, that his commentary in N'Oublie pas de vivre on Goethe's celebration of ancient art's ability to capture the eigenblick evokes this kind of romantic philhellenism closely enough that Hadot feels the need to distance Goethe from it. (36-38)) The Hellenic (and Hellenistic) heritage Hadot wants to situate Goethe within is rather that which Hadot's earlier work, principally Philosophy as a Way of Life, has uncovered. This is a heritage from the philosophical Greeks; albeit one in which philosophical discourse, and theoretical accounts of human and wider nature were coupled with specific argumentative, meditative, somatic and rhetorical practices aimed to so deeply impress the results of the schools' theoretical inquiries upon the psychai of students that they reshaped the entire sense, and ways, of life. If Goethe valorized and celebrated in the classical Greeks and Romans an elevated species of serenity, Hadot argues: "what Nietzsche saw well [is also true] ... that this serenity was acquired and not primitive, resulting from an immense effort of will ... above all, it existed in the ancient world in a philosophical will to find such peace of the soul by the transformation of the self and its way of seeing the world."

We turn now to Hadot's claims concerning Goethe as conscious legatee of the ancient tradition of philosophical paideia or practice: a "voluntary, radical transformation of one's way of living and looking at the world" through existential or spiritual exercises.

II. THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN GOETHE: ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT MOMENT AND THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

The first half of N'Oublie pas de vivre, in two lengthy chapters, is devoted to uncovering in Goethe's literary productions, autobiographies, correspondences and conversations, key "spiritual exercises" Hadot contends lay at the heart of ancient philosophy, taking varying but deeply cognate forms in the different schools.

The first of these exercises spirituels is a mindful attention to the present moment: "the only Goddess I adore," as Hadot quotes Goethe in the title of his first chapter. (15) Despite all their differences, Hadot contends that there is a "grande analogie" in the ways both the Stoics and Epicureans enjoined in their adherents a refined attentiveness to the present moment, as a key component of eudaimonia and characteristic of philosophical enlightenment. (42) In the works of Marcus Aurelius (the subject, beside Goethe, of Hadot's other book-length study on a single author after his early works on Plotinus, Porphyry and Victorinus): "All the happiness you are seeking by such long, roundabout ways you can have right now ... I mean, if you leave all of the past behind you, if you leave the future to providence, and if you arrange the present according to piety and justice." From Exercises spirituels et philosophie antique (largely translated as Philosophy as a Way of Life) and Hadot's other texts, Hadot unpacks several chains of reflection underscoring this high valuation of the present moment in Greek thought. N'Oublie pas de vivre concisely recounts these philosophical claims, tracing their logic through the extant Epicurean and Stoic texts:

• the recognition that the present alone, as against past and future is that tense in which we can act or suffer, and in which all our experiences, and all the things we can change within them, occur (as per Seneca's advice to Lucilius: "Two things must be cut short: the fear of the future and the memory of past disappointments; [since] the one does not concern me anymore, and the other does not concern me yet.")
• the recognition, which can be reanimated forcefully by memento mori (another key theme for philosophical meditation), that the present is nevertheless passing and irrevocable, hence singular and precious, to be seized, "sur-le-champ" (as per the Epicurean Horace's famous carpe diem! (42))
• the reflection that the present, just as it is, is what we celebrate and wish to recur when we are happy (this is the aspect Nietzsche later highlights);
• and the acknowledgment that these significances of the present (Goethe's eigenblick or the Stoic hetaira) are nevertheless most often forgotten by us, so that we do "forget to live": instead becoming caught up in the mundane present (Goethe's des Gemeine (24)): our attention lost in concerns for external goods, the objects of unnecessary desires, the consideration of future possibilities and anticipatory rehearsal of responses to them, the opinions and concerns of others, and futile regrets or nostalgia concerning things past.

