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(RECAP)

BURGER, GODFREY AUGUSTUS, a popular German poet, and well known in this country as the author of the celebrated ballad of *Leonora*, was born at Wolmerswende, in the principality of Halberstadt, on the 1st of January, 1748. In his infancy, as he himself informs us, he displayed no uncommon indications of superior genius; but was, on the contrary, considered by his parents as remarkable only for stupidity and indolence. The first ten years of his life were employed in learning to read and write his native language; the Bible and book of church hymns were his principal and favourite study; and his memory being naturally retentive, he easily remembered what he read from these volumes. From the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and the volume of hymns already mentioned, he caught the first glow of poetical inspiration; and to the latest period of his life, he recollected, and mentioned with emotion, the enthusiasm to which they had elevated his youthful mind.

Even so early as the expiration of his first *decennium*, Burger exhibited that symptom of a poetical disposition—the love of solitude; and without any external encouragement, or other learning, than that with which his hitherto very limited range of reading had supplied him, he began to write verses before he had been taught so much as the first principles of grammar and composition. His studies, in the mean time, proceeded but slowly; and the difficulty with which he was made to acquire a knowledge of the rules of Latin grammar appears extraordinary in a youth certainly of no mean talents. His father, a plain, sensible man, of some learning and great indolence, having in vain attempted to make his son comprehend the elements of that language, at length resolved to send him, in his 12th year, to his grandfather at Aschersleben, in order that he might have the advantage of attending the grammar school in that town. Here young Burger made some progress in Latin; but having, unfortunately, incurred the displeasure of the rector, in consequence of some satirical verses which he had composed in ridicule of one of his fellow pupils, his grandfather found it necessary to remove him to the *frædagogium* at Halle, in the year 1762. In 1764, he entered into the university of Halle, and became, at his grandfather's desire, although contrary to his own inclination, a student of divinity. He is even said to have preached once in a country church in the neighbourhood of Halle. Theological studies, however, were not congenial with the lively disposition of Burger; and his grandfather having got information, that the young man did not conduct himself in a manner suitable to his future vocation, recalled him from Halle. But Burger, it would seem, contrived to appease the anger of his offended relative; for he obtained his permission, not only to repair to Gottingen, at Easter, 1768, but to change his studies from theology to jurisprudence. At Gottingen, accordingly, he applied himself, for some time, with assiduity to his new course of study, and made considerable progress in acquiring a knowledge of the principles of the civil law; but the influence of his former dissipated habits became again apparent; and his grandfather having been informed of his manner of living, gradually withdrew from him his countenance and support, and appears to have regarded him as a depraved youth, whose case was entirely hopeless.

Meanwhile, however, Burger became associated with several men of genius at Gottingen, by whose generous assistance he was enabled to continue his studies, which were now principally directed to ancient and modern literature, and especially to poetry. During this period, he composed several of his songs and smaller pieces. In the year 1770, he contributed, along with his friends, Gotter and Boie, to the contents of the first poetical almanack which appeared in Germany; a species of publication, the idea of which was borrowed from the French. About this time, too, he composed his *Ode to Hope*, and his translation of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, an undertaking which he appears to have long meditated, and upon the execution of which he seems to have dwelt with feelings of peculiar gratification.

Being now well known and esteemed as a poet in Gottingen, Burger had an opportunity of cultivating his genius in the society of a number of young men of distinguished merit, then residing at the same university, several of whom afterwards made a conspicuous figure on the literary theatre of Germany. Among these may be mentioned the poets, Voss, Holty, and the two counts Stolberg. To these friends he communicated most of

his pieces before their publication, and was, no doubt, indebted to them for many useful hints and emendations. In the year 1772, he obtained, through the interest of his friends, the situation of an officer of justice (*amtman*) in the territory of Alten-Gleichen, in the neighbourhood of Gottingen. In 1774, he married his first wife, a daughter of the Hanoverian law-officer, Leonhart, at Niedeck. The place which had been procured for him, however, was neither of sufficient emolument, nor sufficiently congenial with the disposition and habits of the poet, to afford him much or permanent gratification; he therefore resigned it in 1784 in disgust, and in the following year returned to Gottingen.

