

The Whole Truth, by T. Swann Harding, on page 570

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Soliloquy on Madness

AS one looks back over 1928, the world, as usual, seems to have been more mad than sane—madder, as a whole, than in, say, 1914-1918, for that was an era of real insanity, while our madness is just a focussed reflection of the irrationality that smokes somewhere in every brain. They are preserving the leading newspapers and magazines of 1928 with a paraffin glaze so that scholars of 2028 will be able to tell what we were like. A flattering endeavor, but a little mad. They will get the news and the opinions, but we were not really like that. There is a discrepancy between the solemn assumptions of the press and the facts. One reads that the Americans thought this and the British that and the Chinese something else again. Or that New York is rich and Vienna poor; or that the French mind is so and so and the German quite different.

Not false, of course, but misleading. These racial distinctions are not the vital ones. The great resemblances are human instincts and human ideals that sweep round the equator and north and south of it. The great differences are within nations. The spiritual brother of the Kentucky mountaineer is in Albania; yours perhaps is a Chinese nationalist or a German stockbroker. Nine-tenths of ethnology and social description is mingled with illusion. We are individual units intensely conditioned by our humanity, and only superficially differentiated by immediate circumstance. It is only language, table manners, and sets of second-rate ideas that make the barbarian in New York a stranger to the barbarian in Mongolia, or savages in the slums or the back country unaware of their kinship to anthropological savages.

We are so essentially gregarious that we exaggerate every tie with circumstance. The actual differences in a mingled group in a railroad car are immense, almost immeasurable. The individuals think about the same things because they happen to be living in the same stream of consciousness, they share, of course, the same instincts, but in the grips they take upon life they might almost be different species. In taste, in temperament, in what they read, in what they want, in the types of humanity morally considered, they differ more than the Roman and the Eskimo in manners and knowledge. We are bound together in our societies only by our habits, and our sole intellectual unity exists in an apparatus of facts and opinion largely alien to ourselves. Education, the press, books, preachers, parents, say, Think this and that because it is true. What really is true is that most truth is true for us only because we accept it. Wipe out books and memory by some cataclysmic miracle and start civilized man again with his tools, his engines, his utilities, but no remembered knowledge or opinion, and what would his trained mind do? An interesting, if impossible, controlled experiment. How quickly societies and nations would fall apart. Like would seek like, but they would not be the same likes as now. Families would instantly split beyond the most fortunate of intimate circles. Character, temperament, and desire would be the only cements of a new association. With the dropping away of the fabric of accepted opinion and accredited knowledge in which we do all our thinking, our minds, naked of intellectual clothing, yet still minds, with the faculty of logic, and the forms of imagination, would instantly begin to weave a new texture. They would not stay naked long.

Ineradicable Plant

By VIRGINIA MOORE

“ROOT it out,” they say,
“Branch, bole, and seed;
Treat growing love
As if it were a weed.

“Tear it with your two hands
And cast it forth to die.
Why should you love this man—
Why?”

Advisors, well-wishers, and friends,
You that despoil:
These are spirit roots
In spirit soil.

First of the Moderns*

By MARY M. COLUM

OSCAR WILDE, who at times was one of the most illuminating of critics, had a few words to say about biographers that are even more pertinent in our day than in his. “Every great man has his disciples, but it is always Judas who writes the biography. Cheap editions of great books are delightful, but cheap editions of great men are absolutely detestable.” It can certainly be said of Ludwig’s “Life of Goethe” that it is no cheap edition of a great man; Ludwig is no Judas intent on betraying a great man of genius by trying to turn him into a creature of common clay, no Philistine, somehow bent on insinuating his own complexes, his own defects, or his own vices, into his hero, for the satisfaction of fellow-Philistines. “The great men have their great air,” said Thackeray, who had the great air himself and knew what it was. Certainly Ludwig leaves Goethe his great air; when he has done with him Goethe is great in heart, and mind, and achievement, though, to be sure, the mind and achievement elude Herr Ludwig in a way they did not elude that far greater biographer of Goethe, George Henry Lewes. For Lewes not only knew his material better, but was a fine literary critic, whereas Ludwig is that sort of indifferent literary critic who generally, though not always, knows the obviously good, but who can be taken in by the mediocre if it expresses some creditable emotion, or some popularly recognized moral sentiment, and is completely baffled when subtle perceptions or intuitions are required. Now George Henry Lewes’s has remained after all these years one of the classics of biography: in fact, as the life of a great writer, it has yet to be surpassed in this age of biography. In spite of the fact that Lewes, like a great many English and American writers, theoretically conceived criticism as a sort of branch of pedagogy—a conception still very common—there is hardly a dull line in his book, whereas Ludwig, even in this abridged English translation, is often tedious and longwinded. A certain amount of this tediousness is due to the quality of some of the poetry he quotes, and to the astoundingly bad translations of it appended. Outside the poetry the translation of the biography itself appears to be excellent.

