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To cite this article: Brown, Jane K. “Irrlichtelieren (Will-o'-the-wisping-around).” *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* 1, no. 1 (2021): 53–58.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.5195/glpc.2021.15>

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Irrlichtelieren (Will-o'-the-wisping-around)

The lexeme *Irrlichtelieren* (will-o'-the-wisping-around, i.e. thinking outside the box) is Goethe's neologism for a heterodox line of thought that displaces traditional methods of philosophy and science. Although the term occurs only once, in the student scene of *Faust, Part One* (FA 1.7:83.1917), the shifting value of will-o'-the-wisps in *Faust* and other works corresponds to the theories of scientific method Goethe advanced in essays of the 1790s and especially to the methodology of his *Zur Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Color*) of 1810. While in Goethe's letters and in the devil's language in *Faust*, will-o'-the-wisps betoken illusion, they develop in the course of *Faust* into symbols of the ineffable truth that Kantian metaphysics had effectively substituted for God. The ironic dialectic of the will-o'-the-wisps shapes Goethe's views of pedagogy and scientific epistemology and his positions on the idealist subject/object dichotomy, on the relationships of nature and truth, on representation and knowledge, and on knowledge and community.

Introduction

The neologism *irrllichtelieren* can be defined as: "An innovative and eccentric line of thought, [. . .] a lexical innovation [. . .] that configures the 'improper' imperative of Goethean thought [. . .] to displace the 'proper' way of doing philosophy (including logic, rationalist metaphysics, and transcendental idealism) by repurposing its traditional instruments of torture."¹ Goethe invented the word and used it only once, in the student scene of *Faust I*. Derived from the noun *Irrlicht* (will-o'-the-wisp, or *ignis fatuus*), it initially identifies the confused thinking of the student who has yet to learn logic,

Daß er bedächtiger so fortan
Hinschleiche die Gedankenbahn,
Und nicht etwa, die Kreuz und Quer,
Irrlichteliere hin und her. (FA 1.7:83.1914–17)²

So that he creep more circumspectly
along the train of thought
and not go will-o'-the-wisping
back and forth and here and there.

However, the use of will-o'-the-wisp in *Faust* transforms this apparent praise of logic into its opposite, so that "will-o'-the-wisping back and forth" comes to

represent the epistemology actually promoted not only in *Faust* but also in Goethe's essays on scientific methodology and optics from the 1790s and in his massive *Zur Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colors*) of 1810. Derived from *irren* (erring), the central theme of *Faust*, where the Lord says "Es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt" (FA 1.7:27.317; man errs as long as he strives) and *Licht* (light), used consistently as an image for knowledge or truth in Goethe, as so often in the period, *irrllichtelieren* becomes a useful term for Goethe's process of learning truth by trial and error. It engages a series of epistemological issues typical of the period: thinking outside the box, subject/object, the relation of nature and truth, the role of representation in knowledge, and the epistemology of community formation. *Irrlichtelieren* not only exemplifies Goethe's tendency to heuristic rather than systematic thought (unlike that of his Romantic colleagues), but indeed embodies its own meaning—for will-o'-the-wisps and similar figures appear as characters in his (arguably) most characteristic works: *Faust* and the *Märchen* (*Fairy Tale*) of 1795. Furthermore, the word *irrllichtelieren* appears in *Faust* in the context of philosophical discourse when Mephistopheles is holding forth on the place of logic in the curriculum; similarly, in *Faust II*, a will-o'-wisp-like creature named Homunculus, seeking to become, is introduced in the

context of implied questions of *becoming* in idealist philosophy as well as the philosophical-scientific discourse of classical antiquity invoked by the two pre-Socratics Anaxagoras and Thales. Yet because, unlike most of the terms in this lexicon, *irrlichtelieren* begins in Goethe's poetic works as a metaphor that then becomes a personification, it emerges as a philosophical concept only in the metadiscourse of scholarly analysis.

