

# GOETHE RESTUDIED

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THE lifetime of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe covers a long period of unparalleled importance in the history of modern Europe. His childhood witnessed the opening of the Seven Years War, and he lived to see Louis Philippe on the throne of France. The great Frederick, the greater Napoleon, the French Revolution, Germany's war of liberation, and the domination of the continental nations by the reactionary policy of Metternich—all lie in the background of his wonderful career. And yet the figure of this man, who took but little interest in the struggles of his time and had no sympathy with political revolutions, is not eclipsed by the grandeur of the world-drama in which he played his part. He was seen by his contemporaries to be great among the greatest, and his influence is still a living force. If in the rich, abundant and varied teaching which was his gift to his fellowcountrymen and to mankind there is not a little dross which time has revealed, there is also very much of the pure gold of wisdom and the rare jewels of an exquisite art. It is perhaps timely that now, while for the English-speaking world it is still difficult to think of Germans and Germany without the dark cloud of their guilt in the late great war obscuring and distorting the picture, there should appear an adequate, discriminating and scholarly biography of the poet who stands supreme among German men of letters. Professor Hume Brown, whose death occurred before his book was published, brought to his task a very extensive knowledge, enthusiasm, and impartiality, and it would be hard to see how it could have been better done. Certainly we have here a work of great interest which no student of modern literature can afford to ignore.

The conception most widely current of Goethe's personality is that of a cool, unruffled and perfectly poised nature, whose somewhat reserved dignity expressed a consciousness of present wisdom and past achievement. But this corresponds—and the correspondence is not perfectly accurate, only to the aged Goethe, whose house at Weimar was a place of pilgrimage to his ardent admirers from all over Europe during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Goethe's character was extremely complex

1. *Life of Goethe* by P. Hume Brown, F.B.A., L.L.D. With a prefatory note by Viscount Haldane. Published by John Murray, London.

and it is not easy to pluck the heart out of his mystery. From early youth his intelligence was abnormally active, his yearning for knowledge insatiable, and his feelings intense yet changeable. His sensitiveness was extreme, and he was singularly susceptible to the influences of his environment,—moral, social, and physical; even a few days of bad weather would depress his spirits and for the time destroy his creative power. Abundant and fruitful though his own vitality was, he constantly needed the fresh stimulus of some congenial companionship with a man, or a love-passion for a woman, in order to produce his works of imagination in prose or poetry. The range of his intellectual activities was enormous; and his studies, for the most part continued up to extreme old age, included science in many of its branches, music, painting, architecture, literature—, especially poetry and the drama both ancient and modern,—criticism, and the philosophy of life. He was familiar with the works of the best authors of England, France, Italy, and Spain. In his old age he learned Persian and Chinese. Moreover there was never a man so voracious of experience; and all experience became for him material for song, drama, story, or aphorism. Everything he wrote is in a sense autobiographical; the poet and his work must be studied together if either is to be adequately understood.

The briefest survey of the facts of his career must suffice here. He was born at Frankfort in 1749,—his father a well-to-do burgher of considerable intelligence but narrow and pedantic,—his mother a lively genial woman with some of the characteristics of her great son. His relations with his father early became strained, but he found sympathy and affection in his mother and his only sister. At the age of sixteen he was sent to study law at the University of Leipzig; where he learned many things good and evil, but little of law. The dissipation and vice of his three years at Leipzig probably permanently affected his moral tone, and for a time injured his health. Later he went to Strassburg University where his life was somewhat more regular, and he studied sedulously in law, literature, art and science. To this time belongs his love-affair with Frederike Brion, the sixteen year old daughter of the pastor of the little village of Sesenheim: this was the only case in which Goethe seems to have felt any real compunction for his desertion of a woman. Goethe's relations with women form a sorry tale. Beginning at the age of fifteen with a tendresse for an innkeeper's daughter, his loves go on in an almost unbroken series, till at the age of seventy-four we find the dignified Privy Councillor, Herr von Goethe, the greatest poet of his age, violently enamoured of, and proposing mar-

