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Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

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G O E T H E

THIS distinguished and peculiar man has lightened the task of his biographers and critics, by a work of great interest, which he has himself given to the world, and of which some more or less accurate resemblance is also before the English reader. In his *Dichtung und Wahrheit* Goethe has accomplished the difficult problem of autobiography with what seems a singular success: here, in the kindest and coolest spirit, he conducts us through the scenes of his past existence; unfolds with graphic clearness and light gay dignity whatever influenced the formation of his character and mode of thought; depicting all with the knowledge of a chief actor, and the calm impartial penetration of a spectator; speaking of himself as many would wish, but few are able, to speak of themselves: In the temper of a third party, and not sooner or not farther than others are desirous and entitled to hear that subject treated. If the old remark is true, that a faithful secret-history of the humblest human being would be attractive and instructive to the highest, this picture of the spiritual and moral growth of a Goethe may well be considered as deserving no common attention. I am sorry to understand that the English version of the work is not from the German, but from the French: judging by the size of the book, the business of curtailment in this *Life of Goethe* must have been proceeded in with a liberal and fearless hand; it seems also that there are additions, which probably are still more offensive. To this copy of the portrait, defaced and distorted as it cannot fail to be, I must not refer the reader:

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yet all that can be attempted here is a few slight sketches, more in the way of commentary than of narrative.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born at Frankfort-on-Mayn, on the 28th of August 1749. The station and circumstances of his family were of a favourable sort: his father bore the title of Imperial Councillor, and though personally unconnected with active affairs, stood in close relation with the influential and cultivated classes of the community. Both parents appear likewise to have been of a determinate and genuine form of mind, possessing many virtues, and no inconsiderable share of intellectual gifts and attainments. In the height of his fame it was observed of Goethe, that his true-hearted, idiomatic and expressive style of speech recalled his mother to memory; who, while nursing her fair boy on her knee, had little dreamed that in him her own good and kindly character was to be transfigured to such beauty and enlargement, and transmitted in glorious emblems to distant countries and succeeding ages. The father, of course, was fashioned in a more rugged mould, and seems also to have been originally of sterner stuff; a rigorous, abrupt, positive and thoroughgoing man; somewhat of a humorist, for he actually built his house from the top downwards; testy and indomitable, but not ill-natured or ungenerous; clear in his perceptions, as he was resolute in his actions; and withal of an honest and manly heart. Both these modes of character appear to have united in the son; the liveliest susceptibility of all sorts was superadded to them; and the scene he lived in acted on him with strong and complicated influences. These earliest images of his memory he has set before us with the most graceful simplicity in the work above referred to: the aspects of life in Gothic Frankfort, with its old German minds and old German manners, are brought home to our eyes; we walk among rich old-fashioned wondrous objects, and converse with originals as wondrous and old-fashioned as their abode.

Goethe was destined, as his Father had been, for the

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profession of law ; and in due time he went successively to Leipzig and Strasburg, to prepare for, and to undertake, the study of it. But his quick, impassioned and discursive mind, impressed by the most varied impulses, was continually diverging into many provinces remote enough from this his appointed occupation ; for which, as was naturally to be expected, he had never shown any preference ; though, from time to time, he had not failed to prosecute, with fits of resolute diligence, the tasks prescribed by it. In 1771, he obtained his degree : but if the form of his outward life might now seem clear and determined, his inward world was still in a state of uproar and disorder. The ambition of wealth and official celebrity would not seize him with due force : a thousand vague purposes, and vehement wishes, and brightest and blackest forecastings were conflicting within him ; for a strong spirit was here struggling to body itself forth from the most discordant elements ; and what was at last to rise as a fair universe of thought still rolled as a dim and wasteful chaos.