Now it happens that not all the work of Goethe was great: he was the first very great writer in a civilization that spiritually and intellectually was incompletely developed, in a culture that just previous to him and Lessing and Herder had tried to make itself into an imitation of the French. Great as Goethe was, both his inheritance and his environment sometimes got the upper hand of his genius, and he indulged himself in that vice of cultures that have not yet come into their own—uplift—and that excess of *Gemütlichkeit* which is the German accompaniment of provincialism and Babbity. Goethe, to be sure, was so great a poet that these lapses of his make no great inroads on our consciousness, but unfortunately it happens that Herr Ludwig delights particularly in that sort of poetry of Goethe’s which represents a cross between the worst verse of Emerson’s and the writings of the late Dr. Frank Crane. When certain indifferent poems of Goethe’s are first of all quoted very seriously by Ludwig, and then turned into the following sort of verse by the translator, Ethel Colburn Mayne,

*GOETHE: the History of a Man. By EMIL LUDWIG. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons. 1928.

This Week



“Goethe: The History of a Man.”

Reviewed by MARY M. COLUM.

“The Reign of the House of Rothschild.”

Reviewed by JOHN M. S. ALLISON.

“Montrose.”

Reviewed by WALLACE NOTESTEIN.

“Old Ireland.”

Reviewed by FRANK MONAGHAN.

“Raiders of the Deep.”

Reviewed by JOHN CARTER.

“Stride of Man.”

Reviewed by BERNARD DE VOTO.

Composing Room.

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Next Week, or Later

John Bunyan.

By ARTHUR COLTON.

Better or worse? The question is whether we should be better off if we sought our own moral affinities without the drag-back of civilization which is now so often a compulsion by print, by things read and accepted. The question, at least, is not fanciful. Too much reading, too many books and newspapers, may, it is conceivable, be worse than none at all. Much depends upon human nature. If it is as futile and foolish and incoherent as a good many just now are professing to believe, this great expansion of accepted opinion by the machine-made extensions of culture is going to make a poor thing worse,—it is mass production of emptiness.

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A God who in external force consisteth,
One who the All around his finger twisteth!
Nay—he is blent with every cosmic motion,
Nature and He so fused in deep devotion
That all which lives and moves and is in him,
His energy, his mind, fill to the brim

our nerves are not only excruciated, but we get a dismal feeling that neither the author nor the translator of the book really know anything about poetry. Then when we find her turning those couple of lines in which Goethe expresses a momentary disgust with the German language—

Deutsch zu schreiben. Und so verderb' ich unglücklicher
Dichter
In dem schlechtesten Stoff leider nun Leben und Kunst
into—

German author—and so, ill-fated, as poet I squander
Life and art in the worst medium that language has known

we are constrained to ask if there is any reason why, instead of this confused jumble, she did not translate the lines literally, and for what reason did she add the words "that language has known," which are not in the original lines and which actually confuse the rendering. Why should she not indeed have turned all the verse into presentable literal prose instead of into a sort of fake poetry? In extenuation of any translator of Goethe it has to be said that he is one of the most untranslatable of all great poets, that the very kinship of the German language with the English adds to the difficulty, for the words that seem exactly to correspond to the German are those which in English too frequently have "lost their soul," to use an expression of Tagore's. It is fatally easy to turn Goethe into that very sort of language in which certain of the more popular sublimities are expounded in the daily papers by transcendental columnists. What would we not give for even a partly adequate translation of "Faust"? But, after listening to the Theatre Guild's version, one wonders if that masterpiece is not destined to remain forever a closed book to those who do not know German. And it seems forever impossible to render into English those simple, magical poems of Goethe's like "An den Mond," or "Heidenröslein," or "Meine Ruh ist Hin," or "Wie Herrlich Leuchtet Mir die Natur," in which he took the rugged, powerful German language and tuned it so that it became an instrument for expressing the most subtle ecstasy, the most airy emotion. When we look for the translation of this last poem, which happens to be quoted by Ludwig, we find the lines, *O Erd', O Sonne, O Glück, O Lust*, translated into "O Earth, O Sunlight, O Bliss, O Zest," and one vainly tries to comprehend what twist of the mind could make a woman, who is a distinguished *littérateur*, who must have read some of the greatest poetry in the world, translate *Lust* by *zest*, even if the dictionary does give "zest" as one of the translations of the word. Is it merely that a sense of words, a delight in words, is the most mysterious of all literary gifts?

