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GOETHE, 1790-1802: A
STUDY IN EARLY GERMAN
ROMANTICISM, PP. 40-192**

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by John William Scholl

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A STUDY IN EARLY GERMAN ROMANTICISM

BY
JOHN WILLIAM SCHOLL

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INTRODUCTION.

a. STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS.

Friedrich Schlegel, youngest son of Johann Adolf Schlegel, was born at Hannover on March 10, 1772, just three months after Goethe had finished the first version of his first great work, *Götz von Berlichingen*. His literary career begins in 1794 with the publication of *Von den Schulen der Griechischen Poesie*. At this time he is as old as Goethe was when writing the *Götz*.

In the meantime Goethe has written many great works, passed through several cultural stages, been enriched by varied experiences, and in the great general aspects of his character as also in the essentials of his *Weltanschauung* become a *developed* man. Life will deepen, knowledge widen with the coming years, but the Italian journey (September 3, 1786-June 18, 1788), with its revolutionary influences, is past, and twenty years (since November, 1775) of responsible public service in great little Weimar by the side of his devoted friend, the Duke, whom he loved and praised,¹ have had their sedative influence upon the stormy genius of the period of *Götz* and *Werther*. The unique literary friendship with Schiller, who has been at Weimar and Jena since 1787, is just beginning with the establishment of the *Horen*. On the other hand Schlegel is but little beyond the first

¹ *GWZ.* u. Venetian Epigrams, No. 35.

- *stadia* of his intellectual progress. He has scarcely begun a development which is to be conditioned to a remarkable degree by the great minds of the period and by certain great thinkers and writers of the past, and will result in an almost complete reversal of his attitude toward all problems of literature, philosophy, and life. These great influences are Plato, the Greek dramatists, the Platonizing Hemsterhuis, Winckelmann, Herder, Kant, Fichte, Schiller, and Goethe. Personal relations will exist with the last three. The relative force of these influences will vary widely at different stages of his progress. The Hellenizing influence is based in a general way upon Winckelmann, but stands in the closest relations to the doctrines and practice of the Weimar classicists. Kant's critical philosophy, supplemented by Fichte and modified by Schiller, is a second powerful moment and becomes more and more important toward the close. Goethe's works (this can hardly be overemphasized) are influential from first to last. They are the atmosphere in which Schlegel as a literary student breathes. They are the concrete examples of all possible literary excellence since the Greeks. Their author is the acknowledged leader of Weimar culture when Weimar is the center of German letters. Schlegel as a literary aspirant knows no higher goal than the approval of this genius whom he is soon to glorify with extravagant daring as "Gott, Vater."¹

Friedrich's attitude toward Goethe had, however, materially changed before 1804, about which time many evidences of the alteration exist. The least arbitrary date near this period is naturally the date of Schlegel's departure for Paris, the date of the final dispersion of the older Romantic school. Since the earliest known sources of information concerning Friedrich² begin in 1791, we may select the year of student

¹ *BDBr.*, Bd. I, p. 36.

² *WSBr.*

life at Göttingen in company with August Wilhelm as the beginning of his development. The most important years of his activity are thus included between 1790 and 1802. These limits are further favored by the second great source of our knowledge of Friedrich's early career, *Friedrich Schlegels prosaische Jugendschriften, 1794-1802*, edited by Minor.

No complete statement of Friedrich Schlegel's personal and literary relations to Goethe exists. Much work has been done upon certain phases of the dependence, but even here contributions may be made. Statements have been made recently that Goethe learned much from the earlier romanticists, but few definite evidences are produced in their support. It has seemed advisable therefore to collect into one complete statement, so far as possible, what is certainly known of the relationship of Friedrich Schlegel to Goethe during the period above fixed.

b. RELATIONS AS SEEN IN LATER LIFE.

Goethe published his correspondence with Schiller in 1828-9, just as Friedrich's unfortunate career was drawing to its close. The severe judgments of Schiller upon the character, accomplishments, and pretensions of both Schlegels, with the contemporary assent of Goethe in all essential points, were given to the public unaccompanied by the least hint of Goethe's own disapproval of their sharpness and with no disavowal of his own present belief in Schiller's correctness. August Wilhelm, mindful of his outwardly pleasant relations with Goethe during those fruitful years in Jena, was surprised and pained at such revelations. To defend himself and his brother against these criticisms an edition of the Goethe-Schlegel correspondence was planned. But it did not appear. The surviving brother vented his

feelings, however, in print. His attack appeared in Wendt's *Musen Almanach* for 1832, issued in the fall of 1831. To the shame of August Wilhelm, his harshest thrusts were aimed at the dead friend Schiller and not at Goethe.¹ Zelter calls Goethe's attention to these "galligwässrige" attacks in a letter of October 15, 1831. To this circumstance we owe the latest, completest, and most positive expression of Goethe's views of the character of the Schlegels and especially of his relations with them.²

This letter is too well known to need quotation, though almost every line of it is important for our problem. The relations of Goethe to the Schlegels, according to this direct testimony, were (a) universal tolerance, not hearty favor, (b) the furthering of that which he himself did not approve, (c) an effort to keep up a sort of social relation with them, though (d) he stood outside of the romantic circle and would have been extinguished by them, but for his own solid worth, and (e) he did not trouble himself about others while following out his own designs. Schiller's hatred is justified as right, and their accomplishment in all fields except the oriental is discredited.

