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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu



THE LAST DECADE OF THE CENTURY.

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he Eighteenth century came to an end in the midst of war. In a special sense, the last ten years of the century served as a period of transition---a time in which old things were passing away, and all things were becoming new. It was a time of death and a time of birth!

Let us note, in passing, that John Wesley died in 1791, Gibbon in 1794, Burns in 1796, and William Cowper in 1800. Also, that Shelley was born in 1792, Keats in 1796, and Macaulay in 1800.

The impulses and energies which acted upon the last decade of the Eighteenth century produced certain results that became more noticeable and far-reaching than those produced in the preceding years. Among these impulses one may mention the intellectual vigor and brilliancy of the German contribution to literature, and the new cult of Nature---that is, the new enthusiasm with which men regarded the external world and what we call natural scenery---in England.

JOHANN · WOLFGANG · GOETHE



How can a man come to know himself? Never by thinking, but by doing. Try to do your Duty, and you will know at once what you are worth. Goethe

W

hen the German genius, which had slept so deeply and so long, began to wake and speak again in the last decade of the Eighteenth century, the influence was felt throughout Europe, and particularly in England.

In the works of Goethe, Schiller, and Lessing, new interests and new speculations filled the minds of contemporaries.

Goethe commenced his best-known masterpiece, "Faust" in 1773, at the age of twenty-four. His "Wilhelm Meister, begun four years later, was completed only three years before his death--- its composition thus spreading over a

period of fifty-two years. These two famous works appealed to all minds, with the irresistible fascination of an eternal problem. With no great companions such as Shakespeare had, with no air of poetry and national expression such as Shakespeare breathed, Goethe founded German literature. Students earnestly wrestling with doubt, striving to solve the solemn riddles of life, feel their pulses strangely agitated by "Faust"; and in "Wilhelm Meister", the same students will appreciate the advance of man from maturity to perfection of intellect.

