

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Salzburg, March, 1921

IN 1885 Goethe's last surviving descendant, Walther Wolfgang von Goethe, died at Leipzig, two years after the death of his younger brother, Wolfgang Maximilian. The whole of Goethe's estate then became the property of Weimar, his house was thrown open to the public, the collection of his manuscripts was deposited in the Goethearchiv, and the preliminary work for the first complete edition of his writings was begun. In 1887 appeared the first volume of this publication, under the auspices of the Grand Duchess Sophia of Saxony ; and the last appeared in 1919. Now it is finished, in four divisions, of which one contains the creative works, another the scientific writings, a third, in fifteen volumes, the diaries, and the last, in fifty volumes, the letters. In 1885, also, the Goethe Society was founded at Weimar ; and the *Goethe Yearbook*, which had been already appearing since 1880, became the organ of this body. At the same time began a long quiet course of labour, touching in its disinterestedness : a new profession sprang up, that of Goethe-philologist. As some became scientists, historians, and jurists, so now young doctors resolved to spend their whole lives in research among Goethe's manuscripts. They sat in the Archives at Weimar, spring came and soon once more it was autumn, the old Emperor died, his heir ascended the throne, Nietzsche went out of his mind, Bismarck also died, Germany grew rich, they were betrothed, they married, their children grew up, war broke out, and still they sat day after day in the Archives at Weimar reading Goethe's manuscripts. There is in this something fascinating, something worthy of admiration, and also something which is comic and uncanny at the same time. An enormous work has thus been performed. There is hardly any man to-day who knows his own life so exactly in detail as we know Goethe's life. We can account for every day of his life in Weimar and for every hour of a good many days. We know, for nearly every day, when he got up, what verses, in the loneliness of early morning, he scribbled " almost like a sleep-walker " on a scrap of paper, what official memoranda or letters or literary compositions he dictated later to his secretary, walking gravely up and down with his hands clasped behind him, what state of the weather and position of the clouds he observed, what visitors he had and what he discussed with them, whether he went out into the streets or walked in his garden, who lunched with him, what he ate and drank at lunch, whether in the evening he went to Court or had company at home, whether he read aloud or made little Mendelssohn play, whether he was talkative with the merry Zelter or sat taciturn and morose with the worldly-wise Chancellor von Müller. We know what wine he drank and how many bottles, and who prepared for him the dish of *Zeltower Rübchen* which he ate with so much pleasure : even into the depths of the night we know everything, even his alcove has no secrets. The whole life of a man, and so long a life, revealed trait by trait and fixed for ever, from earliest youth to the eighty-third year, would have its charm even were it only that of any average man. But it is the life of a minister of state, whom Napoleon distinguished by an unwonted interest ; of a scientist, who by his discovery of the intermaxillary bone and by his conception of the metamorphosis of plants ranks as one of Darwin's precursors ; of a man familiar with the society of his time ; of a citizen of the world, heaped with honours ; of a favourite of women, who as an old man can still be ardently loved and at the age of seventy-four begs his old Grand Duke to obtain for him the hand of a noble lady of nineteen ; of a world-famous man ; of the greatest of German poets : it is the life of Goethe. What a piece of luck that this single human life which lies thus open before our eyes to its innermost recesses should be the life of that

German who, equally as man and as artist, most interests us ! But there is one remarkable thing : precisely since the unparalleled wonder of this life, so rich and vivid and varied, now madly in love, now heroically renouncing, now that of a wild genius, now almost that of an absurd pedant, always immeasurable, disappearing into myth—since this life in all its breadth, height, and depth was discovered to our astonished eyes, it seems as though no one was left with sufficient courage to undertake an account of the miracle. A new biography of Goethe which should utilise a generation's astonishing work on detail has been wanting. Now at last the courageous man has appeared—Emil Ludwig, the author of *Goethe : Geschichte eines Menschen* (J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, Stuttgart. Three volumes).

It is true that during the whole period there has been no lack of important works on Goethe. But these books, important as they are for the understanding of Goethe's work, remain within the narrow circle of devoted students. None of them is the book on Goethe which the German reader desires. The German wishes, so to speak, to know his great men by sight, to have personal intercourse with them. Their beginnings, their experiences, their habits, all that interests him much more than their actions or their works. The poet interests him infinitely more than the poetry. He would far rather read something about the poet than the poet himself.

Goethe's extraordinary influence, which fascinates afresh each new generation, proceeds directly from his personality far more than from his works. The German yearns for this personality : he desires a book which will give him the exciting romance of Goethe's life. This was what made G. H. Lewes's *Life of Goethe* so welcome to him. The translation has been for almost half a century a German household book (twenty editions have appeared), so beautifully is its story told. But now it is long superseded by the researches of the professional "Goethe-philologists." Also in the meanwhile taste and manners have changed : we are more curious, more insistent. A public man is not allowed to have any secrets from us. Therefore it satisfies us no longer to have his story told : we must have him interviewed. And the great success which Emil Ludwig's book on Goethe has attained is due to the skill with which he has satisfied this desire. It is really a very lively interview with Goethe, an interview carried on from year to year : it is biographical journalism of the highest kind.

