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Beethoven: Life of a Conqueror by Emil Ludwig.

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Emil Ludwig's Beethoven is not a journalistic improvisation - as were his somewhat flimsy essays on Christ, Roosevelt, Stalin, Mussolini, and other celebrities - but the product of conscientious study and a life-long love. No doubt, Mr. Ludwig is sincere when telling us that he has found in Beethoven's music "the greatest consolation for man's spirit," and that there is no other genius, except Goethe, to whom he feels ~~as~~ as deeply and essentially indebted. His biography of the great composer - succeeding a shorter Beethoven portrait included in Three Titans (1930) - testifies with impressive eloquence to the authenticity of his gratitude.

The subtitle of the book - "Life of a Conqueror" - discloses the essence of Ludwig's Beethoven interpretation: he conceives him as a Promethean, not to say "Napoleonic," figure whose predominant feature is a demoniac will for power and fame; an irritable giant harassed and inspired by his terrific ambition and his vulnerable pride. He shows us a Beethoven who, when the talk was of the King of Prussia, said, without hesitating, "I, too, am a king;" a regal, if haunted, nature to whom

the ideal of Freedom meant primarily his own independence; a spirited fighter "whose life was a chain of victories over every obstacle." The Beethoven we find in Ludwig's presentation is the one who spoke the almost Nietzsche-like words: "Strength is the moral code of those who rise above their fellow men, and it is also mine."

Is Beethoven "anti-tragic", as Ludwig chooses to call him? It seems questionable whether this term is applicable to a basically tragic character - even if this character is dynamic enough to triumph "over everything, including tragedy." Ludwig is at his best in dramatizing this constant struggle - both the ~~not~~ petty difficulties of Beethoven's daily life and the profound conflicts of his artistic development. There are brilliant passages - poignant and concise - ; for instance, those dealing with Beethoven's attitude towards money; (bitterly experienced in poverty, ~~the great composer~~ lived to become a "financial wizard," to use Mr. Ludwig's expression;) or the pages about the complex relation between Beethoven and Goethe; or the movingly pathetic episode of Beethoven's belated effort to acquire a son and heir in the person of his rather mediocre nephew.

Ludwig's vision of the aging master is more suggestive and more powerful than his portrait of the striving youth. The Beethoven of the Ninth Symphony, the Missa Solemnis, and the last quartets, has never ^{before} been described ^{as} realistically and effectively. We see him wander through the streets of Vienna; see him work and struggle, quarrel with his friends and servants, insult his patrons and publishers - terribly lonely; separated from the world through his deafness and the vast dimensions of his genius. With glacial solitude surrounding him, he conceives the Ninth Symphony - that "monument to the reconciliation of all mankind;" tormented and tested by a merciless god, he soars to the uncanny height of his last quartets - offering the listener "metaphysics instead of sounds." His isolated figure - not "anti-tragic" but tragically heroic - appears indeed akin to that of the imperial prisoner of St. Helena - Napoleon Bonaparte, to whom Beethoven, in the days of his glorious youth, dedicated his Eroica.

~~The parallel between the two great men - Beethoven and Napoleon - is one of the central themes woven through Ludwig's book. Both appeal equally to his inborn sense for the heroic, the tragic, and the~~

~~Beethoven~~

Evidently, this Beethoven biography falls short of the same author's Napoleon. But, notwithstanding flaws and repetitions - and disregarding an embarrassingly arrogant preface - it is probably the most solid, finest piece of work this too prolific, often irresponsible writer produced since his books on Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm.

Klaus Mann