riage to, a commonplace girl of eighteen. To excuse this amorous tendency and the cold fit of prudence which usually succeeded its display, is a hard task for Goethe's biographers. G. H. Lewes in the manner of a special pleader, seeks to find a justification for each separate episode; even Professor Hume Brown, for the most part a strictly impartial judge, attempts to excuse his hero by the rather gratuitous assumption that "if Wordsworth had lived at Weimar his life too might have been irregular!" Perhaps the only way of mitigating the condemnatory sentence in Goethe's case is to recall the fact that German womankind has always found a strange pleasure in immolating itself on the altar of the conquering male. Apparently, with the exception of Frau von Stein,—whose indignation at her desertion for a dull uneducated peasant-girl was as keen as it was justifiable,—each of his numerous charmers "went on cutting bread and butter" without any great bitterness toward the splendid superman who had loved and ridden away.

After obtaining his Doctorate at Strassburg, Goethe passed several years at Frankfort and various places in its vicinity. In 1773 he published "Goetz von Berlichingen", a historical play inspired by his study of Shakespeare, which brought him fame throughout the whole of Germany. Later it was translated into English by Walter Scott, and was in some sort a contributory cause of Scott's romantic poems and the Waverley novels. In 1774 appeared the still more popular "Sorrows of Werther," which became the most widely read book in Europe. To our generation the melancholy sentimentality of its love-sick hero makes little appeal, but its influence was enormous and lasted long. Among his numerous friends during these years were Herder, Lavater, Jacobi and Stilling, with many other men less noted; indeed all who came in contact with his ardent personality were, for a time at least, subject to its wonderful charm. To this early period belongs the writing of the first sketch of his "Faust," which included many of its most beautiful passages, and also that of many of those graceful love-songs in which his intense though transitory passions found expression and relief. In much of Goethe's dramatic and prose work the critic can easily find flaws, but most of his lyrics are faultless and altogether exquisite. To the foreigner it seems well nigh miraculous that a language so rough and inelastic as German should be made to yield such rare and delicate melody. And the thought in Goethe's short poems is very seldom trite or commonplace; even the old and oft repeated story of love's young dream takes on in his hands individuality and distinction. As was said by Heine, the only German poet whose work of this kind approached Goethe's

in beauty, "in his lyrics the word embraces you while the thought kisses you."

In 1775 Goethe settled at Weimar on the invitation of Karl August, the young reigning Duke of Saxe Weimar. At first he played the part of boon companion in the Duke's not always decorous pleasures; but later he became one of his chief and most trusted ministers, and encouraged and helped him to govern his little realm wisely and well. Shortly after his arrival at Weimar he met a lady who exercised a great, and probably on the whole a salutary influence upon him for about ten years. This was Frau von Stein, a handsome, intelligent woman unhappily married. With her he found what he always needed, intellectual sympathy and encouragement in his literary work. By the Duke's family he was treated with kindness and generosity; and the friendship between him and Karl August, in spite of a few disagreements, lasted till the latter's death.

In 1786 he took a memorable journey to Italy which awakened in him the keenest enthusiasm for the classic spirit in art and literature. The two dramatic poems of this period, "Iphigenie" and "Tasso," were strongly imbued with this new inspiration. Weimar seemed to him dull and narrow after his Italian experiences, and he failed to interest his fellowcountrymen in his new ideas; so that for a time he was greatly discouraged. He had shortly after his return from Italy, formed a liaison with Christine Vulpius, an uneducated girl of some beauty but no special talent or character. He scandalized Weimar society by taking this woman into his house as a sort of upper servant. After this connection had lasted eighteen years, and his son, the sole survivor of their four children, was nearly grown up, he married her. A new and permanent interest began for him in 1791, when, as a result of some experiments with a prism, he believed he had discovered conclusive disproof of Newton's Theory of Light: and on this basis he built up his own ingenious but now wholly discredited, Theory of Colours. Goethe's obstinacy in rejecting all evidence against his own view, and the personal rancour which he displayed against all who rejected it, form an unpleasing feature of his later life. Far more delightful and fruitful in good results was the episode of his friendship with Schiller, which lasted from 1794 till the younger poet's death six years later,—the two maintaining the closest and most cordial intimacy, and each stimulating the genius of the other. Among Goethe's many works of this time are "Wilhelm Meister," many scenes of "Faust," "Hermann and Dorothea,"— which has always been one of his most popular poems in Germany, and innumerable