During the period of his residence in the country, he composed his famous ballad of *Leonora*, and translated several of the books of Homer's *Iliad* into Iambic blank verse, which were published in the *German Museum*. Neither this translation, however, nor one which he afterwards attempted in hexameter verse, was ever completed; nor is it much to be regretted, that he should have relinquished a task, which was afterwards so well performed by count Frederick Stolberg, and by Voss. In 1778, he undertook the sole superintendance of the Gottingen poetical almanack; the former editor, Goecking, having associated himself with Voss, in the management of a similar publication at Hamburg. In the same year, he also published the first collection of his poems, which contained several new pieces, in addition to those which had already appeared in different periodical works.

On his return to Gottingen, in 1784, our author, whose pecuniary circumstances were far from being in a prosperous state, determined to devote himself entirely to his favourite literary pursuits, and to endeavour to qualify himself for the situation of a professor in the university. With this object in view, he began to read lectures on philosophy and the *belles lettres*, and to give private instruction to individual students. In the following year (1785), he married the youngest sister of his former wife, who had been carried off by consumption about twelve months before; a step which exposed him to much censure on the score of morality, but which appears to have been to himself a source of great comfort and happiness. But his happiness was of short duration; for his beloved partner, in whom his whole affections seem to have been centred, died of a hectic fever a few months after the celebration of the marriage. The blow fell heavily upon Burger; and, indeed, from this period, his life exhibits little else than a record of uninterrupted bodily and mental distress. The animal spirits, which had hitherto supported him through poverty, and privations of different kinds, seem now to have almost entirely forsaken him; and the stream of life, which had previously flowed along with a brisk, if not an equable current, now became dull and flaggy, and mingled with the muddy waters of melancholy and affliction. For some time, he devoted himself to the study of the works of the philosopher of Koenigsberg, and read public lectures on the critical philosophy. Strong, however, as was the desire which he constantly manifested to excel as a teacher of philosophy, the infirm state of his health would not permit him to bestow that intense application upon those pursuits, which their nature necessarily required; and his exertions in this field of discipline, therefore, do not appear to have been attended with any remarkable success.

*In the year 1787, his health derived some benefit from medicine; and he had the satisfaction of at length ob-

taining from the philosophical faculty the degree of doctor. Two years afterwards, he was appointed an extraordinary professor of philosophy, though without any salary; and, in the same year, he published the second edition of his poems, which comprehended, in addition to the contents of the previous edition, his *Hohes Leid*, which he appears to have considered as his best and most finished production,—two poems in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the university of Gottingen, and several other pieces.

In 1790, Burger most unadvisedly entered into a third marriage with a Swabian girl, after a poetical courtship, in which the first advances were made by the lady. The marriage proved a most unhappy one, and was attended with consequences which it is believed contributed to shorten the existence of the poet.

In 1792, he was judicially divorced from his wife, after having suffered a great deal of misery during the latter period of the subsistence of the union. A short while before the separation, Burger had caught a cold, which produced a hoarseness that adhered to him during the remainder of his life, and deprived him of the faculty of speaking in public. His situation now became truly deplorable. Without any certain means of subsistence, he was compelled to earn a scanty and precarious livelihood, by translating out of foreign languages for the booksellers. Meanwhile, his strength rapidly declined. In the month of October 1793, he was forced, by a feverish complaint, to confine himself to bed. Symptoms of consumption ensued; and, after a painful and lingering illness, which he bore with becoming fortitude, he expired on the 8th of June 1794, in the 47th year of his age. A small monument was erected to his memory in Ulric's garden at Gottingen, a spot which the poet was in the habit of frequenting at early hours, and which is now used as a public promenade and place of amusement.

The moral character of Burger was far from being a model of purity; yet, if his failings must be allowed to have been numerous, his acknowledged virtues may perhaps be allowed to soften the tone of rigorous censure. His friends have borne ample testimony to the benevolence, disinterestedness, and liberality of sentiment, which uniformly distinguished him; and have recorded instances of generosity and truly Christian charity, which do him infinite honour. An uncommon vivacity of feeling, and a want of steady principle in the general conduct of life, appear to have constituted the defective part of his character; and while the former frequently hurried him into errors, which reason must have acknowledged and reprobated; the latter removed every obstacle to the impetuosity of passion. An indolent and irresolute mind, unable to resist the seductive allurements that are presented to the senses, produced a life which was too much marked by irregularity and dissipation; and actions which will not stand a trial, according to the strict tests of religion and of virtue.

