

GOETHE'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE
PRESENT CENTURY*

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AN adequate treatment of this theme implies a full grasp of Goethe's totality, a real perception of the world's problems, and the possession of some formula for solving them—a demand which might well tax the powers of a Miltonian archangel.

The Summer-Number of the *Yale Review*, issued from New Haven, Connecticut, and edited by that eminent statesman, Wilbur L. Cross, contains a notable article by Thomas Mann. A superficial reading of this contribution might leave the impression that Mann has fixed upon Goethe the stigma of that most blighting of all epithets, *bourgeois*. I believe that this is the first time that Goethe has been described as essentially "middle-class." If we accept the ordinary, rather than the strictly Marxian, connotation of "bourgeois," we think of a smug acceptance of custom, a longing for fat comforts, the lack of a sense of honor and respect for spiritual values, a narrow common-sense, coupled with a tendency to be governed by cheap sentiment rather than by reason. From such a charge we (and, I think, Mann, also) would at once acquit our subject. Mann's chief onus rests on the charge that Goethe defended society, and was poisoned by romantic susceptibilities. I believe he would never have applied that damning adjective, were Germany not sunk to a deep level of misery and despair, and fairly spoiling for a cataclysm; for some desperate escape from utter strangulation. It can look only toward violence—and Heaven knows we have had enough of that!

Every nation needs a "perfect" hero—and Goethe has undergone the doom of beatification—but his personality is a pyramid built on too broad a base to be overturned. Certain unique personages, like "the primal duties," "shine aloft like stars"; their "Laurels are evergreen, and not to be blasted." Different parties may fight each other to the death on literary questions, but they unite in reverence for this great leader. It is much like the

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case in music, where the bitterest enemies pay common homage to Beethoven, or, in sculpture, where various schools agree to pause at any moment in their warfare, to admit the supreme achievements of ancient Greek art. Even Thomas Mann cannot speak of him except with love, and that prince of debunkers, Professor du Bois Reymond, called him "der tiefe Ergründer und kluge Berater des menschlichen Herzens"; and his works, "ein Fittig zum Flug in die Gefilde des ewig Wahren und Schönen."

In estimating Goethe's Significance for the Present Century, we, as a body of language-specialists, may well begin with his influence in the field of letters. The plague of our present age is the crude, swinish naiveté of neurotic neologists—even our most venerated monthlies occasionally go *Police Gazette*. "Art," says Thomas Mann, "should offer what is healthy and full of zest." In his calm maturity, Goethe observed: "Folks are beginning to call the presentation of high-minded acts and feelings tame, and they are trying their hand at all sorts of crazy experiments. They call this sort of thing piquant." For young writers he demanded "an ethical foundation, and higher purpose." "The inner content of the object to be elaborated is the beginning and end of art;" "I pay all honor to rhyme and rhythm, but the really deep and effective, the truly formative and inspiring part of a poet's work is that which remains after it has been translated into prose;" "all talent is wasted if it be spent on an unworthy object." "Das Richtige ist nicht sechs Pfennig wert, wenn es weiter nichts zu bringen hat."

He went through the whole process: in *Werther*, "Say what you will, any observance of rules will utterly destroy the real feeling for Nature, and the real expression of Nature":—and, in later life:

Nature and Art seem ofttimes to be foes,
But, ere we know it, join in making peace;
My own repugnance, too, has come to cease,
And each an equal power attractive shows.

Let us but make an end to dull repose;
When Art we serve in toil without release,
Through stated hours, absolved from vain caprice,
Nature once more within us freely glows.

All culture, as I hold, must take this course;
Unbridled spirits ever strive in vain
Perfection's radiant summit to attain.

Who seeks great ends must straitly curb his force:
 In narrow bounds the Master's skill shall show,
 And only Law true Freedom can bestow.

