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## ON THE GERMAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.

Languages carry within themselves the marks of their antiquity and origin. The roots of ancient and what are called primitive tongues, are expressive of the notions and customs of men in the first stages of society. Following this internal evidence as our guide, the German language (taking the term in its widest sense) must be allowed to belong to a very remote antiquity. The oldest existing monuments of the language are, however, comparatively modern. From the Mæso-Gothic translation of the Gospels, by Bishop Ulfilas, the variations of the language may be traced through all its stages, down to the time of the Reformation, when the German began to be cultivated by the learned. The existing specimens of German Literature, previous to the sixteenth century, are principally works designed for the amusement of the unlearned; the *Heldenbuck*, the *Nibelungen Lied*, *Reinecke der Fuchs*, are

known, at least by name, to all German readers. The lyrics of the *Minnesingers* hold the same place in German literature as the songs of the *Troubadours* occupy in that of the South of Europe. They are rather to be considered as the expression of the chivalrous spirit of the age, than as specimens of individual talent, and are more valuable as a commentary on history and manners, than on account of their intrinsic poetical merit. The History of the language, from the time of the Reformation, is sufficiently familiar. At that time the *Upper Saxon*,\* used by Luther in his famous translation of the Scriptures, took the precedence of the other dialects, and was used by writers in every part of Germany. This *Upper Saxon* improved by cultivation, and enriched from the stores of the other dialects, is the present *Hoch-Deutsch*, the classical language of Germany.

The rise of German literature

\* Luther, however, did not confine himself to the dialect of a particular province, but endeavoured, as he says himself, to write in a language which would be generally understood in Germany.

cannot however be dated from the time of Luther. At the time of the Reformation the contending writers on both sides were obliged to make use of the vernacular tongue in order to make themselves intelligible to the vulgar, but this was a matter of necessity not of choice, and two centuries more elapsed before the great writers of Germany adopted their own language from preference, from confidence in its power, riches, and beauty.

German literature is therefore of very recent origin. The Germans were long a cultivated and literary people before they learned to value or understand their own mother speech; they were content to adopt a foreign idiom, and to forego the inexhaustible riches of their own language. Their princes in general encouraged this spirit of imitation, and repressed the first attempts at originality. Frederick the great, a Frenchman in his taste, was the persecutor of the genius of his country. The disciple of Voltaire never imagined that his own countrymen could attain any literary character more respectable than that of being awkward imitators of the French, and to this he endeavoured to confine them. The *Roi Philosophe* had not a soul fit to conceive the idea of a literature more lofty than that which he himself set the example of worshipping. The Germans are distinguished for the homage which they pay to their rulers; originality being discouraged at court, could not find favour in any quarter, and the German language was thus neglected by those whose genius could have shewn forth its beauties.

It was not, however, to be expected that a people in possession of such a language should for ever continue to write in French, or to imitate French models. As soon as the example was set by a great

writer, the Germans deserted their foreign masters and betook themselves to the task of rearing a native literature. From this time their attachment to their own language has been as remarkable as their former insensibility to its merits. During the long and dull reign of French taste, the German had been corrupted and disfigured by the introduction of French words and phraseology. The writers who followed Klopstock and Lessing, rejected these foreign intruders, and threw themselves on the resources of their own idiom. The object of the Purists was to throw out the exotics as fast as possible, and to supply their places by genuine native terms. It has been doubted whether this spirit may not have been carried too far, as the human mind rushes from one extreme to another; but as the German language can, from its own stores supply forms for all the shades of thought, and for every discovery which the human mind can make, the necessity for retaining in it any foreign admixture seems to be questionable.

As the Germans themselves continued so long ignorant of the value of their own language, it is not surprising that foreigners were still later in perceiving and acknowledging its merits. Their French neighbours, who have but too much led the taste of Europe, continued to consider the German as a barbarous jargon, unfit for literary compositions of a high order, and the learned in other countries re-echoed the decision. But truth in the long run prevails over fashion and prejudice, and this language is now beginning to be studied by the lovers of literature in all civilized countries. In a few years hence a knowledge of German, notwithstanding the difficulty of the acquisition, will be a very common acquirement.

The German is the most copious

of European languages, and it has the faculty of multiplying itself by compounding its own radicals. The analyzing of compound German words, the separation of the root from the adjunct, furnishes great pleasure to the student. In this wonderful language, the accent falls on the root of the word and determines and preserves its signification. The German language is also one of the most varied in its sounds. Its tones are rather those of grandeur and strength, than of softness and sweetness, yet it can assume every character. It is certainly not naturally melodious like the Italian, but are we on this account to prefer that bastard Latin,

"Which sounds as if it should be writ on satin?"

The German has more flexibility, and this is a more valuable quality. It may, in a great measure, assume the softness of the Italian; the Italian cannot easily be divested of its love-sickliness. Dante and Alfieri have endeavoured to infuse a masculine spirit into it, and it is the highest praise of their genius to say that they have succeeded. The two languages have the same relation to each other which subsists between the music of the two countries. The music of Italy is distinguished by beauty of melody, that of Germany, by grandeur of harmony. Sweetness is not the attribute of the German language, and the Italian critics complain of the thundering and crashing style of Handel's music. Yet, though the sounds of the German language, taken separately, are not musical, their effect in sentences is agreeable and harmonious.

That the German abounds in harsh combinations of consonants,

is undeniable, but from the copiousness of the language these combinations may be easily avoided. The guttural sound of *ch*, which is unpronounceable by so many Europeans, the German has in common with the Greek, which many affect to consider as the most euphonic of all languages. There is a considerable difference between the positions in which this sound presents itself in the Greek and in the German. It would not be easy to find a line in German poetry where the guttural is so prominent as in this verse of the Odyssey :

Τριχθα τι και τετραχθα δισηχισις εσ ανηρσι.