Etymological Implications

The addition of “-ieren” to the word “Irrlicht” turns it into a verb, so that it means “to wisp around.” The combination of “will-o'-the-wisp” with the formal French suffix is intentionally frivolous, as is often the case with Goethe at his most ironic and most profound moments. In Goethe's day, an *Irrlicht* was a still mysterious natural phenomenon (now understood as a natural fluorescence originating in the spontaneous combustion of gases from rotting matter in marshy places). Its entry into folklore, specifically as a mischievous nature spirit, is documented in Germany only beginning in the sixteenth century, when the Latin term *ignis fatuus* (silly flame) was invented by a German humanist to lend the long-existing German word intellectual credibility.³ Although Goethe was familiar with explanations for *Irrlichter* extending back to Paracelsus (1493–1541) and, beyond him, to the pre-Socratics, he used it as a scientific term only once, in a reference to two essays by his friend, the botanist and Romantic natural philosopher Christian Gottfried Nees von Esenbeck (1776–1858).⁴ Esenbeck considered both will-o'-the-wisps and falling stars to be entirely natural phenomena connected to a slime (*Schleim*), but in a tension typical of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* remained uncertain as to whether its effects were natural or supernatural. Sly allusions to Esenbeck are to be found in *Faust* via the presence of falling stars in the “Walpurgis Night's Dream” and the sticky roses that torment Mephistopheles in act five of *Faust II*. Otherwise, Goethe used *Irrlicht* in his poetic works, essays, and correspondence always negatively, to refer to delusions.⁵ Thus, in *Faust*, “will-o'-the-wisp” emerges primarily from the mouth of Mephistopheles, the skeptical conjuror of illusions, and its ultimate significance as the best way to learn about truth arises from the fundamental irony inherent in the devil's role in the play.

Learning as Flitting Around

Irrlichter are delusive because they constantly move around and because their light leads travelers astray. And yet, for the author of innumerable works about characters who wander aimlessly, wandering is a primary mode of being. Examples of such characters include Faust, for whom erring is the only path to salvation; the hero of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96; Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship) and almost everyone in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1829; Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years); the indecisive traveler of *Briefe aus der Schweiz* (1808; Letters from Switzerland), who worries whether he should climb the Furka in winter; and the traveler in *Italienische Reise* (1816/17; Italian Journey), who hesitates to go to Sicily and decides not to go to Greece. In his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1833; Poetry and Truth), Goethe regularly defines epochs of his life in terms of place and consistently features his own lack of agency in his choice of places. He, too, was a constant wanderer, even after he was more or less settled in Weimar.

Wandering is also the primary mode of scientific experimentation in the essays of the 1790s, where a “good experiment” (Goethe's word is “Erfahrung [. . .] einer höhern Art”; FA 1.25:34) requires multiple observations of the same object from many different points of view (see, especially, “Der Versuch als Vermittler zwischen Objekt und Subjekt” of 1793). Indeed, the word *Erfahrung* contains the verb *fahren* (to travel). In this respect, Goethe was already ahead of Hegel, whose *Phänomenologie* was originally called “Die Wissenschaft der Erfahrung des Bewußtseins” (The Science of the Experience of Consciousness) and who emphasizes the notion of “dialektische Bewegung” (dialectical movement) at the heart of *Erfahrung*. Similarly, Part 1 of the *Farbenlehre* calls upon the reader to engage in several long series of observations, each of which ends with analogical amplifications of central observation rather than with a theoretical conclusion. Indeed, at the end of a Goethean experiment, the phenomenon “kann niemals isoliert werden” (FA 1.25:126; can never be isolated), the truth is to remain untouched in the unarticulated center of all the different observations. The same is still true in the *Wanderjahre* of the late 1820s, a text that both celebrates wandering and delights in the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory points of view in its narratives and aphorisms. Indeed, Goethe's cultivation of aphorism, as also his history of the science of color in

the form of separate descriptions of scientists without an overarching narrative, reflect this same method of what, at first, seems to be random flitting. *Irrlichterlieren* is the freedom to attend to each detail carefully in itself before connecting it to others.

