

An unknown Feuerbach autobiography

By Walter Kaufmann

Many years ago I bought at an auction a long letter written and signed by Ludwig Feuerbach, and dated by him June 23, 1846. The letter is of exceptional interest, and I have long planned to publish it. But there were problems.

Feuerbach was probably Hegel's most original and influential student, and among those he influenced profoundly was Karl Marx. In every study of Marx's development the thought of Feuerbach must be discussed. Their names are also permanently linked by Marx's celebrated "Theses on Feuerbach" which end: "The philosophers have merely interpreted the world differently, but what matters is to change it." These theses, anthologized again and again, were written in 1845, and published with some revisions by Friedrich Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (1888).

Feuerbach's most famous book, *The Essence of Christianity*, published in 1841, was translated into English by George Eliot (1854). In the twentieth century, Karl Barth and Martin Buber owed much to Feuerbach.

The letter covers both sides of a large sheet, crowding thirty-seven long lines on the first and thirty-eight on the second side, not counting date, address, closing formula, and signature; and what it offers is an intellectual autobiography. I have been slow to publish it because I had great difficulty reading a few words, and I wanted to discover, if possible, to whom it was addressed and whether it was known.

In Karl Grün's edition of the correspondence (*Ludwig Feuerbach in seinem Briefwechsel und Nachlass sowie in seiner Philosophischen Charakterentwicklung*, two volumes, 1874) the letter is not included. But a long quotation in Grün's text in Volume 1 (pages 11-12) is footnoted: "L. Feuerbach to L. Noack. (Manuscript) 1846." After that, several other quotations are footnoted

"Feuerbach to Noack, *op cit*". The wording of the quoted passages often agrees entirely with the letter I have, but frequently it deviates slightly. This raised the question whether Grün was careless and unreliable, or whether the letter sent to Noack in 1846 was slightly different from the one I have, which was written the same year.

In one place Grün has thirteen words that are not found in my text; in another, nineteen. Often he substitutes synonyms or somewhat different phrasing. It may be well to give an example. In Grün's version Feuerbach says of his early decision to become a theologian: "But what I was to become some day, I wanted to be even now. Therefore I immersed myself, even while still at the Gymnasium, in the Bible, as the foundation of Christian theology." My text reads instead: "But this future vocation I wanted to realize even then as much as possible, both practically and theoretically. Therefore I immersed myself, even while still at the Gymnasium, in the Bible and other theological books."

Here is another example. In the letter I have, Feuerbach writes: "The halfness of all theology, the contradictions among its basic principles, seemed utterly outrageous to my sense of truth and to my soul which desired unity, decisiveness, and an unconditional attitude." Grün's version: "The theological mishmash of freedom and dependence, reason and faith, was deadly abhorrent to my soul which desired truth, that is unity, decisiveness, and an unconditional attitude."

Much of the time, however, Grün's wording agrees entirely with that in my text, though he does not use all of the letter. Who, then, was Noack? He is scarcely remembered now, but in Rudolf Eisler's comprehensive *Philosophen-Lexikon* (Berlin, 1912) Ludwig Noack (1819-85) is identified as a professor and librarian at Giessen (a minor Ger-

man university), as the editor of *Jahrbücher für spekulative Philosophie* (1846-48) and of the journal *Psyche* (1858-63), and as the author of more than ten books.

Noack did not make any use of Feuerbach's letter in the *Jahrbücher* in 1846 or 1847. I have not seen his other early publications. But the most important questions raised by Grün's quotations are resolved by Noack's *Philosophie-geschichtliches Handwörterbuch zur Geschichte der Philosophie* (Leipzig 1879). In his long article on Feuerbach (pages 263-274, two columns per page) Noack, without using quotation marks, often follows the exact wording of the letter I have, even in places where Grün's version differs. Incidentally, he lists Grün at the end in his bibliography.

