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GOETHE, AN APPRECIATION

BY

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A cultivated public our civilized world over is now celebrating the bicentenary of the birth of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It would be difficult to find a happier event for commemoration. It had become Germany's turn for a literary heritage. America was still a stripling; the East was for Europe still a region partly fabulous. Our own continent rang the changes on itself. In *belles lettres* France and ourselves divided the honours. In our own case an era had supervened when the heroic couplet was supreme; even Homer's rush and flow were subject to it by the skill of Alexander Pope; and Thomson's *Seasons* offered a rural counterpoise to it with a commanding Continental following. Then it was that the German tongue in literature began to be heard—Herder, Schiller, and, as its head and front, Goethe.

Looking back in 1824, Goethe wrote, "I was fortunate. Shakespeare had left in English nothing else to do; but in German I soon got in front of what there was." The new era hailed not from Vienna or Berlin but from a provincial Court, Saxe-Weimar. It brought an engaging air of freshness; it derived from native springs. In some respects it had cousinship with ourselves, Burns, and the Percy *Reliques*. As an invasion it was transient, but its result was lasting. It affected Coleridge but touched little if at all the Romantics—Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth. Byron did not react to it, though it reacted to him. Its influence, of course, had in foreign travel to meet the drawback of using an alien tongue, and that difficulty was enhanced by a further circumstance—that the spear-head of the invasion came in the form of the lyric, and the great lyric is especially refractory to translation. It is often in short lines employing rhyme and a condensed felicity which must yet be simple. As examples, and taking recourse to memory and to comparison, "Wer nie sein Brot mit Thränen ass," runs with "Fear no more the heat o' the sun"; and then again, "Liebchen, kommen diese Lieder jemals wieder dir zu Hand?" runs with "Who is Sylvia, what is she?" or de Musset's "Elle était belle, si la Nuit." The word-music is so wedded to the sense that no other words will do. Its audience is limited therefore to a native audience consisting of those to whom its language is their home tongue, and to a relative few outside that circle. Shakespeare's songs illustrate this and so do Goethe's *Gedichte*. Their native magic is incomparable, but it is not for export. This is a strong plea for a common language. The old monkish chants were in Latin. Esperanto? No, no; not until Esperanto has been lived in, laughed in, wept in, rejoiced in, sobbed in, can it be an adequate vehicle for a great lyric. Will such a day ever dawn?

Of all the major works of Goethe, I should suppose the dramatic poem, *Faust*, Part I, is the one most read to-day.

I once visited the exceptionally complete Goethe library at Yale, and an impression which I received there was that of all his works *Faust*, Part I, is that which has called for most editions. It suffers somewhat less as to width of audience from the translation difficulty than do the lyrics. The story's general outline is so well known that even a reader not fully skilled in German can open it practically at any page and pick up something of the beauty of the text. We in English have the added zest of the echo of Marlowe's *Faustus*: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss!" As imaginative poetry those lines are scarcely to be excelled, but Goethe's *Faust* is far richer in sustained intellectual dialectic. It is a poem in drama rather than an acting play; it is, however, given on the stage, especially in Germany, where it has the added appeal of being German. In it Goethe is thought to have succeeded in characterization better than anywhere else in the young girl Gretchen of Part I. Perhaps it is a pity that we readers should be asked to find a continuation of her in the somewhat wearisome Helen of Troy of Part II. Goethe is at his weakest in this respect in Part II. Of course he was when composing Part II already an aged man. As to the other *personae* of Part I, the restraint exercised in the delineation of Mephisto is a notable inspiration, a sort of mischievous "God's ape," too aloof for delight in the cruelty of what he does—a rebel against heaven, but of the meaner class. Anything more remote from Milton's Satan is not to be conceived. *Faust*, Part I, also instances what is not frequent in Goethe, humour—the garden scene with Martha.

As we think back to Goethe's masterpieces they strike us by their variety. During much of his career he was a literary sounding-board for the Europe of his time. *The Sorrows of Werther* is a case in point. It has, I suppose, passed over into unreadability. But a romance which once took the reading world by storm cannot be altogether devoid of lasting merit. It reflected wholesale the sentimentality of a period when society lived on the brink of war, when domesticity in woman was a universally admired virtue and middle-class domesticity yearned for the romance attaching to the class above it. Sentimental romance is sadly at the mercy of satire, even from the good-natured. In halcyon times which we now call Victorian, Thackeray rallied the dear high-waistcoated Charlotte of Goethe. He remarked that even after her lover had killed himself "she, like a well-conducted person, went on cutting bread-and-butter." Goethe in his later years said that in Werther he was like the pelican drawing blood from his own breast. Is there not a Werther period in most young men, even to-day?

