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978-1-108-02250-7 - The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Volume 27

Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

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[1829]

A NUMBER of years ago, Jean Paul's copy of *Novalis* led him to infer that the German reading-world was of a quick disposition; inasmuch as, with respect to books that required more than one perusal, it declined perusing them at all. Paul's *Novalis*, we suppose, was of the first Edition, uncut, dusty, and lent him from the Public Library with willingness, nay, with joy. But times, it would appear, must be considerably changed since then; indeed, were we to judge of German reading habits from these Volumes of ours, we should draw quite a different conclusion from Paul's; for they are of the fourth Edition, perhaps therefore the ten-thousandth copy, and that of a Book demanding, whether deserving or not, to be oftener read than almost any other it has ever been our lot to examine.

Without at all entering into the merits of Novalis, we may observe that we should reckon it a happy sign of Literature, were so solid a fashion of study here and there established in all countries: for directly in the teeth of most 'intellectual tea-circles,' it may be asserted that no good Book, or good thing of any sort, shows its best face at first; nay, that the commonest quality in a true work of Art, if its excellence have any depth and compass, is that at first sight it occasions a certain disappointment; perhaps even, mingled with its undeniable beauty, a certain feeling of aversion. Not as if we

¹ FOREIGN REVIEW, No. 7.—*Novalis Schriften*. Herausgegeben von Ludwig Tieck und Friedrich Schlegel (Novalis' Writings. Edited by Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel). Fourth Edition. 2 vols. Berlin, 1826.

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meant, by this remark, to cast a stone at the old guild of literary Improvisators, or any of that diligent brotherhood, whose trade it is to blow soap-bubbles for their fellow-creatures; which bubbles, of course, if they are not seen and admired this moment, will be altogether lost to men's eyes the next. Considering the use of these blowers, in civilised communities, we rather wish them strong lungs, and all manner of prosperity: but simply we would contend that such soap-bubble guild should not become the sole one in Literature; that being undisputably the strongest, it should content itself with this preëminence, and not tyrannically annihilate its less prosperous neighbours. For it should be recollected that Literature positively has other aims than this of amusement from hour to hour; nay, perhaps that this, glorious as it may be, is not its highest or true aim. We do say, therefore, that the Improvisator corporation should be kept within limits; and readers, at least a certain small class of readers, should understand that some few departments of human inquiry have still their depths and difficulties; that the abstruse is not precisely synonymous with the absurd; nay, that light itself may be darkness, in a certain state of the eyesight; that, in short, cases may occur when a little patience and some attempt at thought would not be altogether superfluous in reading. Let the mob of gentlemen keep their own ground, and be happy and applauded there: if they overstep that ground, they indeed may flourish the better for it, but the reader will suffer damage. For in this way, a reader, accustomed to see through everything in one second of time, comes to forget that his wisdom and critical penetration are finite and not infinite; and so commits more than one mistake in his conclusions. The Reviewer too, who indeed is only a preparatory reader, as it were a sort of sieve and drainer for the use of more luxurious readers, soon follows his example: these two react still farther on the mob of gentlemen; and so among them all, with this action and reaction, matters grow worse and worse.

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It rather seems to us as if, in this respect of faithfulness in reading, the Germans were somewhat ahead of us English; at least we have no such proof to show of it as that fourth Edition of *Novalis*. Our Coleridge's *Friend*, for example, and *Biographia Literaria* are but a slight business compared with these *Schriften*; little more than the Alphabet, and that in gilt letters, of such Philosophy and Art as is here taught in the form of Grammar and Rhetorical Compend; yet Coleridge's works were triumphantly condemned by the whole reviewing world, as clearly unintelligible; and among readers they have still but an unseen circulation; like living brooks, hidden for the present under mountains of froth and theatrical snow-paper, and which only at a distant day, when these mountains shall have decomposed themselves into gas and earthy residuum, may roll forth in their true limpid shape, to gladden the general eye with what beauty and everlasting freshness does reside in them. It is admitted too, on all hands, that Mr. Coleridge is a man of 'genius,' that is, a man having more intellectual insight than other men; and strangely enough, it is taken for granted, at the same time, that he has less intellectual insight than any other. For why else are his doctrines to be thrown out of doors, without examination, as false and worthless, simply because they are obscure? Or how is their so palpable falsehood to be accounted for to our minds, except on this extraordinary ground: that a man able to originate deep thoughts (such is the meaning of genius) is unable to *see* them when originated; that the creative intellect of a Philosopher is destitute of that mere faculty of logic which belongs to 'all Attorneys, and men educated in Edinburgh'? The Cambridge carrier, when asked whether his horse could "draw inferences," readily replied, "Yes, anything in reason"; but here, it seems, is a man of genius who has no similar gift.