Upon the poetical character and merits of Burger, we can dwell with more unmingled pleasure. Although all of his numerous productions will by no means satisfy the rigorous demands of taste and criticism; yet there will be found, in general, throughout his works, a spirit of originality, a copiousness of poetical imagery, an energy and fire of language, and a harmony of versification, which indicate the offspring of no ordinary genius. Of these excellencies, his *Pervigilium Veneris*, his *Ode to Hope*, his *Hohes Lied*, the two poems on the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the University of Gottingen, and

others, afford abundant examples. His defects, which, however, are more than compensated by his acknowledged beauties, may be partly ascribed to the peculiarities of his genius, and partly flow, as a necessary consequence, from the system he professed and pursued, in regard to poetical composition. He possessed more vigour and originality, than chasteness and disciplined thought; more boldness and luxuriancy of imagination, than correctness of judgment or refinement of taste. Like some writers of poetry in our own country, he avowedly looked upon popularity as, at once, the greatest proof of literary merit, and the highest reward of poetical exertion; and not that species of popularity which is conferred upon an author by the suffrages of the truly learned and discerning, but that which is acquired by condescending to adopt the feelings and prejudices, and even the very language, of the illiterate and the vulgar. To this erroneous system he too frequently sacrifices the rules of art, and the feelings of propriety, and gives to his effusions an occasional coarseness, which is apt to offend a critical and refined reader. Some of his sonnets and smaller pieces, too, however beautiful in diction and versification, betray too much of the individual character, sensations, and sufferings of the author: They not only exhibit pictures of individual and peculiar dispositions and emotions of the mind, but are, in fact, the offspring of these peculiar and temporary feelings; feelings too minute and particular to be fully comprehended and enjoyed by the reader, and often too violent to permit a free exercise of the poet's powers.

In one species of poetical composition, however, Burger has few rivals. His ballads, whether original or imitated, exhibit a richness in all the different essential qualities of that kind of writing, which has seldom been equalled, and perhaps never surpassed. In simplicity, energy, pathos, and humour, according to the nature of his subject, he always displays powers as excellent as they are various. His attention had been drawn, at an early stage of his literary career, to Percy's "Relicks," a collection which he perused with delight, and of which he translated some of the contents. Several of his ballads, however, are unquestionably original. An attempt, indeed, was made in the Monthly Magazine, (September 1796,) to show that Burger had taken the story of his *Leonora*, from an old English ballad, *The Suffolk Miracle*. But, in the first place, it is extremely improbable that Burger ever saw this supposed original; and, in the second place, it is certain that he used to give his friends a very different account of the matter, and we do not understand that his veracity was ever called in question. The first idea of writing such a ballad, he said, was suggested to him by hearing a peasant girl sing, by moonlight, some verses, of which he recollected only three lines, which we translate thus:

"The moon it shines so bright,
The dead ride fast by night:
Sweet love, art not afraid!"

From which it appears very probable, that an old ballad, somewhat similar in its subject, had existed at one time in Germany. After all, in a poem such as *Leonora*, it is not so much the invention, as the manner of execution, which evinces the genius of the author; and, in this latter respect, the merit of Burger is indisputable.

The amateurs of German literature are probably familiar with his other ballads, "*Der Wilde Jager*," (which has been translated, or rather imitated, by Mr Scott;)

"*Die Weiber von Weinsberg*;" "*Des Pfarrers Tochter von Taubenhain*;" "*Das Lied von Treue*," &c.; besides his translations from the English, which will not shrink from a comparison even with their beautiful originals.

The ballad of *Leonora* has been frequently translated. The admirers of splendid specimens of typography are acquainted with the elegant version of Mr W. Spencer, beautifully printed in folio, with engravings, from admirable designs, by Lady D. Beauclerc. See the Life prefixed to the fourth volume of Burger's works, published by Reinhard, in four volumes 8vo. Gottingen, 1796, and following years; and Schiller's *Review of Burger's Poems*, in the 4th volume of that author's prose writings, Leipsic, 1802. (z)