The key instance Hadot highlights of Goethe's advocacy of such a heightened attention to the present moment comes from the extraordinary second book of Faust. It is the moment when Faust, in whom Hadot sees the definitively dynamic modern hero (16), glimpses a brief moment of happiness: almost long enough for him to wish for an instant to stop to say "stay a while, you are so beautiful", and so lose his wager with Mephistopheles. Helen, the paradigmatic symbol of ancient beauty (22), has appeared to Faust. Almost instantly, inevitably, the two fall in love. Together then les amants begin to speak in rhyming lines, Faust at first offering to teach Helen this modern conceit (cf. 21), she quickly coming to complete his lines as if out of his own mouth:

Faust—Not backwards, forwards is the spirit's sight, This moment now, alone ...
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It is a moment of such intensity that, as Hadot comments, time itself seems for the hero and heroine to stop (19), and neither is untouched by that kind of angstauf before the sheer ‘splendour of being’ (22) we meet at above:

Helen—I feel so far away and yet so near, And gladly say now: ‘Here, I am! Here!’

Faust—I scarcely breathe, I tremble, speech is dead. This is a dream: time and place have fled.

Helen—I seem exhausted, yet created new, Enmeshed with you, the unknown and the true.

Faust—Don’t seek to analyse so rare a fate! Our duty is to live: though but for a day.

This momentary exchange, that for Hadot so piquantly evokes the possibility of an elusive synthesis of ancient and modern, activity and contemplation (20-26), gives the title of one of Hadot’s essays in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. In that essay as in *N’Oublie pas de vivre*, though, Hadot is able to cite ample instances of such a valorisation of the present instant in Goethe, notably in the Marienburg Eley’s appeal to ‘with joyful wisdom! Look the instant in the eye! Do not delay!’ (Hadot 1996, 231). Also paradigmatic here for Hadot is Goethe’s tellingly titled ‘Rule Of Life’ of 1815, which closely mirrors Seneca’s cited advice to Lucilius above:

If you would live unfettered by care —
Let not the past torment you e’er
Be angered as little as you can
And let the present be ever enjoyed:
Never let your heart be moved with hate,
And as for the future, confide it unto God. (Goethe at 231)

It is the same enigmatic advice Goethe was to give, late in his life, to Eckermann, directly echoing what Hadot takes to be the heart of the ancient philosophical exercises: ‘Only persist in this, · · · hold fast by the present. Every situation—say, every moment—is of infinite worth; for it is the representative of a whole eternity.’23 Goethe, Hadot claims, ‘was in his way of living the present moment, · · · half Stoic and half Epicurean.’ He enjoyed the present moment like an Epicurean, and willed it intensely like a Stoic.24

Such advocacy of attention to, or enjoyment of, the present moment—which Hadot does not shrink from characterization as enjoining a ‘mythological dimension’ in the boundless in creation, as anything other than an unphilosophical celebration of immediacy, as John M. Cooper has charged against Hadot—and the Neo-Kantians charged of Goethe. Nevertheless, as per Goethe’s cited advice to Eckermann, Hadot stresses that this ancient philosophical valorisation of the present was the flipside of a larger sense that the present moment, seen as in ‘the totality of life, as a whole of reality’25: as in the Stoic Chrysippus ‘enigmatic claim that “If a person has wisdom for one instant, he is no less happy than he who possesses it for an eternity”’; and Epicureans’ similarly enigmatic claims concerning the pleasure that was for them the highest good, that “[i]n infinite period of time could not cause us more pleasure than can be derived from this one.”26

These difficult thoughts open onto the theme of Hadot’s second chapter on Goethe and the legacy of ancient philosophical exercises. This is Goethe’s recurrent use, in reflections upon his own art and in his works themselves, of images of physical elevation and of looking down upon human affairs en haut, from above. Once more, readers of Hadot’s better known works will be familiar with this ‘view from above’ as a spiritual exercise Hadot shows to have been advocated by figures like Seneca or Philo, practiced by Aurelius, and suggested in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, *Timaeus* and *Republic*.27 The view from above is an exercise in what Hadot, following the Stoics, calls lived physics (physique vécue). In this exercise, the apparently wholly theoretical or contemplative process of ascending philosophically from out of mundane opinions and concerns towards a more general understanding of the natural whole is advocated as a means to generate concrete but elevating ethical effects on practitioners. As Hadot stresses again in *N’Oublie pas de vivre*, cultivating this ‘view from above’ is directed in the ancient descriptions at generating two, complementary existential effects upon the person of the inquirer. These are, first, what Foucault under Hadot’s influence calls a sense of “the irony of the minimise”28. Seen from this new perspective, our everyday concerns, in which we have hitherto been caught up, are shown to be almost ant-like: less mountains than mole hills (as when Plato’s Socrates in the *Theaetetus* reports that the true philosopher, whose mind is “borne in all directions · · · studying the stars, and investigating the universal nature,” because of this considers all the usual political concerns of his fellows “petty and of no account”).29 Secondly, and as a flipside to this reflective distancing of ourselves from our mundane selves, learning to philosophically re-see our lives from this elevated perspective thus involves cultivating a kind of true or philosophically megalopsychic: “the *spiritus* which makes one be above those things whose nature it is to happen to good and bad persons alike,” as the Stoics had redefined this word.30