Subject-Object Relations

The experimental method Goethe described in the 1790s, when he was doing research in botany, anatomy, geology, and optics, when he was also absorbed in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment*) and bringing scientists and philosophers (like Hegel) of the new idealist movement to the university at Jena had, as its explicit purpose, the mediation between subject and object. The multiperspectivism of "Der Versuch als Vermittler" (The Experiment as Mediator) arises from the need to keep scientific knowledge from imposing the subject on the object, the basic problem of idealism. Too much subjectivity causes the investigator to draw arbitrary and often unwarranted connections among phenomena and to become too attached to hypotheses, while too much objectivity reduces scientific knowledge to a mere collection of isolated facts (FA 1.25:31–33). Goethe resolves the problem with the term "Entäußerung," renunciation, or, literally, withdrawal of one's self to the outside. Goethe's "experiment" escapes subjectivity but connects facts by multiplying and varying the conditions of observation. The quality of wandering now becomes flitting around outside of the box—that is, behaving like an *Irrlicht* flitting around outdoors. Similarly, Faust removes himself to the outside of his study and his identity with the aid of Mephistopheles, the invoker of will-o'-the-wisps in the play, while the world of the *Märchen* transcends itself through the mediation of actual will-o'-the-wisps visiting from abroad. Such is the model for Goethe's epistemology.

The Relationship of Nature and Truth

In the *Farbenlehre* and repeatedly in the *Wanderjahre* Goethe asserts that the truth, the phenomenon (and later *Urphänomen*, or sometimes *das Absolute*), remains unknowable. Ringed about by observations, it is incommensurable, a secret to be respected, in some contexts to be revered, but to remain unviolated. Especially the *Farbenlehre* makes generous use of the terms "higher" and "highest" to rank insights and phenomena and does

not hesitate to address transition points from the material to the spiritual/intellectual realm. Above all, the volume communicates the profound respect the scientist owes to the purity and essential impenetrability of the natural phenomenon. Just as in the earlier methodological essays, the phenomenon proper, which Goethe calls the "Urphänomen," remains, to the end, a riddle at the center of all the scientist's observations. Esenbeck's theory of the mysterious slime that characterizes will-o'-the-wisps and falling stars is a similar mystery at the heart of a scientific explanation, leaving an opening to the realm of *Geist* (spirit/mind). The *Irrlicht* is Goethe's image for this essential part of his epistemology. The *Irrlicht* can never be grasped, like the rainbow in the first scene of *Faust II* or the jewels scattered by Knabe Lenker (Boy Charioteer) in act two that turn to insects in the hand. In its inconstant motion, it escapes the control even of Mephistopheles in the Walpurgis Night of *Faust I* and it is repeatedly imagined in evanescent lights in *Faust I* and in a series of mysterious attractive figures in *Faust II*, such as Knabe Lenker, Homunculus, the angels of the burning roses in act five, and, finally, the rising Mater Gloriosa, always just out of reach at the very end of the play. In the *Märchen* the will-o'-the-wisps, having transubstantiated the green snake, restore the world to order and harmony and end by scattering gold, always in Goethe a symbol of the vital force of life, *natura naturans*. As folklore figures, will-o'-the-wisps are Goethe's ideal image of Romantic natural supernaturalism, of the permeable, ungraspable boundary between nature and spirit, between the real and the ideal.

Representation as Knowledge

While the Absolute cannot be grasped directly, it can nevertheless be known through representations the mind stages for itself. The essay "Physik überhaupt" (1798; Physics in general) already introduces aesthetic terminology: the goal of Goethe's series of observations is not to pin down the phenomenon but to understand it in a sequence or in a series of episodes. To present it, then, requires the condensing activity of the subject to represent aspects of the object "in einer stetigen Folge der Erscheinungen" (FA 1.25:126; in a regular series of appearances). "Aesthetic" is the appropriate term here, because all of Goethe's poetic writing of the 1790s has episodic plots consisting of a series of experiences repeated from varied perspectives. The tripartite structure of the *Farbenlehre*

similarly reflects Goethe's basic principle of examining any phenomenon from several different points of view, both between and within parts, and his corresponding stylistic tendency toward episodic organization.