As Goethe remarked to Henry Crabb Robinson: "Werther praised Homer while he was in his senses, and Ossian while he was going mad." As a prophet of Hellenism, Goethe approaches our dearest American heritage, the Great New England Tradition. "Ancient literature is not classical because it is old," said he, "but because it is strong, fresh, joyful, and wholesome." There can be no development of sound culture without historical foundations, and a degree of historic continuity. Our time cultivates an ephemeral whimsicality in letters as in its furniture—compared with self-respecting Colonial designs.

Whom should I meet in Rome but a Chinaman! All of its build-
 ings,

Ancient and modern, he deemed heavy, oppressive, and dull.
 "Pitiful creatures!" sighed he, "not knowing our structures of
 beauty:

Slender pillars of wood, holding a roof like a tent;
 Lattice, and cardboard, and gilding, with intricate carvings and
 colors:

These are the things that delight natures refined and mature!"
 —There, thought I, is the type of many an arrogant dreamer,

Who, with his airy conceits, ventures to challenge and flout
 Nature's solid pattern; and all that is wholesome and normal

Brands as sickly—that he, sickly himself, may seem sound!
 His artistry was gained by slow and laborious accretion: "Every
bon mot that I utter costs me a purse-full of gold."

Some words as to Goethe's ideals in Education would seem pertinent before this gathering: his appeal to hearty enthusiasm; his hostility to factual Gradgrinds; his demand for feeling, as well as thinking; his firm holding to sentiment as against cheap sentimentality; his insistence on that *Zucht* which has almost evaporated from our modern world—but this matter is too large for discussing here, and calls for volumes for its presentation. Moreover, these volumes have already been written.

The emergent and insistent issue of the Present Century is the Social Problem—in *qua me confiteor mediocriter esse versatum*. It is pretty clear to everyone that we are

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
 The other powerless to be born—

and that a tragic struggle is going on for a revaluation of enthusiasms. "Production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him." The great desideratum is sane thinking. Goethe's world-wisdom was built on deep foundations. As Prof. Münsterberg said, "God and man, nature and the mind, law and freedom, science and art, religion and history, social questions and ethics, were within the range of his earnest study." Goethe sensed, as far as *his* age permitted, the pathological conditions of *our* time:

He took the suffering human race,
He read each wound, each weakness clear;
And struck his finger on the place,
And said: *Thou ailest here, and here!*

How up-to-date sound his words to Eckermann: "Of pure simplicity, not a trace:—Young people are aroused far too soon, and at once whirled into the maelstrom of the times. Money and speed are what the world admires, and for which everyone is keen. Railroads, rapid postal service, steamships and all possible facilities for communication are the things which the world uses to develop itself too hastily, and thereby to stick fast in mediocrity." Our futile and vulgar passion for the Bigger and Better; our speed to get nowhere; the noise and glare of life, have led to a cheapening of all humane values, and to the rule of barbarity—that barbarity whose essence, according to Goethe, is, "dass man das Vortreffliche nicht anerkennt." On the one hand, wolfish hunger, cold, unemployment—on the other, Rheingold-trains, new palatial ocean-liners, Grand Hotels, the insolent self-assertion of towering sky-scrappers, the irresponsible squanderings of Hollywood. "Magnificent buildings and rooms," said Goethe, "are utterly repugnant to me. In a magnificent apartment, such as I had in Karlsbad, I found myself immediately lazy and inactive." Billions for cement-highways and new cars; gladiatorial combats of foot-ball; radio-cities, men-of-war, fleets of air-ships; determined organized minorities seizing society by the throat; demagogues and political charlatans; popular magazines, with their confused vomit of text and advertisements, and their "continued on page 318;" the intolerance of variation and new ways of thought; the screaming for publicity and promotion (in which Goethe never took part)—all these things are with us, and of us.

