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Bürger's Ballad *Lenore* in Germany, France and England

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Gottfried August Bürger's ballad *Lenore* corresponds to a folk tale common in many parts of Europe about a girl whose deceased suitor appears to her as a revenant. In Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* it is listed as the »Dead Rider« theme, the story of a departed lover who returns and takes his sweetheart with him on horseback. Sometimes she is saved at the grave by the crowing of the cock, though the experience is usually fatal.[1]

When Bürger wrote his ballad in 1773, he gave the theme a contemporary slant: the »Dead Rider« in his version is a young farmhand, Wilhelm by name, who was conscripted to fight in King Frederick's army during the Seven Years War. After peace is declared and all the other men of the village have returned to their families, his betrothed, Lenore, remains alone, waiting for him in despair. In spite of her mother's attempts to console her, she rebels against her fate and in her frenzy curses the workings of Providence. From the moment of Lenore's blasphemy the story follows a grisly course: At midnight Wilhelm appears on horseback at her house and urges her to join him. They set off, galloping through barren and unfamiliar country; Lenore is filled with fear and repeatedly asks why they must go so fast, always receiving the same horrifying answer: »Hurra! Die Toten reiten schnell!« But Wilhelm promises to bring her to the place where their union is to be accomplished. Reaching a graveyard, he pushes forward with his horse, passing among the tombstones where, by degrees, he loses his lifelike appearance and is changed to a skeleton, while the earth opens up to swallow both him and his mistress.[2]

In addition to transforming the rather naive folk tale into a sophisticated story of terror and fright, Bürger developed in his ballad a style fully appropriate to the plot. From the first line on, to the very end, the choice of words, rhymes and rhythms suffuses the poem with suspense. A constant shift of perspective from the narrator to Lenore to Wilhelm and back; onomatopoetic devices, especially those reflecting the ambience of the hurried ride of the two lovers; an aggressive pace of action which seems to increase from one stanza to the next, all this creates an intensity of thought and feeling hitherto unknown in German poetry and even after Bürger rarely paralleled by any other author with such mastery.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century and up to the middle of the nineteenth, *Lenore* was widely read in all those nations of Europe where the Romantic movement reigned, comparable in popularity only to *Werther, Childe Harold*, or *René*. At different times, and under different circumstances, it was perused and declaimed in such diverse places as Edinburgh, Paris, Copenhagen, Saint Petersburg and Milan. It inspired poets of many tongues to compose ballads on similar subjects and to adopt characteristics of Bürger's style. It was dramatized and performed on the stage, illustrated and set to music.

It was so much in vogue among the reading audience that scores of new-born girls were called Lenore, Lore or Lenora.

The responses provoked by *Lenore* within most European literatures were intense and wide-ranging enough that a book-length discussion could well be devoted to them. In order to indicate what might be considered in such a study, this essay will elaborate on some of the major differences in the reception accorded the poem in Germany, England, and France, referring to other literatures in a more cursory way.

What happened to *Lenore* in Germany was initially determined by the interest of some of the period's most avant-garde writers, who were attempting to revive long forgotten traditions of folk poetry. Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, which had already inspired Bodmer, Raspe and Herder to search for similar texts in their own nation's past, was for Bürger, too, an eye-opener, and it prompted him to conceive what he considered to be a new form of poetry. The actual catalyst to his conception of *Lenore* was probably the ballad »Sweet William's Ghost.« From it Bürger borrowed the basic plot, the name of the bridegroom and a few other details, but the expansiveness of his poem was solely his own.[3]

When *Lenore* appeared in the *Göttinger Musenalmanach* in the fall of 1773, the same year that witnessed the publication of Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* and Herder's essays *Von deutscher Art und Kunst*, it received instant approbation in all parts of Germany. Especially admired were its powerful, in modern terms one might say expressionistic, language, and its action, which fulfilled the Storm and Stress writers' goal of pleasing simple people as well as intellectuals like themselves. In the wake of this success it was no wonder that Bürger, flushed with pride, claimed for himself one of the highest peaks of a German Parnassus.[4]