Yet, aesthetic terminology plays an even greater role in the epistemology of the *Farbenlehre*. Part 1 discusses the subject-object tension, for example, by focusing on "Begrenzung" (limitation) as the essential cause of color rather than Newton's refraction. Color, like any other phenomenon, can only be recognized as such through its boundaries. Defining the edges of color or of light, then, transforms it into an image, a *Bild* ("Anzeige und Übersicht des goetheschen Werkes zur Farbenlehre," FA 1.23.1:1045). Such framing equates to looking at the phenomenon from outside, a single perspective at a time, followed by connecting single observations into patterns in order to transform attentive looking into theorizing (FA 1.23.1:14), as already in the essays of the 1790s. But the consistent focus on the word *Bild* for what Goethe calls "theorizing" dominates this work (see also FA 1.23.1:12, 120). The foreword to the *Farbenlehre* compares understanding people's inner (hidden) character through their deeds to understanding the nature of light through color: "Die Farben sind Taten des Lichts, Taten und Leiden" (FA 1.23.1:12; Colors are the deeds of light, what it does and what it endures). The comparison of human character to light has suddenly morphed into personification when colors become the deeds and sufferings of humanity. Colors have become actors, and indeed, given the Aristotelian atmosphere evoked by "Taten und Leiden," tragic actors. Actors are images, personifications, representations, and not essences, but these "actors" are the *realia* of empirical observations. Reality is now something staged. Indeed, the first part of the *Farbenlehre* provides illustrations to enable the reader to repeat, to reenact, the "experiments" described in the text, and Goethe justifies this move by comparing his illustrations to a play performance, which requires spectacle, sound, and motion to be realized (FA 1.23.1:18–19). Theorizing is transformed into interpretation as observation of nature is equated to observation of a play on stage.

This dramatizing personification underpins Goethe's understanding of light. The human eye, he asserts, does not see forms, but only light, dark, and color. He continues, "Das Auge hat sein Dasein dem Licht zu danken. Aus gleichgültigen thierischen Hilfsorganen ruft sich das

Licht ein Organ hervor, das seines Gleichen werde; und so bildet sich das Auge am Lichte für's Licht, damit das innere Licht dem äußeren entgegentrete" (FA 1.23.1:24; The eye owes its existence to light. From among the lesser ancillary organs of the animals, light calls forth one organ to be its like, and thus the eye is formed by the light and for the light so that the inner light may emerge to meet the outer light).⁶ Now light is the creator god calling forth the human eye, made in the god's own image. From here it is but a step back to *Faust*, with its little erring lights, the will-o'-the-wisps, and Faust as, in effect, the erring human eye, looking at and wanting to experience the entire creation, a notion of experience as viewing already adumbrated at the end of the *Vorspiel auf dem Theater* (Prelude on the Stage) and in the final line of the first scene in *Faust II*, "Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben" (FA 1.7.206:4727; Life is ours in the colorful reflection). Indeed, the *Irrlichter* in *Faust* actually anticipate the trajectory of color and light in the *Farbenlehre*. They enter the play in Mephistopheles' frivolous neologism, *irrlichtelieren*, and appear on stage as speaking actors in the Walpurgis Night and in the Walpurgis Night's Dream, then as Knabe Lenker, Homunculus, and the impish angels in *Faust II*. Seeming at first to be delusions leading into error, they become images, then actors, who mirror for Faust and for us the presence in the world of the invisible and incommensurable truth that gives it meaning. The whole drama is nothing but plays within the play, and, in the end, it turns out that is all anyone can expect. In the final scene, Faust floats upward and onward apparently into the infinite, but in order to know that, to perceive the infinites, images are still necessary. Hence the baroque Catholic imagery that is obviously and uncomfortably not "real." The final "chorus mysticus" (FA 1.7:464.12104–11) speaks of "Gleichnis" (parable), an extreme form of image, and then of dramatic action ("getan" [done], "Ereignis" [event]), exactly the way the *Farbenlehre* describes the representation of light in color. "Das Unzulängliche" (what is inadequate/unachievable) itself is transformed in the process. In Goethe's day, this adjective meant "inadequate" but, in Goethe's usage, becomes "unachievable"—a category of the object becomes a category of subjective striving. The play ends with the impossible riddle, "das ewig-Weibliche" (the eternal feminine). It is the *Urphänomen*, the phenomenon that underlies all our observations but remains alone as a riddle in the center.