Then there is *Iphigenia*, a statuesque poem built on the model of antiquity, and challenging its model. And *Hermann and Dorothea*, a somewhat Virgilian picture of our European countryside, told in faultlessly rhythmic verse, but again with its rural content and virtuous thrift and wedded life and quiet courage settled along the very fringe of war. It had its imitators; one was, I imagine, Longfellow's *Evangeline*, a late echo from across the Atlantic. It also influenced Clough, and not only in metre. Then there are the *Wilhelm Meister*, and *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, and the *Journey to Switzerland*, and the *West-Oestlicher Divan*, and the dramas of *Goetz von Berlichingen*, *Egmont*, and *The Natural Daughter*. For 18 years he was the Director of the Grand Ducal theatre at Weimar, and the Grand Duke gave him a free hand to manage it as seemed best to him, within a certain expenditure. This management was a lively interest to him, and he faintly regretted in old age that he had spent so much time on it. A playwright's question at that time in Germany was adherence to the classical unities of time and scene. Goethe in some plays departed fully from them, in others not. His *Poetry and Truth* is autobiography of his youth and early middle age. The *Conversations* by Eckermann continues that theme to his death. It is often compared with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, but this latter is too much the superior to make the comparison instructive. Eckermann was painstaking, but a "slow person." Goethe did not open his heart to him intimately; he treated him somewhat as a retainer. Goethe was a man who customarily in his study wore his "star"—his Court decoration. Eckermann's wife was never on Goethe's reception list, although he showed personal kindness to Eckermann. Goethe gloried in the Court functions of Saxe-Weimar. He was never an admirer of the French Revolution. He admired Canning's support of Portugal. He praised the freedom of the English way of life, but thoroughgoing egalitarianism scared him. I should suppose him, translated into English terms, a moderate conservative. In religion he was essentially a theist, although at the latter end of his life he protested against not being regarded as a Christian. He condemned such expressions as "the Lord God" and "good God" applied to an "incomprehensible Being beyond the reach of our thoughts." He felt that to address prayer to such a Being was unseemly. As to human personal immortality he was in doubt; about such questions it was the part of a wise man who had work to do to do it and not puzzle himself with the questions.

But I fear I am neglecting part of what was asked of me—namely, Goethe's scientific writings. To appraise them is not a congenial task. In his time natural science was commonly called natural philosophy or simply philosophy. He busied himself with this off and on throughout his life. He may be called an amateur in it without belittling his position in it. His interest in it was wide, and included zoology and botany as well as geology and physics.

Let us turn to the two first of these and recall where they stood in Goethe's period, say from 1780 to 1832, the date of his death. The microscope was in use, though not so much as the hand lens. Simple visual magnification had, although it did not foresee it, a great generalization awaiting it. The hand lens was not powerful enough for it, but the compound microscope was. It would be able to show, in 1839, that each animal and plant which we see with the unaided eye is a society of living units cohering as a composite individual, the whole shaped into a fish, or bird, or man, or flowering plant, as the case might be. The establishing of this immense fact spelt ruin to much gratuitous theory. To such theorizing Goethe had contri-

buted with enthusiasm. There was a sect of so-called "Philosophers of Nature" who especially cultivated this field. The anatomist Oken taught that skull is a set of fused vertebrae; Goethe went further and declared that primordial vertebra is the basis of structure of the whole tribe of backboned animals. Analogously he taught that in the plants a basic element of structure which pervades them all is an "ideal" leaf. The plant is an assemblage of such modified leaves. These assumptions stood throughout Goethe's life as untested possibilities, but when, soon after his death, the cell-theory and embryology came into being, new criteria became available. Embryology did not reveal elemental vertebrae within the fabric of the skull, nor did the plant resolve itself into primordial leaves. Goethe's guesses then receded into the limbo of untenable hypotheses. But these guesses did serve to chasten the frozen view of species favoured by the Linnean classification and to substitute for it an idea of fluctuation of a specific form about a mean. Goethe attributed this fluctuation to the fancy-free operation of a creative deity which he addressed as Nature, an Olympian being. We have to bear in mind that Goethe was both a poet and a pagan. It was only at the end of his life that, perhaps for appearances, he made some approaches towards the Christian faith—and in doing that he equated Christ and the sun.

But to return to his science. He propounded yet another "law of Nature." It explained the long body of the snake as being obtained by suppression of the creature's limbs; and the relatively large limbs of the frog by shortening of the creature's body. "Nature" could not add to the animal except at the price of taking something away. But knowledge does not confirm this.

He also turned to the subject of colour. He was what psychology styles "a visual"; that is to say, visual images rather than auditory dominated in his mind. Comparing the eye with the ear, he speaks of the latter as a "dull sense," showing how different is the ear for music from the literary ear. There is a field of colour which centres on "subjective colour"—that is, colour sensible even in absence of physical stimulation. Goethe made a number of excellent observations on this. He also made physical experiments on colour. Professor Andrade, the accomplished physicist and also historian of science, comments in the current issue of *Nature* on Goethe's pronouncements in this field and there is no need for me, who am far less competent, to dilate upon them here. Suffice it to say that Goethe rejected the fundamental observation on white light and the prism. He reverted to a modification of the Aristotelian theory of classical antiquity. In his great *Handbuch*, first issued in 1856, Helmholtz dismissed Goethe's view as not based on science at all.

Goethe was a man who greatly impressed his contemporaries. His self-confidence as a scientific theorist was that of an enthusiast and amateur. He said, and repeated, "I do not attach importance to my work as a poet, but I do claim to be alone in my time in apprehension of the truth about colour." Here a great artist was mistaken in appraising his own gifts. We learn how necessary in the make-up of science is, along with the urge to discovery, the sublime detachment of the true scientific thinkers.

The report of the final conference of the British Hospitals Contributory Schemes Association, which was held at Folkestone on Sept. 30–Oct. 3, 1948, has been published. A limited number of copies are available on application to the honorary secretary of the association at Royal London House, Queen Charlotte Street, Bristol, 1.