Clearly, the letter I have was sent to Noack, who used large parts of it, though by no means all of it, in this article. Grün's ample quotations are very free and inexact, but his deviations do not betray a consistent tendency. He evidently quoted from a draft he found in Feuerbach's *Nachlass*. That would also explain why he did not include this letter in its proper chronological place in the correspondence. The fact that Grün specifically says "Manuscript" in his footnote shows that Noack had not published the letter before 1874; and since Noack himself did not employ quotation marks when he used Feuerbach's text, it stands to reason that he did not plan to publish the letter. The last word, incidentally, that had defied my efforts at deciphering the writing is "botany", which Noack had been able to read.

For those who are not Feuerbach specialists—and there are few indeed who are—this succinct autobiographical sketch offers an interesting approach to his development. But the final paragraph requires explanation. *Xenien*, literally gifts that hosts present to their guests,

was the name Goethe and Schiller had given to the satirical couplets in which they criticized their age, in high spirits. Their use of the word was derived from Martial who had employed the same tag for some of his Latin verses in the first century AD. The barbed distichs of Goethe and Schiller had provoked many attacks on them, but their enemies were in no position to do them lasting harm.

My thesis, presented in a recent issue of the *TLS* (January 2, 1976), that Goethe had an immense influence on German philosophy after Kant, is beautifully illustrated by Feuerbach, who might be thought to stand in an altogether different tradition. His first book appeared while Goethe was still living, and the title-page read: "Thoughts on Death and Immortality from the Papers of a Thinker, together with an Appendix of Theological-Satirical *Xenien*, edited by one of his friends. Nürnberg 1830."

The author's name appeared only in the second edition, in 1847, the year after the letter to Noack was written. But it became known quickly that Feuerbach was the author, and those who felt outraged by his irreverent wit were able to keep him from ever obtaining a professorship. This was doubly hurtful because Feuerbach had not considered the book ready for publication when one of his friends had it printed; and as Feuerbach explains in his letter, some of the *Xenien* in the first edition were actually not by him but contributed by the editor. These *Xenien*, most of which are identified in the letter, were omitted in the second edition along with others that Feuerbach no longer liked. But the title "Theological-Satirical *Xenien*", as well as the form, both modelled on Goethe and Schiller, was Feuerbach's.

The second edition no longer ends with this "Appendix". It continues with "The Author and the

Human Being: A Series of Humorous-Philosophical Aphorisms. 1834", and then with six further sections, dated 1846. The rest of the 1846 letter seems self-explanatory.

A number of words and phrases in Feuerbach's letter were underlined by him, and they are given here in italics. Some of the things he omits are as significant as those he stresses. To mention only the most obvious examples, he makes no reference at all to his book on Christianity and his relation to the young Hegelians. But what he wrote to Noack provides an attractive introduction to Feuerbach. And that seems to have been his intention.

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Bruckberg, 23 June, 1846

Estimable Sir!
Enclosed I am returning to you the list of my writings. Only a single addition by my hand proved necessary. Yet I must immediately note, in case you should not have found out about this yet through booksellers or something in print, that at present an *edition of my complete writings* is appearing. Actually, the first volume has already appeared, or at least is in my hands, and therefore surely also in the stores. It contains not only previously known critiques and essays but also new pieces that correct, augment, and illuminate my works in important ways. In the preface I have also furnished a few, albeit only brief, hints concerning the course and continuity of my philosophical curriculum vitae. The same subject occupies me now in connection with the second volume, which will contain my general philosophical critiques and thoughts, while the first contains my writings on philosophy of religion.

The third volume will bring the humorous-philosophical aphorisms and thoughts on death and immortality. What is to become of the prose of this work, I do not know yet, but the *poetical part* has already passed its rigorous examination. *Only approximately one third* of the *Xenien* I still recognize today as flesh of my flesh. As you see, I am engaged in the critical reproduction of myself and thus am now giving to the world in this new edition a complete picture of

myself—at least one that is more complete than has been available so far. But I do not mean to dissuade you on that account from your plan. I know how disagreeable it is to be interrupted when one has conceived an intention or a thought. And therefore I will communicate to you in accordance with your wish the most necessary biographical notes.

I was born in Landshut in Bavaria in the dog days of the year 1804. I attended the Gymnasium in Ansbach. The first orientation that emerged decisively during my youth was not toward science but toward religion. This *religious orientation* did not originate in the usual way, however, through religious instruction or preparation for the confirmation or other external religious influences, but solely out of myself through the desire for something that neither my environment nor my education in the Gymnasium gave to me.