We ourselves, we confess, are too young in the study of human nature to have met with any such anomaly. Never yet has it been our fortune to fall in with any man of genius

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whose conclusions did not correspond better with his premises, and not worse, than those of other men; whose genius, when it once came to be understood, did not manifest itself in a deeper, fuller, truer view of all things human and divine, than the clearest of your so laudable 'practical men' had claim to. Such, we say, has been our uniform experience; so uniform, that we now hardly ever expect to see it contradicted. True it is, the old Pythagorean argument of 'the master said it,' has long since ceased to be available: in these days, no man, except the Pope of Rome, is altogether exempt from error of judgment; doubtless a man of genius may chance to adopt false opinions; nay, rather, like all other sons of Adam, except that same enviable Pope, *must* occasionally adopt such. Nevertheless, we reckon it a good maxim, That no error is fully confuted till we have seen not only *that* it is an error, but how it became one; till finding that it clashes with the principles of truth established in our own mind, we find also in what way it had seemed to harmonise with the principles of truth established in that other mind, perhaps so unspeakably superior to ours. Treated by this method, it still appears to us, according to the old saying, that the errors of a wise man are literally more instructive than the truths of a fool. For the wise man travels in lofty, far-seeing regions; the fool, in low-lying, high-fenced lanes: retracing the footsteps of the former, to discover where he deviated, whole provinces of the Universe are laid open to us; in the path of the latter, granting even that he have not deviated at all, little is laid open to us but two wheel-ruts and two hedges.

On these grounds we reckon it more profitable, in almost any case, to have to do with men of depth than with men of shallowness: and were it possible, we would read no book that was not written by one of the former class; all members of which we would love and venerate, how perverse soever they might seem to us at first; nay, though, after the fullest investigation, we still found many things to pardon in them.

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Such of our readers as at all participate in this predilection will not blame us for bringing them acquainted with Novalis, a man of the most indisputable talent, poetical and philosophical; whose opinions, extraordinary, nay, altogether wild and baseless as they often appear, are not without a strict coherence in his own mind, and will lead any other mind, that examines them faithfully, into endless considerations; opening the strangest inquiries, new truths, or new possibilities of truth, a whole unexpected world of thought, where, whether for belief or denial, the deepest questions await us.

In what is called reviewing such a book as this, we are aware that to the judicious craftsman two methods present themselves. The first and most convenient is, for the Reviewer to perch himself resolutely, as it were, on the shoulder of his Author, and therefrom to show as if he commanded him and looked down on him by natural superiority of stature. Whatsoever the great man says or does, the little man shall treat with an air of knowingness and light condescending mockery; professing, with much covert sarcasm, that this and that other is beyond *his* comprehension, and cunningly asking his readers if they comprehend it! Herein it will help him mightily, if, besides description, he can quote a few passages, which, in their detached state, and taken most probably in quite a wrong acceptation of the words, shall sound strange, and, to certain hearers, even absurd; all which will be easy enough, if he have any handiness in the business, and address the right audience; truths, as this world goes, being true only for those that have *some* understanding of them; as, for instance, in the Yorkshire Wolds, and Thames Coal-ships, Christian men enough might be found, at this day, who, if you read them the Thirty-ninth of the *Principia*, would 'grin intelligence from ear to ear.' On the other hand, should our Reviewer meet with any passage, the wisdom of which, deep, plain and palpable to the simplest, might cause misgivings in the reader, as if here were a man of half-unknown endowment, whom perhaps it were better to wonder at than laugh at, our

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Reviewer either suppresses it, or citing it with an air of meritorious candour, calls upon his Author, in a tone of command and encouragement, to lay aside his transcendental crotchets, and write always thus, and *he* will admire him. Whereby the reader again feels comforted; proceeds swimmingly to the conclusion of the 'Article,' and shuts it with a victorious feeling, not only that he and the Reviewer understand this man, but also that, with some rays of fancy and the like, the man is little better than a living mass of darkness.