Knowledge and Community

As *Irrlichter* are promoted from metaphor to personification in *Faust*, they become mediators, agents of cooperation. They take on bodies, and in the course of *Faust II* appear in the bodies of poetry, the vital spirit of life, in effect as Beauty in the form of Helen, and eventually as the angelic messengers of Divine Love. In the course of the play, they represent everything up a great chain of being from delusive nature to higher truth, to pure spirit. In the *Märchen* their ontological status engages the same totality, but not in such a clearly ordered hierarchy. In that tale, they become brighter and apparently more solid after substantial meals of gold, and as they scatter their energy in showers of gold coins they lose substance and even visibility. But the fact that they generously spend their golden substance is crucial. In both their getting and spending they enable the troubled inhabitants of the fairytale world to work together as a community and to restore their golden age of unity, peace, and prosperity. Their arrival signals the beginning of the restoration, and their departure its completion. They are the circulators of gold, of the vitality of nature and spirit; they are the light of this particular world, its erring light. As the mediators between spirit and nature, they also enable the establishment of human community, the injection of ideal order into an otherwise imperfect real world. Cooperation is also an essential element of Goethe's scientific epistemology: scientific knowledge is built up one small piece at a time, whether as the process of repeated observations by a single individual or, at least as importantly, as the accumulation of observations by many individuals over long periods. The historical section of the *Farbenlehre* is longer than its theoretical section and polemic against Newton put together. *Irrlichtelieren*, as a unique mode of engagement with others, inspires a different kind of cooperative knowledge from the chains of tradition.

Nevertheless, it would be naive and most un-Goethean to regard this view as simple optimistic progressivism. *Irrlichter* are transient, evanescent phenomena. They may

inspire social cohesion for the moment, as in the *Märchen*, but they are eternal wanderers, succeeded in the tale, to be sure, by other wanderers, but hardly guarantors of a permanent future outside of a fairy tale. Similarly, Faust's utopian draining of swamps does not last forever in the real world of *Faust*, and Faust's own vision of the future foresees them constantly recreated in a permanent struggle with the sea. And the sea is not only a force of destruction, but is also, in itself, a life-giving force. It, too, is a wanderer. It takes wanderers, the force of constant change, to promote social community but, like the visitors to the New World in the *Wanderjahre*, they always leave again.

Goethe's early political ideal was Justus Möser's federalism of small states. While he read political thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gaetano Filangieri, and Cesare Beccaria, he never favored large permanent systems. He loved Rome, center of the world, for the personal relationships and development it afforded him, but not as the great political center. Not the *Aeneid*, the great epic of the founding of the Roman Empire, excited him, but the *Odyssey*, in which the hero's struggles increasingly have to do with escaping the lures of women to return to his small island home, when he must yet again depart on another journey to plant an oar in a place where journeying by sea and epic heroism are unknown. Goethe admired but did not celebrate Napoleon, and he juxtaposed to his demonic hero Faust the passive, bourgeois heroes Wilhelm Meister and the Hermann of *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797; Hermann and Dorothea). His politics favored the small-scale operations that allowed for variation, change, indeed the "frivolity" of will-o'-wisps. In a common cliché, Goethe is the last Renaissance man, the last universalist, which is another way of saying that his scientific and poetic epistemologies, or his epistemology and his poetology, are essentially linked, as in this anything but frivolous term *irrlichtelieren*.

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Notes

¹ Clark Muenzer, personal communication. See also Muenzer's "Begriff" entry in this volume.

² All references to *Faust* are cited parenthetically by line number. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³ See the entry "Irrlicht" in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli and Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1931–32).

⁴ G. Schmid, "Irrlicht und Sternschnuppe," *Goethe* 13 (1951): 268–89.

⁵ See the entries "Irrlicht," "irrllichtartig," and "irrllichtelieren" in the *Goethe-Wörterbuch*, ed. Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, and the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1978), 2:235–43. <https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=GWB#0>.

⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe. *Scientific Studies*, trans. Douglas Miller (Suhrkamp: New York, 1988), 164. First sentence altered by JKB.

Related Entries in the GLPC

Bewegung (movement), *Bild* (image), *Denken* (thought), *Märchen* (fairytale), *Spiel* (play, game)

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