However, there were also censorious voices: particularly academics and Protestant theologians disapproved of the poem, the former because they felt it reflected the thinking of the uneducated lower classes, the latter because it seemed to them a scandalous piece of impiety: Lenore's renunciation of God upon learning of the death of her lover was viewed as a threat to the basic tenets of Christianity. The Lutheran church official Adolf Reinhard got so carried away with his charge of blasphemy that he accused not only Bürger and some of his friends, but the whole city of Göttingen, where Bürger resided at the time, of being a hotbed of godlessness.[5]

All critical responses were ultimately overshadowed by a review of Bürger's poems in 1791 from the pen of Schiller, whose intent at that time was to establish criteria for what he considered to be the perfect poetic form. Poetry, he asserted, should unite »those powers of the soul that are in disarray«, it should fashion »head and heart, acumen and wit, reason and sensibility into an harmonious whole, and restore the perfect human being which is in us.« The poet should purify his »individuality« as much as possible, in order to represent the most glorious state of mankind. The sensual or crude should be eliminated from literary creations, so that these reflect only the highest ideals.[6] As an illustration of gross deviation from his program he pointed to the poems of Bürger, which were indeed full of earthy, dark, at times even brutal elements. By declaring such elements to be transgressions against good taste, Schiller attempted to set new standards for writers, and in the process formulated the basic maxims of what came to be known as »German classicism«.

That he chose Bürger's poems for his negative examples appears, from Schiller's point of view, to have been almost accidental. He could have directed this criticism to a good number of other writers as well. Yet for Bürger, who at the time the review appeared was experiencing a series of professional, financial and marital crises, it meant a blow from which he never recovered. His excoriation as a poet of questionable aesthetics persuaded Germany's literary public to turn away from him, and in 1794, only three years after Schiller issued his verdict, he died in poverty and misery. Although the emergence of E. T. A. Hoffmann later brought »black Romanticism« into vogue, Bürger, its major forerunner, and his *Lenore* had by then become largely ignored.

To understand the British responses to *Lenore* one has to realize that the poem became known there during the last decade of the eighteenth century, just when English interest in German authors was beginning to develop. What English literati found appealing in them was their curious mixture of diverse proclivities. These new readers were thrilled by the dignity of Schiller's dramas, they appreciated the idyllic character of poems by Haller or Gessner, they empathized with Werther's melancholy, and they felt at home in the bourgeois world of Kotzebue. What seems to have attracted them most, however, were books in which tendencies to mystery or horror were evident, as in *Der Dolch*, Karl Grosse's novel replete with unfortunate complications; Benedicte Naubert's *Hermann von Unna*, a Gothic romance set in the Middle Ages; or Christian August Vulpius' fantastic robber story *Rinaldo Rinaldini*.

It was this interest that made the English reading audience ready to welcome and absorb *Lenore*. The elements of terror contained in it, such as the night-time ride of Lenore with her lover, the invocation of the spirits of the dead, and the increasingly gloomy atmosphere, nearly guaranteed that the ballad would be perused with enthusiasm. The hoofbeats of the ghostly horse that carried Lenore to her death, it was said at the time, could be heard reverberating from Scotland to Wales.

To illustrate the response to *Lenore* in England it may be helpful to look more closely at several of the reactions to it evident in the form of translations and adaptations. In nearly all of them, some degree of deviation from Bürger's text can be observed. Indeed, William Taylor of Norwich, the man who first acquainted the English reading audience with the poem by translating it in 1791, already put his mark on it. Instead of imitating Bürger's fiery, often staccato verses, he chose to use the more controlled diction of old English ballads. He also gave the plot a national tilt by transforming the Prussian soldier into a crusader-knight fighting under the banner of Richard Cœur de Lion. He even let Lenore be carried over the open water on the knight's spectral ride:

> Tramp, tramp across the land they speed;
> Splash, splash across the sea.[7]

Taylor's translation, circulated only in a handwritten version, was the spark which ignited a chain of further reactions to *Lenore*. One of the promptest was Matthew Gregory Lewis' *Monk*, the epitome of what has been called the tale of terror. Among the many materials Lewis borrowed from British, French and German sources, Bürger's *Lenore* is clearly recognizable: the ballad of *Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogene*, an integral part of the novel, deals with a revenant who pulls his bride with him into his grave. This is described in morbid detail against the background of a medieval setting in Palestine and gruesome appearances of ghosts from purgatory.[8]

No fewer than five further attempts at translation were all published in 1796 in various journals or collections of poetry, among them versions by Walter Scott and John Thomas Stanley. Both made great efforts to emulate Bürger's expressive use of language. For Scott, who had become attracted to the poem through his participation in the so-called »German classes« of Edinburgh, the goal was to bring to life a »truly Romantic story.«[9] Stanley, in his *Leonora, a Tale Freely Translated from the German*, tried to recreate what he called Bürger's many »bubbles« of imagination, without which poetry would be deprived of its most beautiful creations.[10] But while Scott kept his changes of content more or less within the frame already set by Taylor, Stanley moved the poem in a new direction. As Evelyn B. Jolles has shown in a line-by-line analysis, Stanley considerably altered the German original, producing a much tamer text as a result. He not only ignored some of Bürger's onomatopoetic devices like »trap, trap, trap« and »Klinglingling«, but made rather consequential changes in the characterization of the heroine and her swain. Omitting some of Bürger's sensitive references to Lenore's state of mind, he made her appear less a distraught lover than a woman who unthinkingly disavows her faith and who receives a deserved punishment. The ambiguity in the appearance of Wilhelm was abolished as well: he was no longer a revenant whom the superior strength of Death forces to return to his grave, but he was Death itself. The poem took on the quality of a religious or moral parable.[11]

In this role, as a still dreadful but now also educational folk ballad, *Lenore* became firmly established in the British literary tradition. Until late into the Victorian period it was frequently reprinted, and inspired further translations, imitations and adaptations. How well known it must have been far into the nineteenth century can be deduced from several preserved parodies, among them one entitled the *Brighton Leonora*, written in 1849, in which the events unfold during a train ride through the British countryside, ending, instead of with Lenore's gruesome death, with her arrival at Victoria Station where she is welcomed by her joyful parents.[12]

The reception accorded *Lenore* in France was of a different nature. Although a review of Bürger's *Schriften* in the *Magasin encyclopédique* of 1797 had drawn attention to the ballad and called for a translation, no response of any kind developed at the time.[13] About the reasons for such silence one can only speculate, but perhaps it is fair to assume that, as had been the case initially with *Werther*, French readers were not well disposed toward a poem lacking in moderation and good taste.

That the French finally learned more about *Lenore* and discovered a sympathy for her must be attributed to Madame de Staël, who observed the British craze for the poem during her London exile. It is likely that August Wilhelm Schlegel, who had studied in Göttingen under Bürger and retained his respect for him in spite of Schiller's dismissal, also influenced her opinion. Whatever the cause for her interest, in *De l'Allemagne* she devoted an unusually long passage to *Lenore*. Most noteworthy in her appraisal is her stress on the poem's form: »All the imagery, all the sounds connected with the situation of the soul, are wonderfully expressed; the syllables, the rhymes, all the art of language is employed to excite terror.« As she saw it, Bürger's stanzas forcefully rendered the tempo of the headlong ride, and she went so far as to aver that few formulations in all poetry had been as memorable to her as Wilhelm's ghostly words, which she quoted as »Les morts vont vite, les morts vont vite.«[14]