Emil Ludwig began his career twenty years ago as a dramatic poet of what was then called "the Neo-Romantic School," in the footsteps of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. He then wrote a very remarkable book on Bismarck, and a book on Wagner which is full of impotent rage and envenomed by the resentment of a whole generation. He was one of the first men in Germany to enter cosmopolitan journalism in the great style. As with prudent step he kept the mean between the traditional manner of the great English correspondents, typified by the *Times* and the *Morning Post*, and the more flexible, vivid, anecdotal style of their Italian colleagues, typified by the *Corriere della Sera* of Milan, his attempt had a great success. All these things contributed very happily to his book on Goethe. One could see that a poet had written it ; one could trace in it the broad synthetic view of the essayist. And the journalist is to be thanked for the fact that never throughout the three thick volumes is the reader bored ; that every phase in Goethe's life, however carefully it may have been prepared, yet appears as a surprise ; that what the reader has long known appears unexpectedly novel and has almost the effect of a *coup de théâtre*. The journalist understands so well the art of making his work readable that the breathless reader does not observe on how solid a basis of work and learning this book, which seems like an exciting novel, reposes. Goethe's personality in all its height, fullness, and depth has never been depicted with so much strength and spirit as here. Never does Goethe become here, as so often in the rabble of biographers, a mere plaster figure ; and while we see all sides of him, the great Philistine and pedant, the rollicking good companion, the careful reckoner, the courtier, statesman and man of the world, the

prudent business man and keen bargainer, the politician, the thinker, the seer, the poet, the man of letters and the journalist, the pursuer of women, in whom even a touch of the *vieux marcheur* is not wanting, and also the honest, happy husband—while we see all this, the dæmonic quality of this incomprehensible existence never disappears from the varied picture.

A sensation of quite a different kind is given by a small volume of letters which Rosa Luxemburg wrote from prison to the wife of her friend, Karl Liebknecht, in her last years before, in 1919, she and Liebknecht were killed together. She was considered in Germany the most dangerous of the Spartacists, a *pétroleuse* of the worst kind, rendered almost irresponsible by hysteria. Even those who were accustomed to read newspapers with some distrust, and who therefore guarded themselves from seeing her as an hyena, could not help feeling a slight shudder at the thought of her. She seemed in any case to be a gross example of the "intellectual," of the typical East-Jewish intellectual in the depths of degeneration. With a little astonishment one now realises from these letters that her heart was responsive to music, to flowers and the singing of birds. Her great passion was Hugo Wolf, and of his disciplined music, restrained almost to hardness, she loved precisely the most tender songs, such as *Blumengruss*, or those which in their purity of line come closest to the classics. We learn also from these letters that she was a great reader; but she will not have Oscar Wilde or Shaw or even Galsworthy; she will not have clever writers at all. If she goes into raptures about Goethe, it is for his simplest, most songlike poems, which keep the spirit of nature in its first freshness and which, as she writes, "rock her in peace, cool her mentally, and make whole her body and soul." But she is at her happiest in the company of birds and flowers. At Wronke a connection of idyllic tenderness begins between her and a certain little blue titmouse which comes regularly to the prisoner's window; and this has a magical effect on the reader. At first, in March, the little titmouse comes daily with its droll "Zizi bā," and Rosa Luxemburg answers, and so they converse until in May the friendly visits suddenly stop. Only after several weeks does the bird come again, but now its "Zizi bā" sounds quite different—"quite short and hurried, three times in succession." She understands now that it has something more important to do. In the interval the blue titmouse has married and must now collect flies for the little family. And while Rosa Luxemburg relates this to her friend (it reads like a poem by Mörike) she remembers how, when she was a schoolgirl of fourteen, she used to make merry over her mother, who swore only by Schiller and the Bible, because her mother believed that King Solomon understood the speech of the animals. "But now," she writes, "I am King Solomon, I also understand the speech of the birds and beasts." At Christmas she lies in prison on a mattress as hard as a stone. After ten o'clock at night her light must be out, but she can never fall asleep before one. "And then I dream of many things in the darkness and I smile through the darkness at life." Underneath, in heavy boots that grate harshly on the wet sand, the sentry goes up and down, but the prisoner believes that she hears in each harsh step "a little beautiful song of life." For it is her "secret" to go through life always "as over a gay meadow," or, as she expresses it another time, "in a star-covered cloak." She concentrates this faith in life in the sublime counsel, "Never forget to look around you, and then you will always become good again."

If the woman who wrote this had not been sitting in a cell but had been standing instead on a political platform she would have been considered an hysterical hyena. Politics must be a funny business.

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