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PORTRAITS IN PRINT

"Leonora" and the German Spirit

THE other day, in an Eton bookshop I picked up a slim, handsome folio entitled *Leonora*. Translated from the German of Gottfried Augustus Bürger, with Designs by the Right Honourable Lady Diana Beauclerc. Diana Beauclerc, the adored friend of Horace Walpole, Reynolds and Gibbon, was perhaps the most brilliant of the amateur artists who thronged English society in the eighteenth century. She particularly excelled in the drawing of cupids, and even the great Wedgwood drew inspiration from her. But it is not classical prettiness that makes *Leonora* fascinating. It is rather the clue it gives one to the workings of the German mind.

Bürger, the author of *Leonora*, enjoyed the tragic life which was then *de rigueur* for a poet: and a vast, incomprehensible popularity. "He is," says the preface, "generally elegant, often sublime and never unintelligible. . . . The scholar and the moralist cannot refuse praise where they have found entertainment, without disgust to their taste or danger to their principles: and the mechanic peruses with delight sentiments suited to his feelings, imagery familiar to his mind and precepts adapted to his practice."

So spoke the complacent translator some hundred and eighty years ago. But to our taste *Leonora* whether in German or in English, is pretty lamentable stuff. It is its mood that is important; for it goes far to explain Belsen and Buchenwald, Dachau and Auschwitz.

It is the story of a young person who loved a soldier called Wilhelm. Battles are lost and won, armies are demobilized, but still no Wilhelm. Leonora, very much upset, wails to her gloomy disapproving mother, when presto! Wilhelm is at the gate, impatient on a prancing steed. He insists on carrying Leonora off.

From the first his conversation is so funereal Leonora should have known something was wrong. But no! The obstinate girl mounts behind him, they ride through the night, the atmosphere of melancholy horror gradually deepens, strange skeletons and funerals flash in the darkness, and then at last, with a shrieking and a rattling of bones, Wilhelm himself turns into a skeleton, to carry Leonora in his grisly embrace down to the tomb.

"Gothick" stories were of course fashionable in other countries beside Germany a century and a half ago. England, after all, had her *Castle of Otranto* and *Monk Lewis*. But in *Leonora* there is a piling up of the gruesome that could only be German. Written for the luxury of frightening a happier and more balanced age than ours, it is the complete expression of that queer, almost Mongolian, morbidity which lurks in the recesses of every German's mind—in a Dürer, a Wagner, or a Thomas Mann. But Bürger, when he set fashionable skins tingling with horror, cannot have dreamed that his wildest, most mortuary fancies would one day be realized at Belsen, not after all so very far from Göttingen, where he passed the larger part of his stormy life. Of recent generations only that eternal school-boy, Mr. Ernest Hemingway, in his remote American security, can afford to dream up horrors. We live too close to real ones.