Goethe, as Mr. Fife has happily expressed it, is the prophet "of

a free and self-contained individualism." This he harmonized with grandiose ideals for Society, as a whole. For him, the first step in social progress was the shattering of the fetters of human stupidity. A deadly standardization was repugnant: "many things can and must maintain a place in our midst which would greatly like to put each other out of business." Like Klopstock and Wordsworth, he experienced a bitter disillusion concerning the French Revolution, when it was plain that the old evils had come back, under a new disguise. He came, finally, to the preaching of a new Social Order: "Let not the solitary man think that he can accomplish anything!" If our present civilization breaks down anywhere, it is in the failure to accept collective responsibility. "The new, socialized world, the world of planning and coöperation will come," says Thomas Mann. Mr. Hoover deplures anything that will "destroy the traditional American system."—

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be.

America, in its development, destroyed a very venerable traditional British system—the whole territory of human history is an Ariccian Forest:

Those trees in whose grim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign,
The priest who slew the slayer,
And shall himself be slain.

Goethe turned from the ideal of sheer individualism to that of a community and of coöperation. The chaotic twaddle which makes the bulk of the *Wanderjahre* contains rich grains of purest gold refined. It points to a Universal Ethical League of Nations; to a society without sharp cleavage, or a war of interests; to the husbanding and coördination of all the resources of Nature. "Every undertaking," remarks Goethe, "is beset by so many obstacles that it requires the whole force of an individual, in fact, that of various persons, in order to arrive at a desired goal." Property is to be of no more importance than common possessions: labor to be carried on to the sound of music, and with gay festivities.

In the field of practical politics, we notice that the fine frenzies of *Sturm und Drang* were tempered by years of devoted service to the State of Weimar, and the study of the serene Greek spirit.

Herman Grimm said: "He always considered his civic duties as the highest and most binding, and unreservedly put all other subjects of thought and action into a secondary place." He recognized, however, that one can exercise worthy influence in other fields: "If a poet," said he, shortly before his death, "has exerted himself throughout his entire life to fighting detrimental prejudices, to removing narrow-minded views, to enlightening the soul of his nation, to purifying its taste, to ennobling its ways of thought and mind—what better could he have done, and how could he show himself a better patriot?" Goethe was against violence as a means of political reform, and had a horror of demagogic agitation and half-baked doctrinaires—"das Absurde der Welt-und Staatesverbesserung." Steadiness, persistence, vigilance were his path to betterment. He regarded personal liberty as a Germanic ideal—which had many noble fruits, and led to many absurdities. "Freedom" he defined as the unimpeded exercise of one's personal capacities: "all that sets the soul free, without giving us self-mastery, is destructive." He, like Uhland, held that

Der Dienst der Freiheit ist ein strenger Dienst.

The quintessence of all republican virtue was to him the ability to make sacrifices. "I am always in favor of strict adherence to law: he who cannot learn how to submit to laws, should withdraw from the territory where they prevail."

Parasitic politics had no place in his world: his political religion was founded on principles, not on self-seeking. He was distinctly hostile to party-aims and party-slogans. He recognized envy as the vice of republics: "whenever anything significant is proposed, straightway appears in its path the commonplace, the opposition." "We never hear more talk about liberty," said he, "than when one party wishes to reduce the other to utter subjection." Goethe frankly challenged the standards of the masses: mob-dictatorship, he held, meant the destruction of human culture. In *Die Aufgeregten* he pointed out the excesses of both sides in the class-struggle. "Nothing is more odious than the majority—for it consists of a few energetic leaders, of pliable rogues, of weak individuals, who can take any color, and of the great mass which trundles along without the slightest idea of what it is all about"; "the majority is easy-going, and falsehood is always an easier thing than truth." In short, he leaned toward an enlightened despotism—though he would

place final state-decisions in the hands of a *majority* of chosen representatives. He perceived that political leadership often meant no more than to exploit the ignorance and weakness of the masses. "State-leadership," he said, "is a very exalted function, which calls for a complete and towering personality." Most "leaders" were concerned with merely mechanical obligations: the State should be an organism for securing the highest possible culture for the individual and for the entire body politic.

