

INFERIORITY FEELINGS AND A GROWING GENIUS

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The search in great biography for expressions of styles of life was an important concern of Adlerian psychology in its earlier years. The recently found poem written by the young Goethe, submitted here, is such an expression. Although it shows the influence of contemporary poetry, it is pervaded with the freshness and awkwardness of Goethe's student days, the first he had spent away from home, and reflects his feelings about himself. It indicates the growing pains of a young genius, which may well be called inferiority feelings. In a humorous mood of self ridicule it testifies at the same time to his ambitions for a great future.

The poem and following remarks are taken from a book by G. H. Needler showing the relationship of Goethe to the English literary world (2). By his sixteenth year Goethe had acquired a fairly good working acquaintance with the English language and practiced it in conversation, in letters home, and in little poems. In one such letter, addressed to his sister Cornelia, he wrote: "For the present state of the improvement of my english speaking . . . I learn much by that conversation. . . . Many time I become a melancholical one. I know not whence it comes. Then I look on every man with a starring owl like countenance. . . . In like a situation of my soul, I make english verses, that a stone would weep" (2, p. 77). Goethe inserted the following poem in this letter.

A SONG OVER THE UNCONFIDENCE TOWARDS MY SELF, to Dr. Schlosser

Thou knowst how happily they Freind
Walks upon florid Ways;
Thou knowst how heavens bounteous hand
Leads him to golden days.

But hah! a cruel ennemy
Destroies all that Bless;
In Moments of Melancholy
Flies all my Happiness.

Then fogs of doubt do fill my mind
With deep obscurity;
I search my self, and cannot find
A spark of Worth in me.

(Six stanzas omitted here.)¹

¹Omitted in the book by Needler.

Then curse I, Freind, the fated sky,
 And from th' altar I fly;
 And to my Freinds aloud I cry,
 Be happier then I (2, p. 78).

This brings to mind an episode of great importance in Goethe's life, not so far removed in time from these English letters of his student days—the love affair that resulted in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. That occasion struck feelings of self doubt with full impact. And as in the last stanza of the present poem, Goethe, in a later poetic conclusion of the *Sorrows of Werther*, "The Elegy of Marienbad," advised his readers not to give in to these suicidal feelings of self doubt, but "be a man and do not follow me." Thus Goethe, incidentally, expressed the goal of competence and superiority, as is so frequently done, through the metaphor of manliness.

According to Adler, inferiority feelings through their inherent displeasure and dissatisfaction become a suitable basis for goal striving. In view of this, Goethe's English poem, referring to his feelings of unworthiness and "unconfidence," is of particular interest inasmuch as Adler has quoted Goethe with reference to his upward striving. Adler's passage is as follows:

Among others, Goethe also points out that while perception is connected with the practical satisfaction of needs, man leads a life beyond this, a life of feelings and imagination. Thereby the coercion toward enhancement of the self-esteem has been excellently comprehended. This also becomes clear from one of Goethe's letters to Lavater where he remarks: "This passionate desire to drive the pyramid of my existence, the base of which is given to me, as high as possible, outweighs everything else and barely admits momentary forgetting" (1, p. 24).

Thus it has appeared worthwhile to bring to the attention of readers in psychology this English poem of the young Goethe in its larger connection with his sorrows and goal striving.

REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. *Ueber den nervoesen Charakter*. Wiesbaden: Bergmann, 1912.
2. NEEDLER, G. H. *Goethe and Scott*. Toronto: Oxford Univer. Press, 1950.