

BESITZ UND GEMEINGUT

WOLFGANG GOETHE. *By Georg Brandes. Translated from the Danish by Allen W. Porterfield. Two volumes. 12mo. 991 pages. Nicholas L. Brown. \$10.*

DR BRANDES has in this biography remembered what Goethe counsels the biographer not to forget—that succeeding generations have a flimsy idea of preceding periods; that nothing is to be assumed, everything is to be related. We should, however, welcome a consideration of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, fuller than the slender chapter which Dr Brandes vouchsafes us, and are defrauded in the absence of any but cursory allusions to Goethe's letters, essays, and reviews. Furthermore, one feels Dr Brandes to be a more "trusting student" of Goethe than one is oneself when he says that "by the mere touch of his spiritual personality, Goethe had initiated Carlyle into life and literature"; that in "publishing under his own name, the most beautiful poems *Marianne von Willemer* ever produced," he "conferred honor when he took." Dr Brandes' gift of epithet is manifest in his alluding to Bettina's "burrlike hanging on" and "youthful boldness," to Schiller's "noble and striving nature," in his characterizing of *Frau von Klettenberg* as "a Protestant nun," and Goethe as "a fortress, not an open town"; his military preempting of judgement, however, would scarcely convert one to his admiration for Goethe if one did not already share it. A certain infelicity of speech is heightened, one suspects, by the translation in which, notwithstanding the translator's confessed loyalty to the text, his idea of idiom seems a false one, resulting as it does in such phrases as "quite a few," "quite a while," "measured up," "forever and a day," "apt to be full of," and "time out of mind."

That of which one is above all, and always delightfully conscious, throughout this truly fervent work, is Goethe's lyric power. One especially values what is said of his "musical skill" and "tonal depth"—of his "magnificent technique" as a result of which, greater effects have "never been produced by fewer words and simpler means." Although certain poems quoted by Dr Brandes do not

seem to us "immortal masterpieces," we feel "the fire," "the manly seriousness," "the tenderness," "the real humor," "the great glamor," the "inner richness of Goethe's being which makes it impossible for even a short stanza to be empty."

We are especially indebted to Dr Brandes for his paragraphs upon Goethe as counsel for the defence in certain legal cases and for his comment upon Goethe's discoveries in anatomy, geology, and botany, for which he says "we feel a respect nearly deeper than that evoked by his purely poetic creations."

"Casting off works in the process of self creation," describing his life as "the incessant turning and lifting of a stone that had to be turned and lifted once more," Goethe is himself, as Dr Brandes implies, his greatest work of art. This man who "never rode on a railway train, never sailed on a steamship, who read by a tallow lamp and wrote with a goosequill," who "never saw Paris, never saw London, never saw St. Petersburg, never saw Vienna, and caught but a fleeting glimpse of Berlin," "was within himself, a whole and complete civilization." "He was among minds," as Dr Brandes says, "what the Pacific Ocean is among the waters of the earth. In reality only a small part of it is pacific." We see an evolving enthusiasm such that the preference for Gothic is "wheeled about" to a preference for the art of ancient Greece, "somewhat as one would turn a fiery charger." Aloof from politics, yet as a passionate economist, he appears "in the person of the singular Uncle in Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre whose watchword, *Besitz und Gemeingut*, was inscribed round about on his various buildings somewhat as the Oriental peoples adorn the walls of their houses with excerpts from the Koran." We see his spiritual independence, his love of liberty as "the opposite of coercion, but not the opposite of a voluntary subjection to such coercion as that of moral discipline, or that of metrics, or social forms, or reasonable law"—a concept embodied in his saying, "*Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.*" We recall with Croce, his "opposing that in French literature which was intellectualistic and ironical, aged and correct like an old lady" as against his reviling "those Germans who were wont to justify every unseemliness they wrote by saying that they had 'lived it.'" We see his unconquerably social nature as evinced by his many friends; a distrust of his age, on the other hand, such that "when finally

as a result of extraordinary exertion, he had finished the second part of Faust, he sealed the manuscript with seven seals, and laid it aside for posterity, convinced that his contemporaries would simply misunderstand it." By this "development of the soul in accord with its inborn ability," we are reminded of "that manifoldness in simplicity of mountains," which Goethe himself admired.

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