The State should make itself secure against attacks from without, but aim at no conquest or control of other nations: its function was the protection of labor, and self-development (I am pleased to note that Thomas Mann has recently advised the Japanese to follow Goethe in their political ideals.) "International relations have no firm basis in morals or law," said he; "one should transcend nationality, and feel for the happiness and sorrows of one's neighbors as though they were one's own." It must not be overlooked that Goethe combined theoretical speculation with practical efficiency—for which du Bois Reymond criticised him, claiming that he should have stuck to the things of the spirit. Such interests as the construction of great public works, the promotion of schools, charitable institutions, roads, buildings, lay close to his heart. He did not lightly forget

. . . dass hier die Welt
So manch Geschöpf in Erdenfesseln hält.

His definition of Democracy agreed with that of Mazzini (which seems to me better, even, than Lincoln's): "The progress of all through all, under the leadership of the best and wisest." At present we seem to be under a Government of Parties, by Parties, and for Parties.

Ethical positions are doubtless more important than political or economic programs. In sex-ethics, it may be conceded that Goethe, like Grover Cleveland, and other great public servants, did not always illustrate the mandates of the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps this matter is not particularly relevant in the discussion of our general subject. At any rate, he declared: "Wo ich aufhöre, sittlich zu sein, habe ich keine Gewalt mehr." He praised restrained, wedded happiness as an ideal, and in the *Wanderjahre* offered a symbolic picture of sanctified family-life.

"To me," said he, "the only things that count are culture and barbarism." By "culture" he meant not embellishment or prestige, but the fullest and freest expression of human capacities. The path ascended from the Useful, to the Truthful, to the Beautiful. "Denken und Tun, das ist die Summe aller Weisheit." His reliance was not upon an idealized humanity, but on sustained, purposeful activity. "We must strive to translate all that is in us into determined action." "Do faithfully and enthusiastically your nearest duty to Society each day." "The efficient man is the one who stirs all about him to creative activity." "We are of account only in so far as we are able to meet the needs of others in a regular and trustworthy way" (a marked contrast to the confident defiance of the *Internationale*, "We have been nought, we shall be All!"). "*Resolut zu leben!*—aware of the preciousness of time, and exploiting every minute; *ohne Hast, ohne Rast*; he even suspended the reading of newspapers: "One is concerned only with doings of other people, and neglects his own immediate duties." This fidelity never tired. In advanced years, still the firm purpose: "*Solange es Tag ist, wollen wir den Kopf schon oben halten.*" "I can say that in those things which Nature assigned me as my daily task I have allowed myself no repose by day or night, and have granted myself no diversions, but have always striven, and investigated, and achieved, as well and as fully as I have been able."

Personal life is a work of art, to be wrought out as severely as an epic. "The first duty on this earth is to size up the career which Fate has determined for us, and to limit our wishes to this." The height of ethics is to love that which one has prescribed for his own good. Goethe adhered to the thesis of that engaging medieval blue-stocking, Hrotsvith of Gandersheim: *homo animal capax disciplinae*. This discipline and renunciation is the substitute for that rush for excitement which marks the Present Century, "Life, when lived well, is always militant and victorious." "Ich hasse alle Pfüscherei wie die Sünde." This doctrine of regularity, and firm principles; of order and honest completion of tasks is as old as the universe:

Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
And the most ancient heavens, through Thee,
are fresh and strong.

To his other doctrines must be added that of *Anmut*, as opposed to

ruthless, selfish utilitarianism—most particularly a lesson for our American people—and the severe loyalty to Truth:

Harmful Truth! I prefer thee still to Error that's helpful:

Truth is able to heal all of the pain it inflicts.

The plausible, accommodating Lavater received the shattering verdict: "Die ganz strenge Wahrheit war nicht seine Sache." Of Platen he said: "He has many brilliant characteristics, but he lacks Love, and so he will never achieve all of which he is capable." Gentle toward the erring, kindly toward sinners, humane toward the inhuman, Goethe represents Aristotle's "Magnanimous Man."