As a consequence of this orientation I then made *religion the goal and calling of my life* and therefore decided to become a theologian. But this future vocation I wanted to realize even then as much as possible, both practically and theoretically. Therefore I immersed myself, *even while still at the Gymnasium*, in the Bible and other *theological books*. In order to master Hebrew, I did not feel satisfied with the usual instruction in the Hebrew language offered at the Gymnasium for future theologians, but at the same time took private lessons with a *rabbi*. In 1822 I graduated from the Gymnasium but stayed on in my parental home to prepare myself for the university by private studies. During this period I studied and made excerpts from *Gibbon's Decline of the Roman Empire*, *Mosheim's church history*, *Herder's theological writings*, *Eichhorn's introduction to the Old and New Testaments*, and a history of theological literature. During this period I also became acquainted with *Luther and Hamann*. *Easter 1823 I went to Heidelberg*, mainly to hear Daub who, according to what I had read and heard about him, seemed to agree entirely with my own point of view, which I had gained during the last period of my life at the Gymnasium, the point of view of thoughtful religiousness or *religious thinking*; and he actually did agree with it.

Nevertheless I missed something in him, but was unable at that time to state clearly what it was. After a stay of one year in Heidelberg, I therefore went to *Berlin* to hear *Hegel*, but at the same time also the most renowned theologians there. I entered the University of Berlin in a most *unhappy, undecided state, divided against myself*. I already felt in myself the division between theology and philosophy, the necessity that one must make an unconditional decision either for one or the other. I decided in favour of *philosophy*. I heard *Schleiermacher, Neander*, and other theologians, but I could endure them only for a short time. The halfness of all theology, the contradictions among its basic principles, seemed utterly outrageous

to my sense of truth and to my soul which desired unity, decisiveness, and an unconditional attitude. For two years I heard *Hegel*. With the study of philosophy I combined at the same time the study of classical philology, physics, and mathematics, which last science I had totally neglected on account of my religious and theological tendency. From Berlin I returned to my parental home where I pursued philology and the history of philosophy. After that I went to *Erlangen*, where I studied botany, anatomy, and physiology.

In 1828 I took my degree there and lectured on Descartes and Spinoza; the immediately following semesters, on logic, metaphysics, and history of philosophy. The year 1832 I spent in Frankfurt, immersed in the French language and literature. For I felt certain that there was no chance of my ever obtaining a position in Germany and that I would reach my true vocation only in a place where I would be able to think and write absolutely freely, and I therefore meant to emigrate from there to *Paris*. But this plan suffered shipwreck when *my father died* in the spring of 1833. But what I had sought in Paris and, to be sure, would have found there in an altogether different manner, I found in the year 1836 in a German village—a place where I could live undisturbed for the study and the development and realization of the thoughts and dispositions that were slumbering in me. But before I settled down here and *said farewell forever to university life*, I still gave one course of lectures in 1835, on the *history of recent philosophy* up to and including Hegel, because friends and relatives had urged me to do this, and I also applied for a *professorship*, but in vain, as was to be expected.

As was only fair, the professorship of philosophy suffered shipwreck over the *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*. Since I am here—that is, since 1836—I concern myself mainly with *nature and religion*. Here you have a brief sketch of my intellectual life, to be sure only two pages. But I doubt that I shall ever find time and inclination for a complete biography, for I do not belong to those who are garrulous in writing or in speech. Moreover, many things that played a role in my life, even if merely a comic one—for example, *Erlangen*, that obscure nest of Philistines—are, having been out my sight for many years, also out of my mind, and I can at most talk about them when I am in a good mood, but simply cannot fix them on paper.

The editor of my book on death and immortality is not Daumer but a man whose name is unknown to, and a matter of indifference for, the philosophical public. The last *Xenion* on page 178 as well as the *Xenien* on page 179 and two other insignificant *Xenien* are not by me but by him. Several passages in the prose have been rendered meaningless by crude misprints.

Respectfully,
Your most devoted L. Feuerbach.