But if we distrust Ludwig and his translator as interpreters of Goethe's poetry, we must admit at the same time that the book is to some extent what Ludwig claims for it; it is within measurable distance of being "the history of a man," for Ludwig is a high-class journalist with a strong scent for the human interest in every man's story. That it falls short of being what he claims for it is due mainly to two or three causes—he has a defective literary sense, an inadequate experience of literature, and his knowledge of his subject is not real enough—it is at bottom merely a journalist's knowledge, and does not partake of that intensity which is the hallmark of real knowledge. We get the impression that he employed a corps of stenographers and researchers to unearth for him all the information about Goethe that could be acquired, then flung himself on the material thus assembled, worked himself up about it, sometimes rather hysterically, and attached to each incident of Goethe's life some suitable quotation from his verse that might illustrate it. We have the feeling that with more pains, a profounder sense of psychology that would have toned down his overestimation of every silly love-affair, with a little less of the highfalutin, a little more critical use of his conscious mind, this book of Ludwig's might have had the unique merit among contemporary biographies of being a convincing history of the external influences that went to the making of a great writer.

He missed a unique opportunity, for there exists

more information about Goethe's life than that of any other writer of the first rank. Every calf-love affair of his has been chronicled, and its effect on his soul solemnly investigated and pondered over. A perfectly astounding number of his letters are extant; there has been handed down both written and oral opinions of him by very many of the great men of his time; practically all of his performances as Minister to the Duke of Weimar, including the detail of his efficient action in putting out a fire, are known. Then Goethe has written a great deal about himself, he has left behind in "Wahrheit und Dichtung" what is perhaps the nearest thing to an autobiography that a poet has produced; he has written about himself also more or less directly in "Wilhelm Meister" and in "Werther." There is, indeed, marvellous material for revealing what sort of influences in life and literature, what sort of relationships, made this man, who was the greatest German writer and one of the great—I believe, indeed, the greatest—influence in modern literature.

Goethe was one of those rare people who had the good fortune to live the ideal life for a writer. If one were to invent some idealistic conception of all the elements of life and experience that would naturally develop a man into a great writer, it would be hard to improve on those experiences and those elements that went to make up Goethe's life. To begin with, he was fortunate in the sort of inheritance he received from his mother and the sort of education he received from his father, he was fortunate in all the people he met—very early he met Herder, that wonderful critic who knew even better than Lessing the path that German literature was destined to take; he showed Goethe, who as a young man had tried to Frenchify himself, that the foundations of German literature must be built on the soil of its folk-songs and inherited tales, and that the artificialized culture that well-meaning *savants* and admirers of foreign refinements had palmed off on Germany was being the ruin of its literature. Whether it is the fault of Herr Ludwig's stenographers and researchers, or whether it is all in the part left out in this translation, the author pays but the scantiest attention to the literary influences that went to make Goethe. What he has to say about them are the merest commonplaces that might be found better done in a dollar history of German literature.

Just before Goethe's time there had taken place in Germany the usual squabbles between critics that herald the dawn of a new literature, or a new movement in literature. There was Gottsched, a critic who represented a genteel version of classicism, hated English literature, and had a tremendous quarrel with Bodmer and Breitinger who, to some extent, represented Romanticism. There were many other critics, but great revealing criticism in Germany only came in with Lessing and Herder who, though men of very opposite tendencies, really worked on paths that led to the same goal—the creation of a genuine German literature. Lessing, in a way, is a sort of model literary critic; he had but few prejudices and these of the right kind; he had an equal love for the great in all schools of literature; his only real prejudices were against fake and imitation and insincerity. He was an Aristotelian—in fact the only genuine Aristotelian in criticism that I can remember—and, at the same time, he loved Shakespeare; in those days it took profound penetration to regard the Greek dramatists and Shakespeare as equally great.

