

## Goethe and Lavater.

BY THE REV. C. FIELD.

TO anyone interested in the currents of thought on the Continent in the eighteenth century the friendship between Lavater and Goethe presents a deeply interesting object of study. For the Swiss and the German were embodiments of the two chief opposing tendencies of their time, Pietism and the Illumination (*aufklärung*). Pietism, under the lead of Spener and Franke, had liberated men from ecclesiastical trammels, and set the individual face to face with his Creator. The "Illumination" may be described as the mental ferment of new ideas which was agitating all men of intellect in Germany and France, and which was to produce, among other things, the Romantic movement in literature and the French Revolution.

Lavater was a pietest to the core, and also an ardent proselytizer. His bold appeal to the Jew Mendelssohn to weigh the evidences for Christianity was an instance of this. Like most others, Lavater felt the great fascination of Goethe, and at an early stage in their acquaintance wrote: "Goethe read many passages to me from his papers, or rather poured them forth in all the ardour of their first composition. His scenes are full of the most truthful human nature. He is an unequalled genius; he excels in whatever he undertakes."

Admiring Goethe's genius, Lavater made a strong effort to win him over to his own simple type of Christianity—"the type untampered with, the naked star," undimmed by philosophic fogs. Goethe, whose mind was rapidly tending in the direction of Spinozism or a sort of Christianized Pantheism, resented this, though at first Lavater's zeal caused no breach in their friendship. In his autobiography (Book XIV.) Goethe writes: "The idea which Lavater had conceived was so closely in union with the image of Christ which was impressed upon his mind that he was unable to imagine how anyone could live and

breathe without being a Christian. He absolutely tormented Mendelssohn, myself, and others. He wished us to be Christians, and Christians after his manner, or that we should convince him of the truth of our creeds. This ardent proselytism irritated me. It was in direct opposition to the religious toleration which I had been accustomed to profess. Lavater's importunities served only to confirm me in my own opinions, which is generally the case with all whose conversion is attempted in vain. At length, however, he pressed me with the terrible dilemma that I must either be a Christian or an Atheist; and I then declared if he would not leave me in the enjoyment of the Christian faith which I had formed for myself I should not have much hesitation in deciding for what he termed Atheism."

In 1774 Lavater was ordered to go to Ems by his medical adviser. Goethe accompanied him, and has drawn a graphic portrait of his outward appearance at the time: "His mild and benevolent expression of countenance, his sonorous German accent and honest Swiss dialect—in short, every peculiarity by which he was characterized, produced the most agreeable impression on his auditors. The attitude of his body, which was somewhat bent, by diminishing the ascendancy of his presence, placed him in some degree on a level with those about him. Vanity and arrogance he opposed by calmness and address. At the moment when he seemed to be on the point of yielding to an opponent he would bring suddenly forth some great view like a diamond shield, and yet knew how to temper the light which flashed from it so agreeably that men of this kind generally felt themselves instructed and, at least while in his presence, convinced.

"He was sympathizing, ingenious, and witty, and loved the same qualities in others, provided they observed the bounds which his own delicacy prescribed. If one ventured beyond these, he used to pat him on the shoulder and call the offender to order with a true-hearted 'Behave, now!' One became virginal by his side in order not to scandalize him by too free speech.

“To me Lavater’s visit proved highly important and instructive. It imparted a new impulse to my love for the fine arts, and inspired me with new activity of mind. The objects which then absorbed my time and attention were too numerous to admit of this influence taking an immediate effect ; but I felt the utmost impatience to renew the discussion of the important points of which we had treated in our correspondence. I therefore resolved to accompany Lavater to Ems, whither he was about to proceed ; and I hoped, during the journey, shut up in a carriage and secure against interruption, to be enabled freely to enter on the discussion of the questions which most interested me.”

Further on Goethe draws an amusing picture of himself seated between Basedow the Educationalist and Lavater at a table d’hôte at Coblenz. The latter was explaining the Apocalypse to a country clergyman, and the former endeavouring to convince an obstinate dancing-master that baptism was useless. Goethe summed up the situation in the well-known lines :

“ Propheten rechts, Propheten links,  
Das Welt-kind in der Mitte.”

Although Goethe repelled Lavater’s open attempt to convert him to orthodox Christianity, the latter had some religious influence on his mind, as appears from a passage in a letter he wrote to Lavater in August, 1775 : “ God will be gracious to me, brother ; I am for a while pious again, delight in the Lord, and sing Him psalms whose echo you ought to hear soon. I wish you were with me, for then I have good company.”