I would add some words about Goethe's Religion—were I not aware that such a discussion violates that massive, concrete-reinforced, open-hearth-steel, ascoloy-metal-coated, 24-bolted, beveled, wedge-blocked *Taboo* which exists in regard to taking this subject into account in a scientific survey: *O, rühre, rühre nicht daran!* It is in no spirit of bravado that I approach this parlous theme:—

L'entreprise, sans doute, || est grande et périlleuse,
J'attaque sur son trône || une reine orgueilleuse.

Professor William McDougall contends that "the wide distribution in time and space of a taboo of any kind affords a strong presumption of its positive value," and I would not offend good taste, nor pain the sensibilities of those who hold, with Natalis Alexander: *Via regia, hoc est Apostolica fides et Sanctorum Patrum doctrina*—but I confess to some sympathy with the wrathful snort of Grandma, in *Miss Lulu Bett*: "Don't you Sh-h-h-h me!". "A social institute that is too fragile to be discussed, seems doomed to be broken." How am I to carry out my commission, if I ignore so vital a factor? Did I not recently insist that two distinguished German visitors should make a long journey to Evanston, to attend divine service in its Methodist Cathedral, in order to witness the crowning exhibition of the high civilization of that academic community?

In a word, Goethe leaned to the secular, and crashed the rusted gates of established doctrines; he refused to recognize that divorce between reason and faith which marks the Present Century. Venerable institutions,

Im Nebelalter jung geworden,
Im Wust von Rittertum and Pfäfferei,

are doing many good works—apart from the solidity of their foundations or the authority of their sanctions. The “impending Millennium,” for example, is still announced, as it has been at short intervals, for twenty centuries—though its ever-reiterated “impedance” is of a sort which could not be sent through the United States Mails without danger of prosecution under the Postal Laws. Personally, I feel that in these matters the future points rather to Goethe or Gibbon, than to Newman, or the Rev. Dr. William A. Sunday. Goethe set little value on inferiority-virtues: “It would hardly be worth while to reach the age of seventy, if all the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” To every claim for long-suffering he would oppose some contrasting virile activity. As The Baal Shem observed, “No man should bend his mind on *not* doing sin: his day should be too full of joyous service.” In the Struggle for Spiritual Existence, Goethe gave a high place to *Ehrfurcht*: “Religion,” he affirmed, “is a powerful thing in its own right, and by it degraded and suffering humanity has again and again brought itself up to higher levels;” “I’m perhaps the only Christian today, though you would make me out a heathen.” He clung pretty closely to historical Christianity and its primal concepts, as exalted and enduring. He believed in Assisting Grace, and that we are saved not only by our own strength, but by the coöperation of everlasting Love; and that

. . . men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.

Prayer should be for “great thoughts and a pure heart,” rather than for material boons; immortality is to be considered, not because of “some legend,” but from the nature of things.

We have, perhaps, an unreasoning feeling that great qualities should approve themselves in great living—and Goethe, in his serene old age, did not fail this test. His Jupiter-like figure, as of a being from a higher world, untouched by earthly sorrows, radiated dignity and power. His eye shone with the life and fire of the spirit; his voice was full and resonant, his memory did not lapse, nor did his activities abate. He kept up his helpful interest in the theater, which he could no longer attend; he read largely, notably from Walter Scott, for whom he had a deep admiration. “Ich leide oft an Beschwerden des Unterleibs, allein der geistige Wille und die

Kraft des obern Teils halten mich im Gange." After a passing stroke, he set himself, with all his powers, to finishing the Fourth Act of *Faust*, and the concluding volume of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. He was the adviser of leaders and princes, surrounded by

. . . that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends.

When the end came, he made no humble confession; received no extreme unction—but passed away in calm majesty, like a Charlemagne, seated on his marble throne of state.