These same senses of the view from above, Hadot claims in *N’Oublie pas de vivre*, are also in play at decisive moments in Goethe’s literary and poetic oeuvre. As Hadot writes: ‘it is characteristic of the older Goethe to stage on high mountains the decisive moment of inner transformation of his heroes, where they detach themselves from their past, finally to rejoin in some way and to reorient themselves towards a new life · · ·’ (119)

Faust, devastated after Euphorion this progeny by Helen’s death in *Faust II*, is carried up on his beloved’s vestments “far above all that is vulgar, towards the highest ether”31 and is thus able to surmount his sorrow, just as his recovery after Grechen’s death has been occasioned by the “joy” he senses in the living nature around him. Wilhelm Meister, at the opening of the second volume of the *Journeyman Years*, is likewise placed by Goethe on a mountain peak looking down, before undertaking to remodel himself. The liberating release such “looking down” upon mundane concerns occasions, however, is in Goethe’s stagings, in the ancient texts, the direct reverse of what Goethe presents as a profound re-connection with the larger whole. Consider these extraordinary lines from *Graziante*:

Seated on a bare summit, embracing in my regard a vast land, I can say to myself: ‘You rest here immediately on the rock which goes to the profoundest depths of the earth. Nothing is interposed between me and the primitive world.’ In this instant, where the forces of attraction and of movement of the earth are exercised equally upon me, where the influences of the sky enucleate me most closely, I am opened to the highest considerations over nature · · · Here on the most ancient altar, which is raised without any intermediary on what is essentially a chaos, of beings: I touch the first, the most solid beginnings of our existence, I look on high at the world, the abrupt valleys with their soft slopes, these fertile plains that I see in the distance. My soul is elevated above herself and above all, and it is filled with nostalgia for the sky which is so close to me · · ·

For Goethe’s *Faust above all*, though, such an elevation operates not simply as a recurrent image of spiritual transformation within his poetry and novels. It operates also as an image of poetry and artistic creativity itself, and thereby of Goethe’s own existential calling. “The poet, as a bird, can hover above the world,” Goethe writes, and his Faust compares the human spirit itself to a skylark: “it is inborn in every man, that his spirit soar upwards and upwards.”32 In some fascinating passages, Hadot traces Goethe’s fascination with the *Montgolfier*, the hot air balloon first flown in November 1783: which for Goethe in a letter to Schiller becomes an apt metaphor for the elevation he was just then experiencing reading Homer—as if he were himself one of Homer’s dithyrambs on Olympus looking down on the fields of Ithum below.33 “True poetry”, as Goethe reflects likewise in his autobiography (significantly entitled *Poetry and Truth*):

... is recognised in the way that, like a profane gospel, it is capable of delivering us from the earthly weights that we accept, because it procures to us at the time an inner serenity and external pleasure. Like a hot air balloon, true poetry elevates us, with the ballast which is attached to us, into superior regions where, because of her, inexplicable human labyrinths are unravelled under our regard, which sees them now from on high · · ·”34
In Hadot’s characteristic language, that is, Goethe’s conception of poetry was deeply philosophical, not simply for the many philosophical themes Goethe undertook to write upon, but as itself a means of spiritual or existential transformation: “to elevate each above himself.” (Goethe at 266)