The stand Madame de Staël took in *Lenore*'s favor must have had an effect, for in 1814, a year after the appearance of *De l'Allemagne*, the complete ballad was translated twice into French. Both translators seem to have proceeded with a certain nonchalance. While one of them referred to Bürger as »Madame de B**«, the other, a certain Baron de la Madelaire, remarked that he had followed an English version of the poem because the German original seemed to be incomprehensible in places. The text he produced as a result was rather flat, but what it lacked in the way of the original's fire it made up for in suggestive additions of its own. Where in Bürger's words one hears, for example, that Lenore, awakened at midnight, hastily threw on a dress before jumping on Wilhelm's horse, this French version submits that Leonore was »almost naked«, with her long, disordered plaits falling over her breast, trusting to her love to transport her beyond her fear.[15]

To get a more accurate feeling for the stylistic finesse of *Lenore* the French reading audience had to wait until 1830, when Gérard de Nerval published his *Poésies Allemandes*, a volume of selected prose translations. Along with poems by Klopstock, Goethe and Schiller, it contained most of Bürger's ballads, led by *Lenore*. This rendition was exceedingly skillful, capturing all the onomatopoetic effects of the poem. As consequential as the quality of Nerval's language was his contention in the preface to the volume that Bürger's poetry, and *Lenore* in particular, should beguile the reader because of its very German spirit, the equivalent of true Romanticism. Arguing along the same lines as had Madame de Staël, he maintained that poetic figures like revenants or sorcerers were the last vestiges of an ancient Northern mythology which had been inspired by the long nights of those climes. And among all Germans, he felt, it was Bürger who most successfully mined this superstitious vein that still so deeply penetrated the human heart.[16]

Madame de Staël's praise of the ballad, together with Nerval's rendition of it, resulted in a breakthrough in France. More translations followed, among them one in verse by the Alsatian Paul Lehr (1834). As had been the case in England, in France, too, theatrical adaptations signified both the popularity of the ballad and its gradual return into the sphere of folk culture whence its theme had originated. Typical for this development was a melodramatic production entitled *Léonore ou les Morts vont vite*, performed around 1840 in Paris' Theatre de la Gaieté. When Heine saw it there he took pleasure in the way Bürger himself was portrayed as the creator of the ballad, obsessively scribbling his chef-d'œuvre by the light of a full moon. The leitmotif line, so deftly adapted in the title of the melodrama, remained known in France well into the late nineteenth century, when one could still hear the remark »Les morts vont vite, comme dit la ballade allemande.«[17]

Much more could be said about the response provoked by *Lenore* both inside and outside the country of its origin. One could mention the sophisticated reaction of the Russian poet Shukovsky, who not only imitated *Lenore* in his own *Ljudmilla* but also wrote a lengthy analysis favorably comparing Bürger's ballad style with Schiller's; one could discourse about the way *Lenore* became the focus of an argument between Giovanni Berchet and Alessandro Manzoni concerning the use of motifs from folk tales in Italian Romantic writing; one could discuss adaptations in Poland that added a tone of national sentimentality, or the attempts of Jens Baggesen and Lyhne Rahbek, the Danish poets, to model their own writing after *Lenore*.[18]

Reviewing all these echoes to *Lenore* makes clear not only how much readers and writers of most European nations were impressed by the ballad's poetic qualities, but also the extent to which they adapted it to their own tastes. Different aspects of *Lenore* appealed to

different people at different times. The recognition that any piece of folk literature incorporates national or regional characteristics may well have been the reason why translators like Taylor of Norwich felt justified in rendering the poem so freely into their own language. British authors, as well as the British reading public, recognized at first the affinity between Bürger's ballad and the tales of terror in the style of Lewis and Maturin. After the terror craze had palled, they gave the story a twist toward Victorian modes of thought: as a parable of transgression justly punished *Lenore* remained for a long time in the public awareness in England. In Germany the appreciation of the poem took an opposite course: the rejection of Bürger as an author who flouted Schiller's idealistic goals for poetry pushed him – and with him *Lenore* – into undeserved obscurity. And for France again different standards applied: due to the initiatives of Madame de Staël and Nerval *Lenore* was recognized there both as an embodiment of Romanticism's dark aspects and as a poem which captured »German« characteristics in literature.