In 1779 Goethe visited Zürich and stayed some time with Lavater. In his immediate neighbourhood the poet felt his personal charm more than ever, and wrote in enthusiastic terms to Frau von Stein : “ It is difficult to describe this man’s excellence ; when one’s impression of him has been weakened by absence, one finds oneself all the more astonished in his presence. He is the best, greatest, wisest, most lovable of all mortals and immortals whom I know. . . . We are happy in and with Lavater ; it is like a moral tonic to be near a man who

lives and moves in an atmosphere of domestic affection. It has made me realize in what sort of moral torpor we usually live, and how my heart, which is not naturally dry and cold, has become stiff and frozen." To Knebel Goethe wrote: "Lavater is and remains a unique personage, to whom one has to be quite close in order to appreciate him. Such truthfulness, faith, love, patience, strength, wisdom, goodness, industry, thoroughness, versatility, calm, is not to be found in Israel nor among the heathen."

But in spite of these high encomiums, when personal intercourse was replaced by correspondence, the radical difference in the two friends' ways of thinking become more and more obvious. Lavater was in the habit of sending his works to Goethe, who, while praising certain portions, made it plain that his own point of view was diametrically opposed to that of his friend. In 1781, on Lavater's sending his "Letters to youths," Goethe wrote: "Never have I been so pleased with, and admired your presentment of Christ so much as in these letters. To see you enthusiastically grasp your crystal goblet, fill it to the brim with red and frothing wine, and then drink it eagerly down is an elevating sight! I gladly allow you this joy as you would be wretched without it. Considering the natural longing to idealize an individual, together with the impossibility of being satisfied by an individual, it is a great thing that a figure survives from ancient times to whom you can ascribe everything, and in Him mirror and worship yourself. But I must protest against your robbing all the thousand varieties of feathered fowl under heaven of their plumes, as if they were not their own, to deck your Bird of Paradise with them exclusively; this must necessarily seem intolerable to those who, like myself, are disciples of the truth revealed to each man through mankind, and who, as sons of God, worship Him in ourselves and in all His children. I know well that you cannot change in the matter, and that your motives are good. But since you so persistently preach your faith and doctrine, I must persist in pointing you to ours—the iron-grained steadfast rock of Humanity, which you and a

whole Christendom may bespatter with your waves, but can neither engulf nor unsettle from its foundations.”

Here Goethe frankly assumes the standpoint of humanism in opposition to Lavater, whose picture of Christ he regards as a projection from his own imagination. When Lavater, in 1782, sent him his work entitled “Pontius Pilatus,” Goethe wrote on the subject to Frau von Stein: “When one of us poets dresses up a hero in a patchwork of our own proclivities and peculiarities, and calls him Werther, Egmont, Tasso, or what you like, it is all right; the public ranks it according to the merits of the author’s genius, and the story rests on its own basis. Our friend Lavater fancies this method of dramatization, so to speak, and dresses up his Christ in a similar patchwork. But when he makes Humanity’s birth and death, Alpha and Omega, salvation and safety depend upon Him, it seems to me tasteless and intolerable. . . . When a great man has a dark corner in him, then it is very dark. The story of Christ has turned his head, so that he cannot think sanely.”

On August 9, 1782, Goethe wrote to Lavater himself: “You hold the Gospel as it stands for Divine truth. An audible voice from heaven would not convince me that water burns, and that fire extinguishes, that a Virgin can bear a child, and that a corpse can rise again; rather would I reckon this a blasphemy against God and His revelation in Nature. You find nothing more beautiful than the Gospel; I find thousands of writings of God-gifted men, ancient and modern, just as beautiful and useful and indispensable to mankind. Dear brother, believe me, that I am just as earnest in my faith as you in yours; must I not, then, maintain precisely the opposite of what your book ‘Pilatus’ contains, and demands our unconditional assent to, with bigoted intolerance. Forgive me these hard words. Did it not lead to further misunderstanding, I might say the intolerance is not in you, it is in your book. The Lavater who walks among men and converses with authors is the most tolerant and mild of beings. Lavater as the fanatical propagandist of an intolerant religion—what are we to call him?”

"Forgive me, I speak without bitterness. Your 'Pilatus' is intolerant from beginning to end, and you intended it to be so. Often you make the demand: 'Who can—who dare (speak as He did)?' Whereupon in reading an involuntary 'I' has often risen to my lips. Believe me, I have often wished to discuss your book with you in detail, and have written much about it, but could not send it, for when will one man understand another? It is impossible to be so opposed in opinions without coming into collision. I confess to you that if I were a teacher of my religion you would perhaps have better reason to charge me with intolerance than I you."

Lavater returned a mild reply to this letter: "I believe myself to be open-minded and strong to hear anything, because I am most anxious to mend my defects. Everyone knows that my whole manner of life, at any rate, is the opposite of intolerant. Yes, I venture to assert that among all German authors none is more tolerant and appreciative of good where he can find it than myself. I find many things besides the Gospel beautiful, but nothing *so* beautiful as the Gospel which judges me a thousand times more sternly than my friend Goethe."

