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Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

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[1827]

DR. JOHNSON, it is said, when he first heard of Boswell's intention to write a life of him, announced, with decision enough, that, if he thought Boswell really meant to *write his* life, he would prevent it by *taking Boswell's*! That great authors should actually employ this preventive against bad biographers is a thing we would by no means recommend: but the truth is, that, rich as we are in Biography, a well-written Life is almost as rare as a well-spent one; and there are certainly many more men whose history deserves to be recorded, than persons willing and able to record it. But great men, like the old Egyptian kings, must all be tried after death, before they can be embalmed: and what, in truth, are these 'Sketches,' 'Anas,' 'Conversations,' 'Voices,' and the like, but the votes and pleadings of so many ill-informed advocates, jurors and judges; from whose conflict, however, we shall in the end have a true verdict? The worst of it is at the first; for weak eyes are precisely the fondest of glittering objects. Accordingly, no sooner does a great man depart, and leave his character as public property, than a crowd of little men rushes towards it. There they are gathered together, blinking up to it with such vision as they have, scanning it from afar, hovering round it this way and

¹ EDINBURGH REVIEW, No. 91.—*Jean Paul Friedrich Richter's Leben, nebst Charakteristik seiner Werke; von Heinrich Döring.* (Jean Paul Friedrich Richter's Life, with a Sketch of his Works; by Heinrich Döring.) Gotha; Hennings, 1826. 12mo, pp. 208.

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that, each cunningly endeavouring, by all arts, to catch some reflex of it in the little mirror of Himself; though, many times, this mirror is so twisted with convexities and concavities, and, indeed, so extremely small in size, that to expect any true image, or any image whatever from it, is out of the question.

Richter was much better-natured than Johnson; and took many provoking things with the spirit of a humorist and philosopher; nor can we think that so good a man, had he even foreseen this Work of Döring's, would have gone the length of assassinating him for it. Döring is a person we have known for several years, as a compiler, and translator, and balladmonger; whose grand enterprise, however, is his *Gallery of Weimar Authors*; a series of strange little Biographies, beginning with Schiller, and already extending over Wieland and Herder;—now comprehending, probably by conquest, Klopstock also; and lastly, by a sort of *droit d'aubaine*, Jean Paul Friedrich Richter; neither of whom belonged to Weimar. Authors, it must be admitted, are happier than the old painter with his cocks for they write, naturally and without fear of ridicule, the name of their work on the title-page; and thenceforth the purport and tendency of each volume remains indisputable. Döring is sometimes lucky in this privilege; otherwise his manner of composition, being so peculiar, might occasion difficulty now and then. Biographies, according to Döring's method, are a simple business. You first ascertain, from the *Leipsic Conversationslexicon*, or Jördens's *Poetical Lexicon*, or Flögel, or Koch, or other such *Compendium* or *Handbook*, the date and place of the proposed individual's birth, his parentage, trade, appointments, and the titles of his works; the date of his death you already know from the newspapers: this serves as a foundation for the edifice. You then go through his writings, and all other writings where he or his pursuits are treated of, and wherever you find a passage with his name in it, you cut it out, and carry it away. In this manner a mass

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of materials is collected, and the building now proceeds apace. Stone is laid on the top of stone, just as it comes to hand; a trowel or two of biographic mortar, if perfectly convenient, being spread in here and there, by way of cement; and so the strangest pile suddenly arises; amorphous, pointing every way but to the zenith, here a block of granite, there a mass of pipeclay; till the whole finishes, when the materials are finished;—and you leave it standing to posterity, like some miniature Stonehenge, a perfect architectural enigma.

To speak without figure, this mode of life-writing has its disadvantages. For one thing, the composition cannot well be what the critics call harmonious: and, indeed, Herr Döring's transitions are often abrupt enough. The hero changes his object and occupation from page to page, often from sentence to sentence, in the most unaccountable way; a pleasure-journey, and a sickness of fifteen years, are despatched with equal brevity; in a moment you find him married, and the father of three fine children. He dies no less suddenly;—he is studying as usual, writing poetry, receiving visits, full of life and business, when instantly some paragraph opens under him, like one of the trap-doors in the *Vision of Mirza*, and he drops, without note of preparation, into the shades below. Perhaps, indeed, not forever; we have instances of his rising after the funeral, and winding-up his affairs. The time has been that, when the brains were out, the man would die; but Döring orders these things differently.