By degrees, however, after not a little suffering in many hard contests with himself and his circumstances, he began to emerge from these troubles : light dawned on his course ; and his true destination, a life of literature, became more and more plain to him. His first efforts were crowned with a success well calculated to confirm him in such purposes. *Götz von Berlichingen*, an historical drama of the Feudal Ages, appeared in 1773 ; by the originality both of its subject and its execution, attracting the public eye to the young author : and next year his *Sorrows of Werter* rose like a literary meteor on the world ; and carried his name on its blazing wings, not only over Germany, but into the remotest corners of Europe. The chief incident of this work had been suggested by a tragical catastrophe, which had occurred in his neighbourhood, during a residence at Wetzlar : the emotions and delineations which give life to it ; the vague impassioned longing, the moody melancholy, the wayward

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love and indignation, the soft feeling and the stern philosophy, which characterise the hero, he had drawn from his own past or actual experience.

The works just mentioned, though noble specimens of youthful talent, are still not so much distinguished by their intrinsic merits as by their splendid fortune. It would be difficult to name two books which have exercised a deeper influence on the subsequent literature of Europe than these two performances of a young author; his first-fruits, the produce of his twenty-fourth year. *Werter* appeared to seize the hearts of men in all quarters of the world, and to utter for them the word which they had long been waiting to hear. As usually happens, too, this same word once uttered was soon abundantly repeated; spoken in all dialects, and chanted through all the notes of the gamut, till at length the sound of it had grown a weariness rather than a pleasure. Sceptical sentimentality, view-hunting, love, friendship, suicide and desperation, became the staple of literary ware; and though the epidemic, after a long course of years, subsided in Germany, it reappeared with various modifications in other countries; and everywhere abundant traces of its good and bad effects are still to be discerned. The fortune of *Berlichingen with the Iron Hand*, though less sudden, was by no means less exalted. In his own country, *Götz*, though he now stands solitary and childless, became the parent of an innumerable progeny of chivalry plays, feudal delineations, and poetico-antiquarian performances; which, though long ago deceased, made noise enough in their day and generation: and with ourselves his influence has been perhaps still more remarkable. Sir Walter Scott's first literary enterprise was a translation of *Götz von Berlichingen*: and if genius could be communicated like instruction, we might call this work of Goethe's the prime cause of *Marmion* and the *Lady of the Lake*, with all that has followed from the same creative hand. Truly, a grain of seed that has lighted in the right soil! For if not firmer and fairer, it has grown to be taller and

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broader than any other tree; and all the nations of the Earth are still yearly gathering of its fruit.

But, overlooking these spiritual genealogies, which bring little certainty and little profit, it may be sufficient to observe of *Berlichingen* and *Werter*, that they stand prominent among the causes, or, at the very least, among the signals, of a great change in modern Literature. The former directed men's attention with a new force to the picturesque effects of the Past; and the latter, for the first time, attempted the more accurate delineation of a class of feelings, deeply important to modern minds; but for which our elder poetry offered no exponent, and perhaps could offer none, because they are feelings that arise from passion incapable of being converted into action, and belong chiefly to an age as indolent, cultivated and unbelieving as our own. This, notwithstanding the dash of falsehood which may exist in *Werter* itself, and the boundless delirium of extravagance which it called forth in others, is a high praise which cannot justly be denied it. The English reader ought also to understand that our current version of *Werter* is mutilated and inaccurate: it comes to us through the all-subduing medium of the French; shorn of its caustic strength; with its melancholy rendered maudlin; its hero reduced from the stately gloom of a broken-hearted poet to the tearful wrangling of a dyspeptic tailor.

One of the very first to perceive the faults of these works, and the ridiculous extravagance of their imitators, was Goethe himself. In this unlooked-for and unexampled popularity, he was far from feeling that he had attained his object: this first outpouring of his soul had calmed its agitations, not exhausted or even indicated its strength; and he now began to see afar off a much higher region, as well as glimpses of the track by which it might be reached. To cultivate his own spirit, not only as an author, but as a man; to obtain dominion over it, and wield its resources as instruments in the service of what seemed Good and Beautiful, had been his object more or less distinctly from the first, as it is that of

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all true men in their several spheres. According to his own deep maxim, that 'Doubt of any sort can only be removed by Action,' this object had now become more clear to him; and he may be said to have pursued it to the present hour, with a comprehensiveness and unwearied perseverance, rarely if ever exemplified in the history of such a mind.