short poems and epigrams. In 1806 Goethe was unwillingly brought into personal contact with the great struggle between Napoleon and his enemies, when the battle of Jena was followed by the occupation and pillage of Weimar by the French troops. Though protected from actual ill-treatment, the poet suffered some annoyance from the disorderly soldiers. Never in sympathy with the French Revolution, and desiring peace and order much more than political freedom for the German people, Goethe had a great admiration for Napoleon, and was not unwilling to see his country subject to his strong control. Napoleon on his side recognized in Goethe a great intellectual force, and treated him with a consideration and respect which he showed to no other German.

In 1808 appeared Goethe's masterpiece, "Faust, a tragedy", which we now know as the "First Part of Faust." Received with enthusiasm throughout Germany, this work has been recognized all over the civilized world as placing its author among the little group of men of supreme imaginative genius,—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. It is hard to speak without seeming exaggeration of the fascination of this wonderful drama—so profound in its philosophy of life, so keen and vital in its character-drawing, so poignant in its tragedy. Faust, Margaret, and Mephistophiles are among the immortal things of literature. The fire of Goethe's productive power burnt lower after it had reached this its highest point; yet even in extreme old age his brain and pen remained active; and though the "Second Part of Faust," which he only completed a few months before his death, is in many places very obscure and involved in style, it yet contains a wealth of weighty thoughts on literature, art, morals, and life. The chapter on the second Part of Faust in the present biography is written by Lord Haldane, and is an excellent piece of criticism. In 1832 Goethe's long, strenuous, and intense life came to a peaceful close. His works as published while he lived filled forty volumes. Besides what he wrote for publication, he carried on for many years a vigorous correspondence with numerous personal friends and men of letters throughout Germany, much of which has been given to the world. But even these vehicles for self-expression were inadequate. In his old age he engaged as secretary, Herr Eckermann, an ardent admirer and disciple, who became his close companion, and, with the poet's concurrence, took full notes of Goethe's conversations, which were published after the latter's death. It is usual to compare the "Conversations with Eckermann" with Boswell's account of Johnson's sayings and doings. Boswell's immortal narrative is undoubtedly much the more entertaining and lively, but for the stimulating

and enlightening discussion of an immense variety of topics, Goethe's talk greatly excelled that of the renowned lexicographer.

Of Goethe's personal charm there is ample testimony and though somewhat unstable in his friendships, he inspired warm affection and admiration in most of those with whom he came in intimate contact. Stilling wrote of him, "Goethe's heart, which few knew, was as great as his intellect, which all knew." Knebel, a lifelong friend, called him "the most loveable of mankind." One of the writers of the Romantic school after a visit to the poet wrote, "I have had a superlative, delightful day,—a whole day spent alone and uninterrupted with Goethe, whose heart is as great and noble as his mind." Lavater after his first meeting with him, described his conversation as "all spirit and truth." His beauty of person was remarkable,—the forehead very high and broad, the eyes large and luminous; and his carriage in his later years full of dignity. Henry Crabb Robinson, who saw him first in 1804, wrote of him "In Goethe I beheld an elderly man of terrific dignity; penetrating and insupportable eye, a somewhat aquiline nose and most expressive lips, which closed seemed to be making an effort to move, as if they could with difficulty keep their hidden treasures from bursting forth. A firm step ennobling an otherwise too corpulent body, a free and enkindled air, and an ease in his gestures,—all of which combined the Gentleman with the Great Man." Thackeray, who saw him about two years before his death, said, "His complexion was very bright, clear and rosy. His eyes extraordinarily dark, piercing and brilliant. I felt quite afraid before them. His voice was very rich and sweet." Lockhart, too, referred to "the majestic beauty of Goethe's countenance, the noblest certainly by far I have ever yet seen."