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

N’Oublie pas de vivre is arguably the most personal of Hadot’s works: one which he avows with characteristic candour is a work of love, based upon a lifelong process of returning to and savouring Goethe’s works. (9) The very fact that Goethe was pre-eminently a great poet and that Hadot is comfortable situating him in a legacy of great literature (pre-eminently Lucian and Voltaire) who, in his eyes, carried forward the ancient philosophical exercises as institutional philosophy devolved over Western history into “theory alone” reflects what is a distinct signature of Hadot’s meta-philosophy. Hadot has long challenged any simple, hard and fast division between philosophy and literature, based on his sense of philosophy as a practice, and its shared concern with exercises spirituels as an existentially serious business: “il ne s’agit pas de se s’informer, mais de se former”. (10) Hadot’s own writing in N’Oublie pas de vivre, finally, brings together, in a characteristic coincidence of opposites, Hadot’s classical restraint and encyclopaedic learning with the quiet, insistent affirmation of real existential commitment underlying his authorship. For the Hadot of 2008, as much as in any of his previous works, the ideas he seeks and finds in Goethe concerning how to live, even in the sure knowledge of death’s immanence, matter existentially: not descriptions of ways of life only, they are also challenges and calls to self-transformation. In the brief space available here, let me state two of the many questions Pierre Hadot’s last book may suggest for its reader.

First, from the side of assessing the meaning and force of Pierre Hadot’s Goethe: a critical reader might ask whether Hadot’s attempt to situate Goethe as a legatee of Greek philosophical bios and the exercises spirituels does not, for all its insight, also blinker us from weighing airtight the ways in which Goethe—the man and, as it were, the first modern man—was more Faust than Helen or Hellenistic; and a dedicatee of world-transformation, rather than the serene world-contemplation of the Hellenistic sophoi. There is no question that Goethe’s definitive hero, Faust, begins as a good model for appreciating the Hadotian vision of philosophy. This disgruntled scholar’s restless quest for life comes out of the same kind of enniai with academic studies that attracts many scholars today to Hadot’s work:

“I’ve studied now Philosophy
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,—
And even, alas! Theology,—
From end to end, with labour keen;
And here, poor fool! with all my love
I stand, no wiser than before …
That which one does not know, one needs to use;
And what one knows, one uses never.”

Yet, if we are to take Faust as Goethe’s crowning or emblematic work, as Hadot seems at times comfortable with doing, it is unclear whether Goethe’s hero ever overcomes that restless dynamism that sees him “storm through life,” as he reflects: “every moment … unsatisfied.” (9) Nor, short of his final outburst of beatific illumination, is it wholly clear that Faust achieves any kind of meaningful spiritual tranquillitas or aratura in this life, or ability to look the present moment in the face: the goal of the Hellenistic schools central to Hadot’s later work. Throughout the poem’s two books, this veritable force of nature “desires, achieves my freedom and existence again, and so, with force …” until we finally see him sighing fulfillment in a project that for the Greeks would surely have seemed definitively hybris: of that of subdue the sea, {a la the Persian King at Salamis. (8) It is true that, elevated by the voyage en haar after Euphorion and Helen depart, Faust does at least begin to place his titansm at the service of others. It is Faust’s envisaging of a “free earth: where a free race, in freedom, stans” that delivers Faust “the develop” (258)—his “highest moment” and mortal rest with the ability to at least say to the present moment: “Stay a while! You are so lovely!” (94) Yet the final scenes of the epic are famously enigmatic, beginning with Faust’s responsibility for the forcible relocation—like some perverse Zeus—of the elderly, defenceless Baucis and Philemon in the name of his new utopia, continuing through Faust’s “last and greatest act of will” in the creation of “a Paradise Whose boundaries hold back the raging tide” (196), to his death, transfiguration and beatific vision as Doctor Mariasmus. Even as Faust contemplates the new paradise for “many millions” he foresees, he avows that “[t]he last word wisdom ever has to say” is that “[h]e only earns his freedom and existence, who’s forced to win them freshly every day.”

Just so, the sage of Weimar’s classicism so ubiy brought out by Hadot formed but one component of that intense spiritual dynamism that saw Goethe himself produce novels, poems, dramas, over 3000 sketches, scientific works, and an autobiography, and over 10,000 letters (written up until the very week of his death). Hadot is forced to confront Goethe’s distinctive modernity in his long chapter on the poem Ürweire, which ends by appealing to hope (épisp), in contrast to the well-known ancient cautious concerning the last thing out of the Hesiodic Pandora’s box. Hadot tries, via recourse to Goethe’s pantheism, to interpret the poem in a way consistent with the kind of immanent world-affirmation he sees in the Hellenistic philosophies:

… Hope in Prümal Worte [is] a power which, in turning us towards what is elevated, permits us to reinterpret the destiny which is imposed on us and to act with confidence by situating our action within the perspective of the All and the will of God-Nature. Hope is inherent to life and to action. To hope, it is to be in life, it is to be active …” (236)

Yet it is difficult, even for Hadot, to square Goethe’s stated conviction late in his life “… of our survival [beyond death] coming from the concept of activity” — “E, until my end, I act without an instant of rest, nature is obliged to assign me another form of existence …” (253)—with the philosophical dogmata of any of the ancient schools. For all of Goethe’s criticisms of Francis Bacon, this ethical activism indeed stands much closer to Bacon’s influential criticism of the ancient ethical philosophers in The Advancement of Learning as privileging the contemplative over active lives, and private contemplative perfection over charitable, dynamic devotion to the public good.

To criticise Hadot’s rendition of Goethe, however, seems peevish given the many riches, and the unique intellectual perspective, N’Oublie pas de vivre brings to the study of the sage of Weimar. Our closing thoughts here then will concern Hadot’s oeuvre as a whole, and the particular light this last, lesser-known book on Goethe retrospectively casts back on his better-known studies.

By far the predominant anxiety expressed by Anglo-American critics of Hadot’s work concerns the way that his emphasis on philosophy as cultivating an ongoing state of attention or awareness can be seen to sit in tension with rigorous argumentation and the dispassionate concern for truth. N’Oublie pas de vivre will do nothing to allay those academic anxieties about Hadot’s work: arraiging Goethe, a self-professed poet, as a principal modern legatee of classical philosophy, if anything highlights the methodological and substantive distance between his work and predominant, analytic later modern readings of classical and Hellenistic philosophy. While Hadot’s published work turned increasingly to the Hellenistic schools after 1970, the Compte rendus de ses courses at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (9: 38, and 50), shows Hadot’s continuing interest in Western mysticism. It also invites the supposition that his early experiences and encounter with Plotinus overwhelmingly shaped his wider sense of philosophy, as well as his particular sensitivities in reading Goethe. (251)
A more provocative consideration prompted by N’Oubliez pas de vivre, as it seems to me, concerns the sig-
nificance of Hadot choosing to write his last monograph not on the ancient thought whose study had made
his name, but on the modern personage of Goethe. In What is Ancient Philosophy? in particular, the status
of modern philosophy in Hadot’s picture is left tellingly underserved: on the one hand, modern purely
theoretical philosophical discourse carries forward the subordination of philosophia of the Christian era into
modernity; while on the other, Hadot briefly invokes a series of figures, from Montaigne to Kant, Thoreau,
and Wittgenstein, who he argues have remained aware of, or practiced, varieties of philosophising as a way of life.
N’Oubliez pas de vivre’s work on Goethe clearly serves in part to fill this lacuna in Hadot’s historical narra-
tive, and to show the kind of reworking of modern thinkers opened up for readers by Hadot’s methodology
and metaphilosophy. Yet, as his last philosophical testament, this book on Goethe casts a revealing, indirect light
on Hadot’s own, seemingly wholly antiquarian, “return to the ancients.” Hadot has been remarkably forthcoming
in interviews concerning his intellectual development. In that development, he assigns central, formative places
to the moderns Montaigne, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Goethe and Heidegger. Certainly,
then, when we turn back via N’Oubliez pas de vivre to the earlier works, one is struck by just how central Goethe
in particular has been in his work: particularly in shaping his key essays in Philosophy as a Way of Life on the
exercises of attention to the present moment and the view from above.3

The placing of N’Oubliez pas de vivre as Hadot’s effective, last philosophical testament then inescapably raises,
on one hand, the question of the influence of the modern philosophical visions had it surrounded with,
as a student in the 20th century, and his vision of ancient philosophy. At the deepest level, though, Hadot’s
choice to write his final work on Goethe’s living debt to ancient thought and arts of living can I think be seen
as emblematic of a much more important register of Hadot’s lifework. This was Hadot’s desire not so much to
rearticulate, in either elegiac or celebratory mode, any absolute “ancient-modern” opposition. Hadot’s work,
it seems to me, stands as its own distinct kind of challenge to the historicist suppositions that usually underlie
such “philosophies of history” altogether.4 Hadot’s own way of writing for its part attests as well as “mak-
ing people love old truths”, as he once described his goal, his larger ambition was to in effect short-circuit the