Such statements roundly deny any real sympathy with the romantic doctrines and practices of the Schlegels and imply a degree of artistic and literary isolation incompatible with mutual influence.

This letter cannot be credited to momentary bitterness at August Wilhelm's attack on Schiller in Wendt's *Almanach*. If bitterness dictated it, it was a settled bitterness of a quarter of a century. Many utterances of Goethe from 1804 until his death seem to show that the bitterness was a part of the settled consistent judgment of all his riper years.

¹ *EXen.*, Bd. II, p. 285 ff.

² *GZBr.*, Bd. VI, pp. 315 f. and 318 ff.; Goethe an Zelter, October 26, 1831.

In a conversation with Sulpiz Boisserée, May 25, 1826, he charges the Schlegels with dishonesty and an evil influence upon free investigation.¹ In 1819, in conversation with an anonymous person (F. A. Wolf?) he charges them with attempting to throttle him with friendly words, rob him of himself, and make him other than himself; they were thus his worst enemies.² Another conversation with Boisserée shows that Goethe called Friedrich a "Schelm" in spite of all the artist's defense of his friend. Boisserée explained this language as due to envy and pride of faint-hearted old age, etc.³ Several very important facts are omitted from Boisserée's report, which would have given a key to Goethe's full meaning. We do not learn what arguments were presented by Sulpiz in favor of Friedrich's honesty, the truth of which might be granted without involving a denial of the appearance of dishonesty. Perhaps *irony* was urged, that unconscious accompaniment of a life without inward fundamental convictions. We must admit that Friedrich's conduct toward Goethe and his works had every appearance of insincerity, if one assumes in his character that fixity of opinion which marks the ripened man. It was no forced inference when Goethe concluded that the Schlegels had a dishonest purpose in their praise of him. We should further like to know what statements of Goethe were considered well-grounded and what were concordant with things which must be admitted. Thus we should be in condition to judge whether the "chief point" rested merely upon personalities, and also to estimate the degree of justice in Sulpiz's reference of Goethe's words to motives of envy and pride. Without these further facts we have here simply a confirmation of Goethe's usual attitude accompanied by an interpretation

¹ *BGG.*, Bd. v, p. 290, No. 1038.

² *Ibid.*, Bd. viii, p. 357, No. 1581.

³ *Ibid.*, Bd. iii, p. 14, May 9, 1811.

equally liable to personal coloring, for the *Boisseries* were loyal disciples of Friedrich, and Goethe had every opportunity to know the character and capacity of Schlegel at first hand and as accurately as they.

Several years earlier we have a number of utterances which are in point. On May 17, 1808, Goethe is angry at Schlegel's imputation to him of Voltaire's principles. This is interpreted as an attempt to discredit him while using his name for financial advantage.¹ To this period belongs also the report of a conversation by Falk in which the claims of the Schlegels to literary dictatorship are satirically disposed of. Goethe is resigned to the prospective loss of his imperial mantle, since it does not involve the loss of his head too, and expects to die in peace in his bed beside his beloved Ilm.² Several days later Goethe again attacked the literary anarchy of Germany, this time "mit dreimal kanstischer Lauge" and directed a volley at Friedrich Schlegel as the self-styled Hercules of German literature.³

Goethe brought out an edition of his collected works in 1808. Friedrich reviewed them for the romantic organ, the *Heidelberger Jahrbücher*. The former sworn eulogist of Goethe could not break entirely with his past and appear in his true attitude before the world while his former utterances were so readily accessible. He could now no longer praise with a full throat, so we have a carefully toned-down repetition of much that he had already said. Whoever compares this performance with previous reviews becomes at once aware of the whole vast change in personal relations.⁴ Goethe could say complacently that he was content, he understood how the review had been produced, but as an

¹ *Ibid.*, Bd. II, p. 144; Bericht von Frh. Schopenhauer.

² *Ibid.*, Bd. II, p. 202 ff., No. 357, April 18, 1808.

³ *Ibid.*, Bd. II, p. 208, No. 357b.

⁴ *FSW* etc., Bd. VIII, p. 117 ff.