His external relations had already ceased to obstruct him in this pursuit, and they now became more favourable than ever. In 1776, the Heir Apparent of Weimar was passing through Frankfort; on which occasion, by the intervention of some friends, he waited upon Goethe. The visit must have been mutually agreeable; for a short time afterwards, the young author was invited to Court; apparently, to contribute his assistance in various literary institutions and arrangements, then proceeding or contemplated; and in pursuance of this honourable call, he accordingly settled at Weimar, with the title of *Legationsrath*, and the actual dignity of a place in the *Collegium*, or Council. The connexion, begun under such favourable auspices, and ever since continued unimpaired, has been productive of important consequences, not only to Weimar, but to all Germany. The noble purpose undertaken by the Duchess Amelia was zealously forwarded by the young Duke on his accession; under whose influence, supported and directed by his new Councillor, this inconsiderable state has gained for itself a fairer distinction than any of its larger, richer, or more warlike rivals. By degrees, whatever was brightest in the genius of Germany had been gathered to this little Court: a classical theatre was under the superintendence of Goethe and Schiller; here Wieland taught and sung; in the pulpit was Herder: and possessing such a four, the small town of Weimar, some twenty years ago, might challenge the proudest capital of the world to match it in intellectual wealth. Occupied so profitably to his country, and honourably to himself, Goethe continued rising in estimation with his Prince: by degrees, a political was added to his literary influence; in 1779 he became Privy Councillor;

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President in 1782; and, at length, after his return from Italy, where he had spent two years in various studies and observation, he was appointed Minister; a post which he only a few years ago resigned, on his final retirement from public affairs. In this, his second country, he still resides. The German biographies are careful to inform us that by the Duke of Weimar he was ennobled; and decorated by Alexander and Napoleon, and various other kings and kaisers, with their several insignia of honour.

A much purer and more imperishable series of honours he has earned for himself, by the peaceful efforts of his own genius. His active duties were, at all times, more or less intimately connected with literature; they seem not to have obstructed the silent labours of his closet; and perhaps they rather forwarded the great business of his life, a thorough universal culture of all his being. Goethe's history is a picture of the most diverse studies and acquisitions: Literature he has tried successfully in nearly every one of its departments; with Art, ancient and modern, he has familiarised himself beyond a rival; Science, also, he seems to have surveyed with no careless or feeble eye, and his contributions to several of its branches, particularly of Botany and Optics, have been thankfully received by their professors. Some of our readers may be surprised to learn, that the painted Diagram of Mountain-altitudes which ornaments their libraries, exhibiting in one view the successive elevations of the Globe, was devised by the Author of *Faust* and *The Sorrows of Werter*.

Goethe's purely literary works amount to between twenty and thirty considerable volumes. A bare enumeration of their names, without note or comment, would be perplexing rather than instructive; and for note or comment of the humblest sort our present limits are too narrow. In the province of the Drama, omitting *Egmont*, *Iphigenie*, and multitudes of lighter pieces, we must mention, as entitled to peculiar distinction, the tragedy of *Torquato Tasso* and the

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play of *Faust*. The first paints, in simple gracefulness, the poetic temperament at conflict with the ordinances of vulgar life ; a pure and touching picture, full of wisdom, calm depth and unostentatious pathos. The second, of a still deeper character, images forth, in the superstitious tradition of *Faust*, the contest of the good principle in human nature with the bad ; the struggle of Man's Soul against Ignorance, Sin and Suffering ; the indirect subject of many, perhaps of all true poems ; but here treated directly, with a wild mysterious impressiveness, which distinguishes this play from every other. *Faust* and also *Iphigenie* have been translated into English.