In this way does the small Reviewer triumph over great Authors; but it is the triumph of a fool. In this way too does he recommend himself to certain readers, but it is the recommendation of a parasite, and of no true servant. The servant would have spoken truth, in this case; truth, that it might have profited, however harsh: the parasite glozes his master with sweet speeches, that he may filch applause, and certain 'guineas per shet,' from him; substituting for ignorance which was harmless, error which is not so. And yet to the vulgar reader, naturally enough, that flattering unction is full of solacement. In fact, to a reader of this sort few things can be more alarming than to find that his own little Parish, where he lived so snug and absolute, is, after all, *not* the whole Universe; that beyond the hill which screened his house from the east wind, and grew his kitchen-vegetables so sweetly, there are other hills and other hamlets, nay, mountains and towered cities; with all which, if he would continue to pass for a geographer, he must forthwith make himself acquainted. Now this Reviewer, often his fellow Parishioner, is a safe man; leads him pleasantly to the hill-top; shows him that indeed there are, or seem to be, other expanses, these too of boundless extent: but with only cloud mountains, and *fatamorgana* cities; the true character of that region being Vacuity, or at best a stony desert tenanted by Gryphons and Chimeras.

Surely, if printing is not, like courtier speech, 'the art of *concealing* thought,' all this must be blamable enough. Is it

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the Reviewer's real trade to be a pander of laziness, self-conceit and all manner of contemptuous stupidity on the part of his reader; carefully ministering to these propensities; carefully fencing-off whatever might invade that fool's-paradise with news of disturbance? Is he the priest of Literature and Philosophy, to interpret their mysteries to the common man; as a faithful preacher, teaching him to understand what is adapted for his understanding, to reverence what is adapted for higher understandings than his? Or merely the lackey of Dulness, striving for certain wages, of pudding or praise, by the month or quarter, to perpetuate the reign of presumption and triviality on earth? If the latter, will he not be counselled to pause for an instant, and reflect seriously, whether starvation were worse or were better than such a dog's-existence?

Our reader perceives that we are for adopting the second method with regard to Novalis; that we wish less to insult over this highly-gifted man, than to gain some insight into him; that we look upon his mode of being and thinking as very singular, but not therefore necessarily very contemptible; as a matter, in fact, worthy of examination, and difficult beyond most others to examine wisely and with profit. Let no man expect that, in this case, a Samson is to be led forth, blinded and manacled, to make him sport. Nay, might it not, in a spiritual sense, be death, as surely it would be damage, to the small man himself? For is not this habit of sneering at all greatness, of forcibly bringing down all greatness to his own height, one chief cause which keeps that height so very inconsiderable? Come of it what may, we have no refreshing dew for the small man's vanity in this place; nay, rather, as charitable brethren, and fellow-sufferers from that same evil, we would gladly lay the sickle to that reed-grove of self-conceit, which has grown round him, and reap it altogether away, that so the true figure of the world, and his own true figure, might no longer be utterly hidden from him. Does this our brother, then, refuse to accompany

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us, without such allurements? He must even retain our best wishes, and abide by his own hearth.

Farther, to the honest few who still go along with us on this occasion, we are bound in justice to say that, far from looking down on Novalis, we cannot place either them or ourselves on a level with him. To explain so strange an individuality, to exhibit a mind of this depth and singularity before the minds of readers so foreign to him in every sense, would be a vain pretension in us. With the best will, and after repeated trials, we have gained but a feeble notion of Novalis for ourselves: his Volumes come before us with every disadvantage; they are the posthumous works of a man cut off in early life, while his opinions, far from being matured for the public eye, were still lying crude and disjointed before his own; for most part written down in the shape of detached aphorisms, 'none of them,' as he says himself, 'untrue or unimportant to his own mind,' but naturally requiring to be remodelled, expanded, compressed, as the matter cleared up more and more into logical unity; at best but fragments of a great scheme which he did not live to realise. If his Editors, Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, declined commenting on these Writings, we may well be excused for declining to do so. 'It cannot be our purpose here,' says Tieck, 'to recommend the following Works, or to judge them; probable as it must be that any judgment delivered at this stage of the matter would be a premature and unripe one: for a spirit of such originality must first be comprehended, his will understood, and his loving intention felt and replied to; so that not till his ideas have taken root in other minds, and brought forth new ideas, shall we see rightly, from the historical sequence, what place he himself occupied, and what relation to his country he truly bore.'