After all, however, we have no pique against poor Döring: on the contrary, we regularly purchase his ware; and it gives us true pleasure to see his spirits so much improved since we first met him. In the *Life of Schiller* his state did seem rather unprosperous: he wore a timorous, submissive and downcast aspect, as if, like Sterne's Ass, he were saying, 'Don't thrash me;—but if you will, you may!' Now, however, comforted by considerable sale, and praise from this and the other *Litteraturblatt*, which has commended his diligenc,

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his fidelity, and, strange to say, his method, he advances with erect countenance and firm hoof, and even recalcitrates contemptuously against such as do him offence. *Glück auf dem Weg!* is the worst we wish him.

Of his *Life of Richter* these preliminary observations may be our excuse for saying but little. He brags much, in his Preface, that it is all true and genuine; for Richter's widow, it seems, had, by public advertisement, cautioned the world against it; another biography, partly by the illustrious deceased himself, partly by Otto, his oldest friend and the appointed Editor of his Works, being actually in preparation. This rouses the indignant spirit of Döring, and he stoutly asseverates that, his documents being altogether authentic, this biography is *no* pseudo-biography. With still greater truth he might have asseverated that it was no biography at all. Well are he and Hennings of Gotha aware that this thing of shreds and patches has been vamped together for sale only. Except a few letters to Kunz, the Bamberg Bookseller, which turn mainly on the purchase of spectacles, and the journeyings and freightage of two boxes that used to pass and repass between Richter and Kunz's circulating library; with three or four notes of similar importance, and chiefly to other booksellers, there are no biographical documents here, which were not open to all Europe as well as to Heinrich Döring. Indeed, very nearly one half of the *Life* is occupied with a description of the funeral and its appendages,—how the 'sixty torches, with a number of lanterns and pitchpans,' were arranged; how this Patrician or Professor followed that, through Friedrich-street, Chancery-street, and other streets of Bayreuth; and how at last the torches all went out, as Dr. Gabler and Dr. Spatzier were perorating (decidedly in bombast) over the grave. Then, it seems, there were meetings held in various parts of Germany, to solemnise the memory of Richter; among the rest, one in the Museum of Frankfort-on-Mayn; where a Doctor Börne speaks another long speech, if possible in still more decided bombast. Next come threnodies

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from all the four winds, mostly on very splay-footed metre. The whole of which is here snatched from the kind oblivion of the newspapers, and 'lives in Settle's numbers one day more.'

We have too much reverence for the name of Richter to think of laughing over these unhappy threnodists and panegyrists; some of whom far exceed anything we English can exhibit in the epicedial style. They rather testify, however maladroitly, that the Germans have felt their loss,—which, indeed, is one to Europe at large; they even affect us with a certain melancholy feeling, when we consider how a heavenly voice must become mute, and nothing be heard in its stead but the whoop of quite earthly voices, lamenting, or pretending to lament. Far from us be all remembrance of Döring and Company, while we speak of Richter! But his own Works give us some glimpses into his singular and noble nature; and to our readers a few words on this man, certainly one of the most remarkable of his age, will not seem thrown away.

Except by name, Jean Paul Friedrich Richter is little known out of Germany. The only thing connected with him, we think, that has reached this country, is his saying, imported by Madame de Staël, and thankfully pocketed by most newspaper critics:—'Providence has given to the French the empire of the land, to the English that of the sea, to the Germans that of—the air!' Of this last element, indeed, his own genius might easily seem to have been a denizen; so fantastic, many-coloured, far-grasping, every way perplexed and extraordinary is his mode of writing. To translate him properly is next to impossible; nay, a dictionary of his works has actually been in part published for the use of German readers! These things have restricted his sphere of action, and may long restrict it, to his own country: but there, in return, he is a favourite of the first class; studied through all his intricacies with trustful admiration, and a love which

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tolerates much. During the last forty years, he has been continually before the public, in various capacities, and growing generally in esteem with all ranks of critics; till, at length, his gainsayers have either been silenced or convinced; and Jean Paul, at first reckoned half-mad, has long ago vindicated his singularities to nearly universal satisfaction, and now combines popularity with real depth of endowment, in perhaps a greater degree than any other writer; being second in the latter point to scarcely more than one of his contemporaries, and in the former second to none.