Another singular performance of Goethe's is *Reinecke Fuchs*, a poetic version of the old tale, said to be originally a Netherlands political pasquinade, and which exists in English, under the corresponding title of *Reynard the Fox*. Goethe's work is written in hexameters, in twelve books, like another *Æneid* : a wondrous affair ; imbued with the truest humour, full of marvellous imitations, grotesque descriptions, and manifold moralities. If beasts could speak, we should surely expect them to express their 'general views' as they are made to do in this epos : the ass here is a philosophical masticator of thistles and gorse ; Bruin thinks, and talks, and acts, like a very bear ; and 'Malapertus the Fortress' is still redolent of murdered poultry. Nor is this strange mimicry the sole charm of the work ; for there is method in its madness ; across these marvellous delineations we discern a deeper significance. It is a parody of human life, as it were, a magic picture, with forms of the wildest mirth, which, while we gaze on them, sadden into serious and instructive, though still smiling, monitors. *Hermann und Dorothea* is also written in hexameters, and with a cheerful earnestness, which has recommended it to great favour with the Germans. You see it printed in gay miniature, with gilding and decorations ; and friend testifies his kindness to friend by the present of this *Civic Epos*.

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In the Romance department, Goethe has written several works, and on peculiar principles. Besides *Werter*, we have *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (The Elective Affinities); and five years ago he published the first volume of *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, a fragment which the reader is now to have an opportunity of perusing. These performances, though bearing the common name of novel, are of very varied quality: and some of them but ill represented by so trivial a title. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, for instance, whatever may be thought of it in other respects, has a deeper object than many a poem which has called itself epic: nor was it hastily or carelessly huddled together without study; for this novel, it would appear, lay ten years in the Author's mind and hand, one year longer than even the Horatian period. Like many of his other works, *Meister* has called forth a numerous series of imitations; but the strength of such productions lies less in the form than in the substance, which it is not so easy to copy; and accordingly, when most of these 'Art-novels' are forgotten, *Meister* alone continues rising in esteem. Except the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, all Goethe's novels are now in English.

Of his numerous short Poems it is difficult to say a well-weighed word: for they are of all sorts, gay and grave, descriptive, lyrical, didactic, idyllic, epigrammatic; and of all these species, the common name, without long expositions, would, when applied to him, excite a false idea. Goethe is nowhere more entirely original, more fascinating, more indescribable, than in his smaller poems. One quality which very generally marks them, particularly those of a later date, is their peculiar expressiveness, their fulness of meaning. A single thing is said, and a thousand things are indicated. They are spells which cleave to our memory, and by which we summon beautiful spirits from the vasty deep of thought. Often at the first aspect they appear commonplace, or altogether destitute of significance: we look at the lines on the

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canvas ; and they seem careless dashes, mere random strokes, representing nothing save the caprices of their author ; we change our place, we shift and shift, till we find the right point of view ; and all at once a fair figure starts into being, encircled with graces and light charms, and by its witcheries attracting heart and mind. In his songs he recalls to us those of Shakspeare : they are not speeches, but musical tones ; the sentiment is not stated in logical sequence, but poured forth in fitful and fantastic suggestions : they are the wild woodnotes of the nightingale ; they are to be sung, not said.

A large portion of Goethe's writings still remains to be classed under the head of Miscellanies. We have sketches of Travels ; dissertations, direct or allegorical, on Art ; autobiography, continuous or in fragments ; fantasies, dialogues, or other light essays, on Taste, Manners, and Morals ; there is even a short treatise on the geography of the Children of Israel's journey into Canaan ! Nor has he disdained the humble offices of a translator and editor. The *Life of Benvenuto Cellini*, which lately appeared in English, he long ago translated, with notes. Voltaire's *Mahomet* had a similar honour from him ; also Diderot's *Neveu de Ramcau*, the original of which was published only very lately, many years after the German version. His editorial functions, I believe, he has not yet laid aside ; for two periodicals, the *Morphologie* and the *Kunst und Alterthum* (Art and Antiquities), are still occasionally continued under his direction and coöperation.

Such are some specimens of the labours, in which Goethe has spent many diligent and most honourable years. That they are too varied to be all excellent, that he would have better cared for his fame, had he limited his efforts to a narrower circle, is an obvious cavil ; to which also he can reply, as he has already done for D'Alembert, that there are higher things on Earth than fame ; that a universal development of our spiritual nature may actually be more precious to us than the solace of our vanity ; that the true business is