If we now ask what was the nature and what was the permanent value of the results of this man's prolonged, vigorous and ever-varying activity, the answer cannot be given in any single phrase. Goethe was not systematic either in his life or his work: he had an antipathy to systems of thought as such, and believed that a ripe experience is the truest source of wisdom—and that wisdom itself cannot be reduced to a formula. "All theory, dear friend, is grey, it is the golden tree of life that is green." Hence it was his own life,—its sorrows its weaknesses, its struggles, its joys—that constituted the raw material from which his masterpieces were wrought. In *Werther*, we have the love-lorn, and for a time, disconsolate young Goethe who sentimentalized first over Lotta Buff and then over Maxe Brentano. In *Tasso*, the poet who suffered from ennui and imperfect sympathy at a little ducal

court in Italy, we have the picture of Goethe at the little ducal court at Weimar. "Wilhelm Meister" is very largely autobiographical. Faust, greedy for all knowledge, licit and illicit, with his restless yearning for the joys of life, is Goethe in his period of storm and stress: and Faust grown old, who having suffered and sinned and striven, finds at last that only in the work he has done for the good of men has he found peace and satisfaction, is just the aged Goethe too. As Rembrandt's love of his art made him draw, and paint, and etch his own face over and over again at every stage of his life, so the great German poet used his own soul as his model and found in it a never failing inspiration. His friends, his loves, he employed in the same way. Gretchen is an idealized and more tragic Frederike Brion. Werther's Charlotte is Charlotte Buff undisguised; even Mephistopheles is derived to some extent from his clever and sarcastic friend, Merck. But his range of observation was far from being limited to the comparatively narrow circle of his intimates. He knew at first hand many grades of German society,—the solid bourgeoisie of Frankfort, the wild student-world of Leipzig, the aristocratic circle at the Weimar court. Artists, litterateurs, business-men, men of science, country-folk and princes,—with all these he had intercourse. He knew the Germany of his own day as few knew it; and if some of his deductions as to the more immediate and pressing needs of his country were at times incomplete, they more often show a singularly clear and profound vision. Goethe as is well known, underrated and misjudged the desire of his country for political liberty and national unity; but he was keenly interested in what he conceived to be its much more vital concerns. To him the real enemy of Germany was not the ancient regime of kings and princes, nor the dominance of a Napoleon,—it was the ignorance of the masses, the Philistinism of the so-called cultured classes, the torpor of the art instinct, the crudity and the mediocrity of the native literature. He feared lest the French Revolution should do what he believed the Protestant Reformation had done through its consequences direct and indirect,—check the intellectual progress of Germany for centuries. When Goethe's life began there was practically no modern German literature, and no modern German art. The religious schisms and the innumerable wars of which Germany had been the theatre had left his country far behind Italy, France, England, and Holland in all that concerns the higher life of humanity. To teach the supreme importance of this higher life was the aim of Goethe; and the revolution he desired and strove for was the freeing of his fellow countrymen from the sordid, the vulgar, and the common.

With materialism he would make no terms; and the way of escape, he held, lay through the training of the mind in knowledge, and the elevating and purifying of the emotions by means of art. And this explains in large measure the attraction which ancient, and especially Greek, art and literature acquired for him, and his zeal in trying to impose its standards upon German culture. He realized acutely that the defect of the writers of his people was a lack of respect for form,—a tendency to the vague, the verbose, the exaggerated. The unrestrained exuberance of the writings of the Romantic School,—even of his own work of his earlier period,—seemed to him dangerous for his country and his country's literature. Hence he strove to reawaken the spirit of ancient Greece as shown in her arts and letters. The characteristic qualities of Greek sculpture, architecture, and the drama were moderation, respect for law, self-restraint, and a dignity informed with a vital love of beauty; and it was by cultivating such qualities that, he hoped, German culture might be led upward and onward. It is easy to say that the German genius could never have developed freely and naturally if it had consented to hamper itself by the restrictions of a spirit so alien to it; but it is none the less true that Goethe did no small service to his own people by emphasizing just those intellectual virtues in which they were deficient. Probably he had more success in this direction than is generally recognized, yet students of modern German literature must often have felt that it would have been well if the lesson he taught had been more taken to heart.

