

# **GOETHE'S LITERARY ESSAYS**

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Goethe's Literary Essays by J. W. von Goethe & J. E. Spingarn

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**J. W. VON GOETHE & J. E. SPINGARN**

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LITERARY ESSAYS**



J. W. ...

# GOETHE'S LITERARY ESSAYS

A SELECTION IN ENGLISH

ARRANGED BY

J. E. SPINGARN

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
VISCOUNT HALDANE



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# FOREWORD

By VISCOUNT HALDANE

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OF Goethe Sainte-Beuve held that he was the "king of criticism." Sainte-Beuve was among the most competent of judges on such a point, and Matthew Arnold has endorsed his conclusion. The reason for it is not far to seek. Goethe's gifts as a critic fell within a large whole of knowledge which was his in a degree for which we must look back over two thousand years to Aristotle if we wish to find a rival. He wrote lyrics that are supreme in their kind. His capacity for observation of nature was, as Helmholtz has pointed out, of the first order. Although he hated philosophy, he had, none the less, a fine instinct for great metaphysical conceptions. Spinoza and Kant both made appeal to him, and the appeal was responded to from the depths of his nature. The world has seen no poem like *Faust*, with the exquisite perfection of the "Dedication" and the lyrical outbursts with which the first part is studded, set in a structure which signifies a profound conception of life as a whole, into which far-reaching reflection has entered. The second part of the drama is as great in this latter regard as is the first part in its occasional exhibitions of the purest lyrical gift.

Goethe's work was uneven, as was his life. That is what we must expect from the variety which both contained. But through each a great purpose is obviously in process of continuous realization, a purpose

## *Foreword*

which never flags, of presenting the world as a place where man may work out what is directed towards the highest and belongs to what is above Time. It is always the effort that counts, and not any result outside, conceived abstractly and apart from the effort. The quality of the struggle "to conquer life and freedom daily anew" is what constitutes the victory. We are apt to remain with Goethe's poetry and to content ourselves with the enjoyment of its perfection. But that is to miss half the lesson which this man, one of the very greatest sons the earth ever bore, has to teach us. It is his outlook on life as a whole which we must master if we would learn for ourselves what freedom from what is narrow means with him. And this outlook we find at least as much in his criticism as in his lyrics. We have to turn to the *Autobiography*, to *Meister*, and to the *Prose Sayings*, if we would find the other half. Beyond these books, too, there remains much else which it would occupy years for the student to discover for himself unaided.

That is why a book such as that to which these lines are written by way of preface may prove a source of help and inspiration to the general reader.



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# THE THEORY OF ART