It is diverting to remember that the third critic who undertook to point out a path for German literature was Frederick the Great: like almost everyone with an interest in literature the King fancied himself as a literary critic. He perpetrated a work of criticism in the French language called "De la Littérature Allemande," a work of astounding ignorance but with a certain amount of shrewd wisdom. Frederick was genuinely interested in literature, but he had a very confused and limited knowledge of it which seemed to him, as it has seemed to many self-appointed critics since, no drawback to the writing of criticism—in fact, critics of Frederick's caliber, like the poor, are always with us. Strange to say, like Gottsched, Frederick was inclined to the genteel, and he sometimes got the canons of the book of etiquette mixed up with the canons of literary criticism. Like Gottsched, he did not think Shakespeare's writings well-bred; he pronounced Goethe's "Götz von Berlichingen" a vulgar imitation of Shakespeare, and naively announced that the great days of literature in Germany had yet to come, but

that he would not live to see them. He did not realize that the great days were on him, and that they had begun with the author of "Götz von Berlichingen." But if Frederick's criticism meant little to German literature, his victories meant a great deal, and they had a powerfully inspiring effect on Goethe, and so it can be said that the formative influences on the young Goethe's work were Frederick, Herder, and Lessing—Frederick with his victories, Lessing with his devotion to ancient classical and to English literature, and Herder with his devotion to folk-literature and to English literature.

Later on, undoubtedly, Herder's criticism became woolly and boring, but how fiery and creative were his early ideas and his early criticism! "Do not be surprised," said he, "that a young Lapp who does not know his letters, has never been to school, and hardly has a god, sings better than Major Kleist. For the Lapp sang his song on the wing, as he was gliding over the snow with his reindeer, impatient to see Lake Orre where his sweetheart lived, but Major Kleist made his song by imitation from a book." This sentence, characteristically enough, Ludwig does not quote. But, simple and lyrical as it sounds, and familiar as the idea behind it is to us moderns, it played its part in ushering into the world a new school in literature—the subjective school. Herder was a great influence in making Goethe that, until his time, rare figure in literature, the subjective writer. For who were the subjective writers before Goethe? If we omit the Confession-writers like Augustine, they seem to be limited to Catullus, Petrarch, perhaps, and perhaps one or two minor Elizabethans. But since Goethe's day we have had too few of the other sort of writers—the objective writers. He gave to posterity the recipe for writing entertainingly about themselves, and posterity has wearied the world by doing the recipe to death.

"Study the superstitions and the sagas of the forefathers," said Herder to Goethe, and the saying passed not only into the soul of Goethe, but also into the soul of Wagner. And Goethe, in studying the legends of the forefathers, attached himself particularly to the legend of Doctor Faustus, who sold his soul to the devil, and he made it into the eternal history of the struggle of the creative mind, and he made of it also the history of modern man and the strivings of modern man. Following Herder also, he became a collector of folk-songs; he got their rhythm into his blood, their whimsical nonsense-rhymes into his measures. "All girls," said he fatuously, "who wish to find favor with me shall learn them and sing them." So, like the Lapp, he began to sing his songs on the wing as he rode to see his sweetheart, and he got into them the earth and the sunshine, the clouds and the mountains, and the lyricism and spontaneity of the folk-song—

Wie herrlich leuchtet
Mir die Natur!
Wie glänzt die Sonne!
Wie lacht die Flur.

O Lieb', . . . O Liebe!
So golden schön!
Wie Morgenwolken
Auf jenen Höhen.

Ich singe wie der Vogel singt, "I sing as the bird sings," he wrote in his poem of the old Minstrel. He did indeed. And it seems as if the very earth and sun long for a poet of Goethe's caliber once more.

He was the last of the great universal geniuses, someone has said of him. When, at the age of twenty-six, the young Duke of Weimar invited him to his court, and he became Minister and Chancellor, he proved the many-sidedness of his gifts; he became a real statesman, an able economist, an accomplished diplomat. Some writers on Goethe have claimed to see in some of his work regrets that he spent so much of his life helping to govern a state, and certain lines in his poem of the old Minstrel are pointed out as showing that he thought such things were not a poet's business. But I beg to differ with these critics. If a man is a great genius every experience helps in his growth; the minor writers may have to be parsimonious of their energies, but for the great men there has to be the great way; every detail of Goethe's life at Weimar became grist to his mill. He never could learn much from books, he said himself; life taught him everything; and if he did not do much writing during his first years in Weimar, he was learning all those things, acquiring all that wisdom, that went into his later books. And what a marvellous place Weimar was to