Goethe's convictions in regard to religion varied somewhat at different stages of his career. Perhaps what was his dominant and most characteristic view is given in a letter to Jacobi, to whom he wrote; "As poet and artist I am a polytheist; as a man of science on the other hand, I am a pantheist; and I am the one just as decidedly as I am the other. If as an ordinary human being I need a God for my personality, that too is provided for. Heaven and earth form a kingdom so wide that its mere comprehension needs the organs of all existence working together." Professor Hume Brown seems to regard Goethe's youthful and very short lived assumption of pietism, and his use for a time of conventional religious phraseology, as a more or less insincere affectation; but this probably was not the case. He had nothing of the hypocrite about him, but at all times, and in youth to a most remarkable degree, his mind took its tone from those with whom he was on terms of intimacy and affection; and at this period he was much influenced by Fraulein von Klettenburg, a friend of his mother, who was a



woman of deep piety, and of such force of character that the elder Goethe was in the habit of seeking and following her advice in matters concerning his family. Her regard for the brilliant and engaging young son of her friend was maternal in its strength and tenderness; and it is not surprising that one so subject to temperamental changes should for a short time have accepted the impress of her highly emotional creed. It was, however, soon thrown off, and though in his old age the active antagonism which in middle life he seems to have felt to conventional Christianity was succeeded by a philosophic tolerance, there was never any acceptance by him of its distinctive dogmas. It was in Spinoza's "Ethics" that Goethe discovered a source of strength and consolation comparable to what many pious-minded persons find in the sacred books of their religion. It may seem strange that he, who so insisted on the value of the concrete facts of life, should have been so strongly attached to the great Jewish philosopher who clothed his thought in the abstract terms of mathematical deduction; but Goethe saw, what some of Spinoza's commentators have failed to see, that the kernel of his speculative system is his insistence on the value, permanence, and omnipresence of that reality of which the multi-form and ever-changing phenomena of sense and thought experience form at once the veil and the manifestation. It was the union in Spinoza's philosophy of a mysticism essentially eastern and having its roots deep in the remote past, with a realism as definitely western and modern, that fitted it to satisfy to some extent the complex and far-reaching demands of such a comprehensive nature as Goethe's.

Goethe's views on moral subjects are apt to meet with prejudice because of the somewhat obvious moral shortcomings of his own life. Yet he is in the main a sincere and serious ethical teacher, however lax and even cynical some of his writings appear. To him, all life that is worth living is a struggle, and to avoid this struggle by a recourse to solitude, inaction or self-renunciation is cowardice and stupidity. Character can only develop "in the stream of the world." Life is activity, and only when this activity is rationally directed to worthy aims is such happiness as man is capable of attained. But the individual must strenuously cultivate his higher faculties if he is to play his part. Self-culture and a rich experience are the conditions of a wise man's life. But Goethe's philosophy is saved from egoism by the recognition that the appropriate and worthy outcome of the wise and good man's actions must be the welfare of his fellowmen. Of such a nature was the really fine and unselfish labour of Goethe himself as minister of

the little duchy of Saxe Weimar; but no doubt his life-long devotion to science, art and literature had actually for him an altruistic side, as being conducive to the good of his country and of mankind. Goethe's morality is certainly not specifically Christian; humility and meekness play a small role in his ideal, and of "Love's Divine self-abnegation" he knew little, though there is a hint of it in the final scene of the Second Part of Faust. His is a lofty form of Paganism, or more specifically, of Greek ethics; and he was less akin to St. John, St. Francis of Assisi, or St. Thomas a Kempis than to Sophocles, Plato, or Epictetus. In spite of the confession that "it is the eternal womanly that leads us upward", his morality is essentially virile, and the softer and more passive virtues remain in the background. Yet, when all deductions are made, we may claim for him that in his insistence on strenuous effort after a worthy life,—in the importance which he attributes to high aims in art, literature and science,—in his repudiation of mere power and gross material wealth as the signs or the fruits of national or individual greatness,—and in his earnest to free the soul from half-things, and to live resolutely in the whole, the beautiful and the good,—he set before his country an ideal not unworthy of a great nation, and one to which it might well turn in this hour of defeat and humiliation, brought on by a leadership so unlike that of its greatest poet. And might not we too, who belong to a young country, where the intellectual life is still undeveloped and crude, and who are but too apt to rest satisfied with the mediocre, the utilitarian, and the trivial, learn something from a study of the works of this great man of letters as to the true value of striving for the things that are more excellent in science and literature, in art and life?