But in spite of their national tinges, all these responses to *Lenore* are closely interrelated, crossing the boundaries among European literatures. The revival of the folk ballad had its first champion in Percy, a Welshman, yet it was the German poet Bürger who elevated it to a form of higher literature. The tale of terror was, some critics suggest, a creation of the Germans, yet it reached its peak in the Gothic novels of England, with *Lenore* admirably suited to this context. That the French discovered a liking for the ballad was due to Madame de Staël, who probably heard about it from English rather than from German sources. And that most foreign readers ignored Schiller's criticism of Bürger may well signify their indifference to the German author's aesthetic theories.

Our appraisal of the different gowns *Lenore* wore at different times and in different places has illustrated the involvement of a single poem in major trends of literary evolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: on the one hand, the responses to it embodied a growing awareness of national traditions and, on the other, changing tastes among those who considered themselves the intellectual avant-garde repeatedly subjected it to new interpretations. Most of these developments in Germany, England and France seem to deserve further discussion, and responses to the ballad in other nations call for equal attention. The results of such an investigation might well shed more light on the intellectual bonds to be found among European literatures during a period that has always been close to the heart of Henry Remak, colleague and friend.

Notes

[1] Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. Bloomington 1968, vol. II, p. 420.

[2] The summary of the poem's action is based on Madame de Staël's description of it in *De l'Allemagne*, Part II, Chapter 13.

[3] Arnold E. Berger, »Bürgers Leben und Werke«, in: *Bürger's Gedichte*, Leipzig and Wien 1904, p. 25.

[4] Berger, p. 26.

[5] Wolfgang von Wurzbach, *Gottfried August Bürger. Sein Leben und seine Werke*, Leipzig 1900, p. 98. A discussion concerning the theological implications of *Lenore* developed among Albrecht Schöne, Lore Kaim-Klook, Eduard Stäuble, Emil Staiger and Götz Hübner between 1954 and 1969. A synopsis of this discussion is given by William A. Little, *Gottfried August Bürger*, New York 1974, pp. 102–107.

[6] Friedrich von Schiller, »Über Bürgers Gedichte«, in: *Werke*, ed. Gerhard Fricke and Herbert Göpfert, Munich 1959, vol. V, p. 971–972.

[7] Quoted by Evelyn B. Jolles, *G. A. Bürger's Ballad ›Lenore‹ in England*, Regensburg 1974, p. 71.

[8] Jolles, p. 80.

[9] Jolles, p. 81.

[10] Jolles, p. 94.

[11] Jolles, pp. 95–105.

[12] J.W. Warre Tyndale, *The Bürger and Brighton Leonora; or, Romance versus Railway. Dedicated, by Permission, to All Desperate Daughters*, London 1849.

[13] Theodor Süpfle, *Geschichte des deutschen Kultureinflusses auf Frankreich*, Gotha 1888, vol. II, p. 160.

[14] *De l'Allemagne*, Part II, Chapter 13.

[15] Süpfle, p. 150.

[16] *Œuvres complémentaires de Gérard de Nerval*, ed. Jean Richter, Paris 1959, vol. I, p. 43. Cf. also Charles Dédéyan, *Gérard de Nerval et l'Allemagne*, Paris 1957, vol. II, p. 282–288; Alfred Dubruck, *Gérard de Nerval and the German Heritage*, The Hague 1965, pp. 104–106.

[17] Süpfle, p. 161.

[18] Cf. Hans-Bernd Harder, *Schiller in Russland*, Berlin 1869, pp. 166–167. – L. Filippi, *La Poesia di G. A. Bürger*, Venezia 1928, pp. 70–75. – Sven Hakon Rossel, *Den Litteraere Vise I Folketraditionen*, Copenhagen 1971, p. 91.