Faust and Mephistopheles

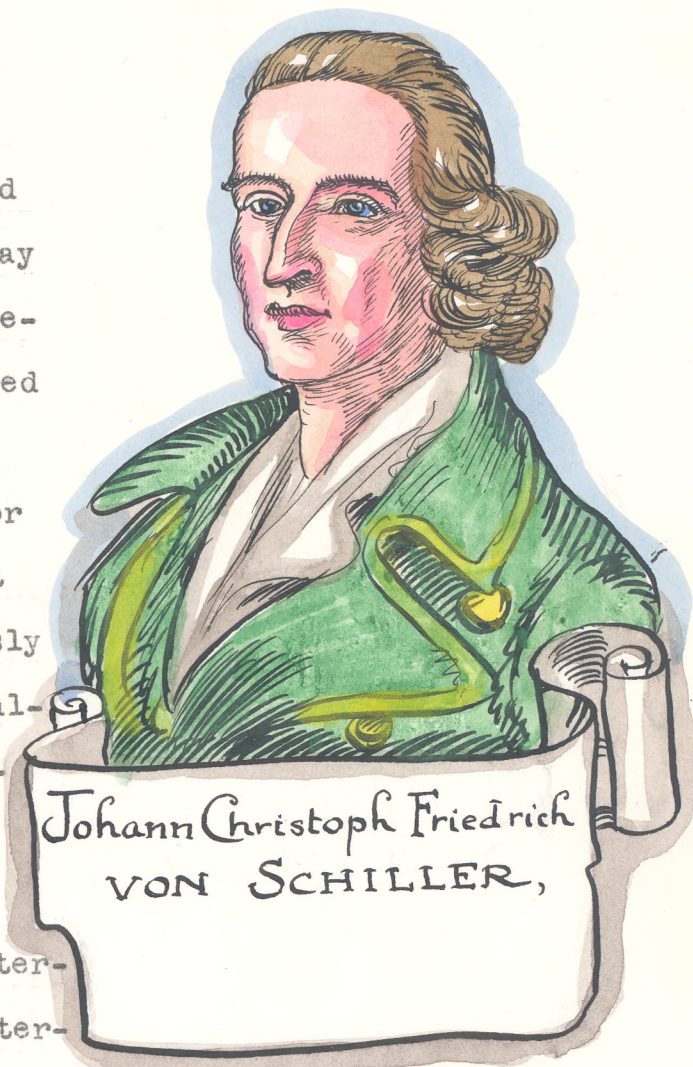


after the etching by Sullivan

Likewise, Schiller's masterpiece, "William Tell", shows the supremacy of the German creative spirit in literature at the end of the Eighteenth century. The play deals with the hero of the Swiss Revolution, William Tell, who is ordered by the Tyrant Gessler to shoot an apple from his little son's head, or (if he should aim wrongly) die! It was a noble work, and was rapturously received throughout Germany, crystallizing as it did the national aspirations towards freedom.

The greatness of Schiller's creative imagination has its counterpart in Lessing's supremacy in literary criticism. In 1766, Lessing published his "Laocoon", which is

regarded as the most masterly and original inquiry into the principles of criticism of the Eighteenth century. It is believed that Lessing's "Laocoon" made Goethe and Schiller possible. Goethe himself confessed that Lessing's work "transported us from the region of miserable observation into the free fields of thought".



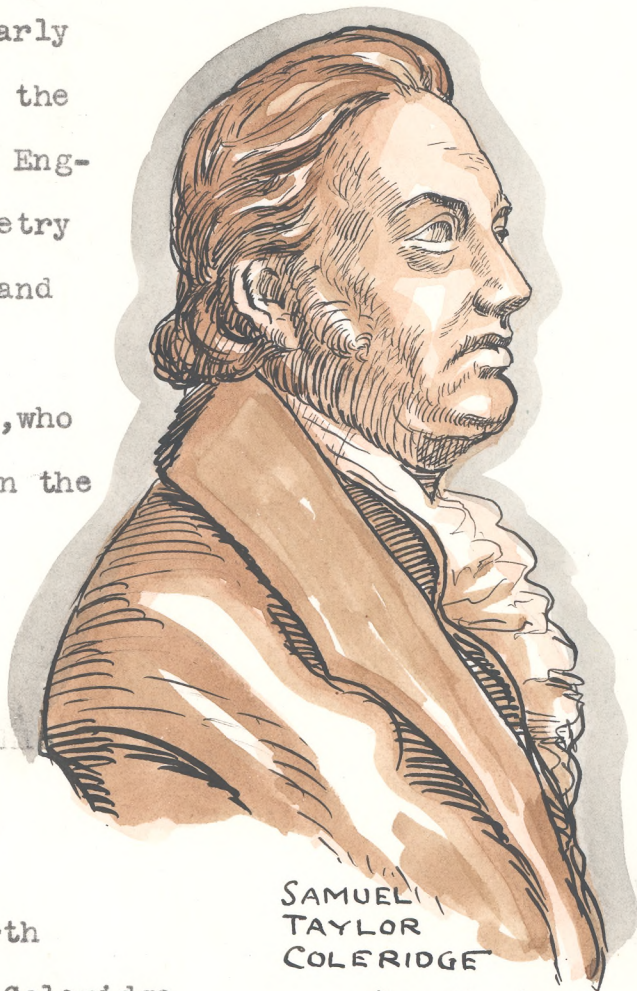
Johann Christoph Friedrich
VON SCHILLER,



GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

The influence of German thought and literature began to clearly show itself in the works of the so-called Romantic poets of England, particularly in the poetry of Coleridge, Scott, Shelley, and Byron.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had begun to learn German in the autumn of 1797, translated Schiller's "Wallenstein's Death", and gathered a rich store of ideas during his sojourn in Germany, whence he traveled in the company of William Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth. Coleridge came under the stimulating influence of Lessing, and with that influence began a new era in English criticism. Says Coleridge: "It is Lessing who first proved to all thinking men, even to Shakespeare's own countrymen, the



SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

after the bust by Thornycroft.

