

GRIMM'S GOETHE.*

IN volume ii., page 296, of his essay the author utters the following opinion incidentally, almost casually :

"The career of this [namely, 'Faust,'] the greatest work of the greatest poet of all times and all peoples, has just begun, and we have taken only the first steps towards exhausting its substance."

The paragraph taken entire has the appearance of an innocent generality. But the single phrase, "the greatest poet of all times and all peoples," is one to make the thoughtful reader pause and consider. Is the author prepared to stand by his assertion? We must bear in mind who and what he is. Hermann Grimm represents the second generation after Goethe's death. The circle of master-minds, the Grimms, Lachmann, Moritz Haupt, Savigny, the Humboldts, Richter, and the others whom we think of instinctively when we seek to revert to the brilliant period of the Berlin University, were young men when Goethe was slowly declining to the grave. They looked up to him as "the old master." Yet they have long since passed away, and now Hermann Grimm, the son of William, and nephew of Jacob Grimm, himself in the prime of life, comes forward with this latest tribute to "the old master," this greatest of all great poets. The unsparing art-critic, author of the standard life of Michael Angelo, has outgrown the flush of youth, and the hearers to whom he addresses himself are clear-headed, cool-blooded Prussians of the purest water. We can scarcely imagine him as wishing us to take his words otherwise than literally. Yet we do not cite his opinion with a view to defend, much less to controvert it. We cite it merely as a sign of the times, an index of that great revulsion of opinion which has taken place in Germany, and to which we have called attention more than once in these columns. Most of us are so misled by the empty Shakspeare-cult in Germany as to take it for sober earnest. It is significant enough, therefore, to discover a Berlin professor lecturing to a Berlin audience and proclaiming Goethe king of Parnassus. This Berlin professor, let us not forget, has the entrée to the highest circles of thought, and to the sanctums where opinion is made, or at least forecast. His essay may be fairly regarded, then, as a summing up of the past and an outlook into the future of Goethe-criticism.

Yet it is set in anything but a dithyrambic key. It is rather analytic than sympathetic, rather explanatory than laudatory. Its aim is to unfold the growth of each of Goethe's great works, especially to lay bare the connecting link between the poem and its author's character, and to give the broad movement, but not the details, of Goethe's life. Those who approach the essay prepared to find in it a biography in the ordinary sense will be disappointed. On the other hand—and herein it surpasses all previous works of the kind—it gives the political, social, and moral atmosphere in which Goethe breathed and moved. We are made acquainted with the old, mediæval Frankfort of Goethe's boyhood, with the Weimar of Karl August and Frau von Stein, and with the Rome of the *Italienische Reise*. Comparisons are odious and also dangerous, yet we venture to assert that nowhere else, at least without making the most elaborate special studies, can one obtain such an insight into Rome of the eighteenth century and its inevitable significance for Goethe. We learn what Goethe meant when he wrote in the first outburst of enthusiasm: "At last I stand in this capital of the world!"

To attempt to give even an outline of a work that is by its nature

* "Goethe. Vorlesungen gehalten an der kgl. Universität zu Berlin. Von Hermann Grimm." Berlin: Hertz; New York: L. W. Schmidt, 1877.

concise and condensed, would be necessarily fruitless. Those who are at all familiar with Goethe's life know already what a complexity of elements it embraced, what a wealth of associations it embodies, what an array of names, talents, and achievements it suggests. Grimm has prudently refrained from characterizing every one whom circumstances placed in close contact with Goethe. He has discarded the accidental and unessential, and concentrated himself upon the "determining" characters and events. Hence the carefulness with which he treats of Herder and Spinoza, Karl August and Frau von Stein. On the other hand, he is the first, to our knowledge, to assert unqualifiedly the fact that Goethe, after his return from Italy, was a "made" man—that is, a man whose character was incapable of being further moulded by others. Prior to the Italian journey, Goethe had had more than one friend to whom he gave himself up unreservedly, with all his emotions, his intellect, his joys and doubts and aspirations. Friendship was to him in those days a blending of man with man, as marriage is a blending of man and wife. But from 1788 to his death, Goethe had no friend in this sense—no one whom he took into his entire confidence, no one to whom he vouchsafed more than a partial glance into his inner being. His world-renowned intercourse with Schiller, apparently a striking exception, is in reality none at all, accord-