The biography of so distinguished a person could scarcely fail to be interesting, especially his autobiography; which, accordingly, we wait for, and may in time submit to our readers, if it seem worthy: meanwhile, the history of his life, so far as outward events characterise it, may be stated in a few words. He was born at Wunsiedel in Bayreuth, in March 1763. His father was a subaltern teacher in the Gymnasium of the place, and was afterwards promoted to be clergyman at Schwarzbach on the Saale. Richter's early education was of the scantiest sort; but his fine faculties and unwearied diligence supplied every defect. Unable to purchase books, he borrowed what he could come at, and transcribed from them, often great part of their contents,—a habit of excerpting which continued with him through life, and influenced, in more than one way, his mode of writing and study. To the last, he was an insatiable and universal reader: so that his extracts accumulated on his hands, 'till they filled whole chests.' In 1780, he went to the University of Leipsic; with the highest character, in spite of the impediments which he had struggled with, for talent and acquirement. Like his father, he was destined for Theology; from which, however, his vagrant genius soon diverged into Poetry and Philosophy, to the neglect, and, ere long, to the final abandonment of his appointed profession. Not well knowing what to do, he now accepted a tutorship in some family of rank; then he had pupils in his own house,—

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which, however, like his way of life, he often changed; for by this time he had become an author, and, in his wanderings over Germany, was putting forth, now here, now there, the strangest books, with the strangest titles. For instance, —*Greenland Lawsuits*; — *Biographical Recreations under the Cranium of a Giantess*; — *Selection from the Papers of the Devil*; — and the like! In these indescribable performances, the splendid faculties of the writer, luxuriating as they seem in utter riot, could not be disputed; nor, with all its extravagance, the fundamental strength, honesty and tenderness of his nature. Genius will reconcile men to much. By degrees, Jean Paul began to be considered not a strange crackbrained mixture of enthusiast and buffoon, but a man of infinite humour, sensibility, force and penetration. His writings procured him friends and fame; and at length a wife and a settled provision. With Caroline Mayer, his good spouse, and a pension (in 1802) from the King of Bavaria, he settled in Bayreuth, the capital of his native province; where he lived thenceforth, diligent and celebrated in many new departments of Literature; and died on the 14th of November 1825, loved as well as admired by all his countrymen, and most by those who had known him most intimately.

A huge, irregular man, both in mind and person (for his Portrait is quite a physiognomical study), full of fire, strength and impetuosity, Richter seems, at the same time, to have been, in the highest degree, mild, simple-hearted, humane. He was fond of conversation, and might well shine in it: he talked, as he wrote, in a style of his own, full of wild strength and charms, to which his natural Bayreuth accent often gave additional effect. Yet he loved retirement, the country and all natural things; from his youth upwards, he himself tells us, he may almost be said to have lived in the open air; it was among groves and meadows that he studied,—often that he wrote. Even in the streets of Bayreuth, we have heard, he was seldom seen without a flower in his breast. A man of quiet tastes, and warm compassionate affections! His

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friends he must have loved as few do. Of his poor and humble mother he often speaks by allusion, and never without reverence and overflowing tenderness. 'Unhappy is the man,' says he, 'for whom his own mother has not made all other mothers venerable!' And elsewhere: 'O thou who hast still a father and a mother, thank God for it in the day when thy soul is full of joyful tears, and needs a bosom wherein to shed them!'—We quote the following sentences from Döring, almost the only memorable thing he has written in this Volume:

'Richter's studying or sitting apartment offered, about this time (1793), a true and beautiful emblem of his simple and noble way of thought, which comprehended at once the high and the low. Whilst his mother, who then lived with him, busily pursued her household work, occupying herself about stove and dresser, Jean Paul was sitting in a corner of the same room, at a simple writing-desk, with few or no books about him, but merely with one or two drawers containing excerpts and manuscripts. The jingle of the household operations seemed not at all to disturb him, any more than did the cooing of the pigeons, which fluttered to and fro in the chamber,—a place, indeed, of considerable size.'¹

Our venerable Hooker, we remember, also enjoyed 'the jingle of household operations,' and the more questionable jingle of shrewd tongues to boot, while he wrote; but the good thrifty mother, and the cooing pigeons, were wanting. Richter came afterwards to live in finer mansions, and had the great and learned for associates; but the gentle feelings of those days abode with him: through life he was the same substantial, determinate, yet meek and tolerating man. It is seldom that so much rugged energy can be so blandly attempered; that so much vehemence and so much softness will go together.