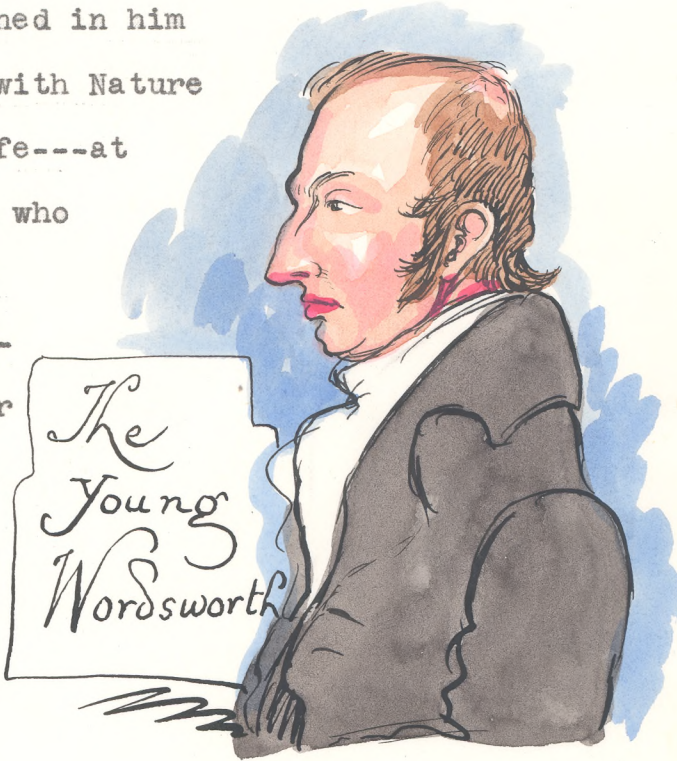


COLERIDGE from a drawing done in GERMANY c.1798-9

true nature of his (Shakespeare's) irregularities."

The impulses and energies which led to the new cult of Nature and a fresh enthusiasm in poetry, are clearly expressed in the poetry of both Coleridge and Wordsworth. These poets began life as ardent supporters of the French Revolution, and were carried.

away by the humanitarian promises of the democratic movement in Europe. At one time Wordsworth, who toured through France, seriously considered settling in Paris and joining the Girondists. From the ruins of the Bastille he picked up a stone and treasured it as a relic. He even felt a shock of pity and shame when England joined the Continental powers in making war on France. Wordsworth's experience with the French Revolution awakened in him a new sense. His quick sympathy with Nature was extended to include human life---at least the men, women and children who lived in simplicity and close to Nature herself. He had read Rousseau, and Rousseau had called for a new society of equality reared in place of the existent one--- a new simple society, individualistic and based upon the natural and elemental goodness of man.



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hen Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, removed to Somerset, and became neighbors of Coleridge, the three of them discussed these matters "by the glow of their new illumination". In a series of "endless walks and talks" on the Quantock hills, they "wanton'd in wild poesy", until together they evolved the famous "Lyrical Ballads", a joint volume of poems which was to start the new Romantic movement in English poetry. In the publication of the second edition (1800), Wordsworth included an essay,

----the famous "Preface"--- in which the laws of poetic diction were investigated, the the progress of English poetry reviewed. We hope to return to a consideration of the "Lyrical Ballads" and the Romantic Movement in England at a later time, when we discuss the literature of the early Nineteenth Century.

Our immediate business is to bring this section of the book to an end. Of course, there is no such thing as the closing of a century, except in the matter of dates. As a matter of fact, many of the problems of the last decade of the Eighteenth century will be carried on into the first decade of the Nineteenth. There is no real break in the story of the nation--- King George III will continue to sit on the throne of England, and the struggle with France will be resumed. We have been very long at the task of writing and illustrating the story of the Eighteenth century, and ^{feel} are somewhat glad to conclude this section at this point.