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22. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 229.
23. See Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 69; 88; 224.
24. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 223.
27. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way, 81; 84-85; 88; 96; 131-2; 196; 198; 209; 212
28. at Hadot, Philosophy as a Way, 233.
29. See Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 230. Although Hadot does not cite this passage, it is clear, in line with Hadot’s thesis, that Goethe did not overlook the need for such an attention to be cultivated, through repetition, even daily practice, as per this advice which closely echoes a famous recommendation of Seneca’s in De-Ira III concerning a nightly examination of conscience: “all the same we see the present too little ... discard most things in order to be free of them.” A daily review of what has been achieved and experienced has the effect of making a man aware of his activity and concerned with it; it leads to consciousness — in such a daily diary, errors and mistakes come to light of their own accord, the illumination of the past profits the future...” (Goethe, at Loeb, From Hégel to Nietzsche, 212).
32. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 229
33. Piätsch, Common Conceptions, 106a2, Cicero, De Finibus, 1,19:63; both cited at Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 228; 224.
34. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 242-3.
37. Diogenes Laertrius VII 126; Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 244.
38. At Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 238.
39. See Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 238, 247.
40. Cited by Hadot at loc. cit.
41. See more generally for the development of this theme Hadot, N’oublie pas de vivre, 265-266.
43. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 234.
45. Goethe, Faust II 11439.
46. Goethe, Faust II 11482.
47. Goethe, Faust II 1440-41.
49. Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air, 60.
50. Goethe, Faust II 1580-86.
51. Goethe, Faust II 1586-5.
52. Goethe, Faust II 11369-70
53. Francis Bacon Advancement of Learning 1605 (Great Britain: Britannica, 1952), Book II, chapter XX, sections 6-11; book II, ch. XXI, sec. 1-5.
56. Hadot was an exacting philologist, who cannot lightly be accused of anachronistic readings of ancient texts, although in John M. Cooper’s recent Pursuits of Wisdom he has received this criticism, concerning an alleged projecting backwardness of a late-imperial paradigm of philosophising onto the Hellenistic and classical thinkers. See again John M. Cooper, Pursuits of Wisdom, 20-22, 404, n. 4-5.
57. More widely, Hadot’s claim that to become a philosopher in the ancient sense involved an existential commitment to a way of life which might, seemingly, precede or be independent of argumentative persuasion, for instance, stands in tension with the way ancient thinkers tended to present the philosophical life. (Hadot 2002, 102, 103, 129, 132, 176; cf. Cooper 2007, 26-27). Cf. Cooper’s remark: “there is no reason to think that any ancient philosopher made a choice first to be a Stoic and live a Stoic life, or on any other specific philosophical life. For one thing, many of them studied at more than one of the Athenian schools, simultaneously or in sequence, before finally settling in one philosophical milieu or another. First came the decision to live a philosophical life (perhaps, of course, under the influence of the attractions of some particular version of it) — to live according to reason. Even if at the same time one decided to live as a Stoic or an Epicurean or a Platonic, that specific choice was logically subsequent.” (Cooper, 2007, n. 6) I think Cooper is partially right here, although he is too quick to downplay the role that philosophical reasoning still plays in Hadot’s vision of the philosophical life.
58. Notably, Hadot’s emphasis in his work on the primacy of a practical or ethical role for philosophy, even in its most theoretical or contemplative forms, already unseats one opposition (pragmacy/theory) already versed practice/modern) around which the distinction of modern from ancient thought has often been articulated. For Hadot, here like the young Jürgen Habermas, all forms of human inquiry are grounded in human needs and interests: the issue being what kinds of such interests and needs the human animal, as a rational animal capable of philosophical inquiry and reflection, is taken as having. 59. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 108.
60. Pierre Hadot, Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Joanne Carlier and Arnold L. Davidson, translated by Marc Djaballah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 147); Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 285.
61. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 108.
62. The Lycée-eyed Lycéus represents a much more contemplative human possibility than that of Goethe’s titanic hero. “In all I behold / Ever-comely design,” Lynceus tells us, in almost-Stoic terms: “As its virtues unfold / I take pleasure in mine.” (Goethe, Faust II 11296-9)