The expected Edition of Richter's Works is to be in sixty

¹ Page 8.

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volumes; and they are no less multifarious than extensive; embracing subjects of all sorts, from the highest problems of Transcendental Philosophy, and the most passionate poetical delineations, to *Golden Rules for the Weather-Prophet*, and instructions in the *Art of Falling Asleep*. His chief productions are Novels: the *Unsichtbare Loge* (Invisible Lodge); *Flegeljahre* (Wild-Oats); *Life of Fixlein*; the *Jubelsenor* (Parson in Jubilee); *Schmelzle's Journey to Flätz*; *Katzenberger's Journey to the Bath*; *Life of Fibel*; with many lighter pieces; and two works of a higher order, *Hesperus* and *Titan*, the largest and the best of his Novels. It was the former that first (in 1795) introduced him into decisive and universal estimation with his countrymen: the latter he himself, with the most judicious of his critics, regarded as his masterpiece. But the name Novelist, as we in England must understand it, would ill describe so vast and discursive a genius: for, with all his grotesque, tumultuous pleasantry, Richter is a man of a truly earnest, nay, high and solemn character; and seldom writes without a meaning far beyond the sphere of common romancers. *Hesperus* and *Titan* themselves, though in form nothing more than 'novels of real life,' as the Minerva Press would say, have solid metal enough in them to furnish whole circulating libraries, were it beaten into the usual filigree; and much which, attenuate it as we might, no quarterly subscriber could well carry with him. Amusement is often, in part almost always, a mean with Richter; rarely or never his highest end. His thoughts, his feelings, the creations of his spirit, walk before us embodied under wondrous shapes, in motley and ever-fluctuating groups; but his essential character, however he disguise it, is that of a Philosopher and moral Poet, whose study has been human nature, whose delight and best endeavour are with all that is beautiful, and tender, and mysteriously sublime, in the fate or history of man. This is the purport of his writings, whether their form be that of fiction or of truth; the spirit that pervades and ennobles his delineations of common life, his

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wild wayward dreams, allegories, and shadowy imaginings, no less than his disquisitions of a nature directly scientific.

But in this latter province also Richter has accomplished much. His *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (Introduction to Æsthetics¹) is a work on Poetic Art, based on principles of no ordinary depth and compass, abounding in noble views, and, notwithstanding its frolicsome exuberance, in sound and subtle criticism; esteemed even in Germany, where criticism has long been treated of as a science, and by such persons as Winkelmann, Kant, Herder, and the Schlegels. Of this work we could speak long, did our limits allow. We fear it might astonish many an honest brother of our craft, were he to read it; and altogether perplex and dash his maturest counsels, if he chanced to understand it.—Richter has also written on Education, a work entitled *Levana*; distinguished by keen practical sagacity, as well as generous sentiment, and a certain sober magnificence of speculation; the whole presented in that singular style which characterises the man. Germany is rich in works on Education; richer at present than any other country: it is there only that some echo of the Lockes and Miltons, speaking of this high matter, may still be heard; and speaking of it in the language of our own time, with insight into the actual wants, advantages, perils and prospects of this age. Among the writers on this subject Richter holds a high place; if we look chiefly at his tendency and aims, perhaps the highest.—The *Clavis Fichtiana* is a ludicrous performance, known to us only by report; but Richter is said to possess the merit, while he laughs at Fichte, of understanding him; a merit among Fichte's critics which seems to be one of the rarest. Report also, we regret to say, is all that we know of the *Campaner Thal*, a Discourse on the Immortality of the Soul; one of Richter's

¹ From *αἰσθάνομαι*, to feel. A word invented by Baumgarten (some eighty years ago), to express generally the *Science of the Fine Arts*; and now in universal use among the Germans. Perhaps we also might as well adopt it; at least if any such *science* should ever arise among us.