Meanwhile, Novalis is a figure of such importance in German Literature, that no student of it can pass him by without attention. If we must not attempt interpreting this Work for our readers, we are bound at least to point out its exist-

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ence, and according to our best knowledge direct such of them as take an interest in the matter how to investigate it farther for their own benefit. For this purpose, it may be well that we leave our Author to speak chiefly for himself; subjoining only such expositions as cannot be dispensed with for even verbal intelligibility, and as we can offer on our own surety with some degree of confidence. By way of basis to the whole inquiry, we prefix some particulars of his short life; a part of our task which Tieck's clear and graceful Narrative, given as 'Preface to the Third Edition,' renders easy for us.

Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known in Literature by the pseudonym 'Novalis,' was born on the 2nd of May 1772, at a country residence of his family in the Grafschaft of Mansfeld, in Saxony. His father, who had been a soldier in youth, and still retained a liking for that profession, was at this time Director of the Saxon Salt-works; an office of some considerable trust and dignity. Tieck says, 'he was a vigorous, unweariedly active man, of open, resolute character, a true German. His religious feelings made him a member of the Herrnhut Communion; yet his disposition continued gay, frank, rugged and downright.' The mother also was distinguished for her worth; 'a pattern of noble piety and Christian mildness'; virtues which her subsequent life gave opportunity enough for exercising.

On the young Friedrich, whom we may continue to call Novalis, the qualities of his parents must have exercised more than usual influence; for he was brought up in the most retired manner, with scarcely any associate but a sister one year older than himself, and the two brothers that were next to him in age. A decidedly religious temper seems to have infused itself, under many benignant aspects, over the whole family: in Novalis especially it continued the ruling principle through life; manifested no less in his scientific speculations than in his feelings and conduct. In childhood he is said to

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have been remarkable chiefly for the entire, enthusiastic affection with which he loved his mother; and for a certain still, secluded disposition, such that he took no pleasure in boyish sports, and rather shunned the society of other children. Tieck mentions that, till his ninth year, he was reckoned nowise quick of apprehension; but at this period, strangely enough, some violent biliary disease, which had almost cut him off, seemed to awaken his faculties into proper life, and he became the readiest, eagerest learner in all branches of his scholarship.

In his eighteenth year, after a few months of preparation in some *Gymnasium*, the only instruction he appears to have received in any public school, he repaired to Jena; and continued there for three years; after which he spent one season in the Leipzig University, and another, 'to complete his studies,' in that of Wittenberg. It seems to have been at Jena that he became acquainted with Friedrich Schlegel; where also, we suppose, he studied under Fichte. For both of these men he conceived a high admiration and affection; and both of them had, clearly enough, 'a great and abiding effect on his whole life.' Fichte, in particular, whose lofty eloquence and clear calm enthusiasm are said to have made him irresistible as a teacher,¹ had quite gained Novalis to his doctrines; indeed the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which, as we are told of the latter, 'he studied with unwearied zeal,' appears to have been the groundwork of all his future speculations in Philosophy. Besides these metaphysical inquiries, and the usual attainments in classical literature, Novalis seems 'to have devoted himself with ardour to the Physical Sciences, and to Mathematics the basis of them': at an early period of his life he had read much of History 'with extraordinary eagerness'; Poems had from of old been 'the delight of his

¹ Schelling, we have been informed, gives account of Fichte and his *Wissenschaftslehre* to the following effect: 'The Philosophy of Fichte was like lightning; it appeared only for a moment, but it kindled a fire which will burn forever.'