To this Goethe replied (October 4, 1782): "Your exposition in your letter of your inner scheme of religion was very welcome to me. We shall soon arrive at a mutual understanding on this point, and leave each other in peace. Nature deserves our gratitude for having stored up in every creature so much *vis medicatrix*, that, whenever it receives an injury, it can immediately commence to patch itself up again; and what are the thousandfold forms of religion but so many examples of this *vis medicatrix*. My plaster doesn't suit you, and yours doesn't suit me. In Our Father's dispensary are many recipes. So I have nothing to answer nor refute in your letter, but much to say on the other side. We ought some day to set out our two respective confessions of faith in two parallel columns, and enter into some bond of peace and neutrality on the subject."

But the theological gulf between Goethe and Lavater was too wide to admit of any such compromise. Goethe was

approaching the time of his visit to Rome and Venice, when he was probably more estranged from orthodox Christianity than at any other period, as appears from certain of the "Venetian epigrams." The correspondence between the two friends became rarer, and in 1783 altogether ceased. In 1786 Lavater paid a visit to Weimar, and stayed a night with Goethe, but their intercourse was distant in manner and restrained. He wrote to his friend Spalding: "I found Goethe older, colder, firmer, more reserved, more practical." Goethe on his side wrote to Frau von Stein: "Lavater stayed with me. No really friendly nor intimate word passed between us, and I have done with love and hate as far as he is concerned."

But, in spite of this assertion of indifference, Goethe's later references to Lavater in letters and conversations were not devoid of considerable bitterness. To Jacobi he wrote about him: "He has been spying here in Weimar, but our decided heathenism frightened him away"; and in the "Xenien" many of his sharpest epigrams are levelled at him—*e.g.*:

"Pity that Nature made only one man out of thee,  
For there was material enough for a worthy man and a scoundrel."

When Goethe visited Zürich in 1797 he carefully avoided Lavater, and on one occasion, when he saw the latter approaching down an avenue, deliberately stepped aside and let him go by.

In old age Goethe's judgment of his former friend became milder. In one of the conversations reported by Eckermann he said: "Lavater was a really good man, but subject to strong delusions. He did not wish to deal with Truth whole and unadulterated; he deceived himself and others." Of another conversation Eckermann reports: "Goethe spoke about Lavater, and said much in praise of his character. He also related details of their early intimate friendship, and how they had often at that time slept in the same bed." "It is lamentable," he added, "that a weak mysticism so soon set bounds to the flight of his genius."

The friendship of Goethe's mother with Lavater, on the other hand, continued unbroken till her death. The following

letter, written on the death of her daughter Cornelia, testifies her warm regard for the Zurich pastor :

“FRANKFORT, *June 23, 1777.*”

“ ‘He giveth strength to the weary, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’ What He promises He certainly performs. We are new and living witnesses of this, who have just laid in the grave our only daughter Cornelia. Her death was like a bolt out of a clear sky—entirely unexpected. Oh, dear Lavater! The poor mother had much to bear. My husband was sick all the winter; the sudden slamming of a door startled him, and I had to be the first to announce to him his daughter’s death, whom he loved above all besides.

“My heart was crushed, but the thought ‘Shall there be evil in the city and the Lord hath not done it?’ kept me from entire collapse. Without a rock-like faith in God—on God Who counts our hairs and knows the sparrows, Who slumbers not, nor sleeps, Who goes not on journeys, Who knows the thought of my heart before it is present, Who hears me without my having to cut myself with knives and lancets, Who, in a word, is Love—without faith in Him it would be impossible to hold out. St. Paul says, ‘All trials are grievous when they come’—but it is one thing to feel this, and another to murmur at God’s providence, and to be like those who have no hope. But we who know that immortality dwells beyond the grave, and that our brief life is hurrying to its close, we should kiss the hand that smites us, and say, although with many tears, ‘The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the Name of the Lord.’”

“Dear son, your letter has done me much good. You say you are vexed with yourself that you cannot comfort me. But let me tell you it was like balm to me to have your whole warm, sympathetic, friendly heart laid open before me. When I see only a line of your writing all those happy moments recur to my mind when we sat together at one table, when you were under my roof, and used to come to my room at nine o’clock in



the evening. Although I saw you such a short time I knew at once on which round of the lofty ladder, on which my sons stand, to set you. When you departed I wept for a whole day. All this comes back to my memory when I see your hand-writing upon an envelope.

“Forgive me, dear son, for writing this sort of stuff. It is now one of my favourite occupations to write to those friends who are so near to my heart and share its joys and sorrows. I live in this great town as in a wilderness. Of my relations, there is only Frau Fahlmer who understands me, and she is unfortunately in Dusseldorf.

“Now, my dear friend, good-bye. Greet your dear wife, Pfenninger, Frau Schulthess, Lenz, and all good souls from me. I have had two touching letters from my dear son Schlosser.<sup>1</sup> He suffers like a Christian and a man and believes on God. May the Almighty bless you and your belongings, and preserve your affection for me. Mine will last till death, and beyond—so says, and will keep it,

“Your true mother,

“A.J.A.”

<sup>1</sup> Husband of Goethe's sister Cornelia.