No German word begins with this sound as many Greek do, and this I think is an advantage on the side of the German. The sound of *pf*, the Germans reckon the harshest in their language, and the difficulty of pronouncing it is increased by the consonants which sometimes follow it; a German writer gives, as examples of the degrees of harshness, the words Pfennig, Pfeffer, Pfriem, Ppropfreis.\* I give the following line from Schiller as a curiosity; it is hardly pronounceable but by a German:

"Wohlauf Kamaraden! Auf's Pferd, auf's Pferd!"

It cannot, however, be said that this sound is of frequent occurrence.

If the German were really as jarring and uncouth as it was once the fashion to represent it, the vast stores of knowledge to which it is the key, would render it well worth the trouble of acquiring. On ancient History, Antiquities, Mythology, and Philosophy, the German writers have thrown more light than those of all other countries put together. They have

\* F. C. A. Berg's Grammar.

revolutionized the whole system of philology, and fixed it on truer and more solid foundations. We ought to study the language of Germany, if it were only to enable us to appreciate and understand the labours of its Niebuhrs and Schlegels, and if there existed no such thing as German polite literature. German must be studied by all Englishmen who wish to understand their own language; the two tongues are sister representatives of the Teutonic.

But it cannot be said with truth, that the German is a harsh language. That flexibility which enables it to assume every character, does not fail it when the subject of the writer requires the most dulcet melody. The writer who is master of this instrument can produce from it every tone of music from the rudest sweepings of the lyre to the softest Lydian measures,

wie leise vom Zephyr erschüttert  
Schnell die öolische Harfe erzittert.

The German abounds in words ending in vowel sounds, and by availing themselves of such words and by other means which the ear and taste may direct, the German poets have produced verses which vie with the strains of the Italian masters. Every reader of German poetry must have met with numberless instances. If the great beauty of the poetry do not deceive me, the following lines of Schiller are extremely musical:

Ehret die Frauen! Sie flechten und  
weben  
Himmliche Rosen ins irdische Leben,

Flechten der Liebe beglückendes Band,  
Und in der Grazie züchtigem Schleier  
Nähren sie wachsam das ewige Feuer  
Schöner Gefühle mit heiliger Hand.

Ewig aus der Wahrheit Schranken  
Schweift des Mannes wilde Kraft;  
Unstät treiben die Gedanken  
Auf dem Meer der Leidenschaft.

Gierig greift er in die Ferne  
Nimmer wird sein Herz gestillt  
Rastlos durch entleg'ne Sterne  
Jagt er seines Traumes Bild.\*

In the poem of which the two first verses are here given, the loveliness and virtue of woman are contrasted in alternate verses with the wild strength and passion of man. The verses are worthy of the subject; the praise of woman has found a suitable strain, nor do these two verses appear to me more melodious than the remaining seven.

It would occupy more space than I am allowed, merely to refer to the numerous specimens of musical versification which might be pointed out in the more celebrated German poets. Examples in abundance may be found in the works of Werner, of Bürger, and of Matthisson. The following song possesses this merit in a high degree, and the poetry is beautiful and pathetic.

#### DAS GRAB.

Das Grab ist tief und stille  
Und schauerhaft sein Rand  
Es deckt mit schwarzer Hülle  
Ein unbekanntes Land.  
Das Lied der Nachtigallen  
Tönt nicht in seinem Schoos  
Der Freundschaft Rosen fallen  
Nur auf des Hügels Moos.

\* *Literal translation.*—Honour the Women! They entwine and weave heavenly roses into earthly life, they weave the happy-making band of love, and in the modest veil of grace, they vigilantly nourish the eternal fire of fine feelings with a holy hand.

The wild strength of man is perpetually roving beyond the bounds of truth; unstably his thoughts are drifted upon the sea of passion. Eagerly he seizes on the distant, never is his heart quieted; restlessly through remote stars he hunts the image of his dream.

Verlass'ne Bräute ringen  
 Umsonst die Hände wund  
 Der Waisen Klagen dringen  
 Nicht in dem tiefen Grund.  
 Doch sonst an keinem orte  
 Wohnt die ersehnte Ruh'  
 Nur durch die dunkle Pforte  
 Geht man der Heimath zu.  
 Das arme Herz hiernieden  
 Von manchem Sturm bewegt  
 Erlangt den wahren Frieden  
 Nur wo es nicht mehr schlägt.\*

The power of adapting the sound to the sense is possessed in an extraordinary degree by the German language. The trooper's song in Wallenstein, is a masterpiece in this way, and the celebrated Lied von der Glocke, by the same author, is perhaps the finest specimen in any language. The following verse from Bürger's Leonore, is not perhaps a legitimate example of the merit of which I am speaking, but it is wonderfully striking and animated :

Und aussen horch! ging's trap, trap,  
 trap,  
 Als wie von Rosses Hufen;  
 Und klirrend stieg ein Reiter ab  
 An des Geländers Stufen;  
 Und horch!—und horch!—der Pfortenring  
 Ganz lose, leise klinglingling;  
 Dann kamen durch die Pforte  
 Vernehmlich diese Worte.

Leonore is the most beautiful of all ballad Romances. The unholy despair of the wretched girl, contrasted with the piety so naturally and affectingly expressed by the mother, forms one of the finest dramatic scenes ever written. What can be more simple than the mother's prayer to God, and the words by which she strives to

comfort her daughter? yet these words produce a strong emotion in the reader.

Hilf Gott hilf! Sieh uns gnädig an!  
 Kind bet' ein Vaterunser!

\* \* \* \* \*  
 Hilf Gott hilf! Wer den Vater kennt  
 Der weiss, er hilft den Kindern.  
 Das hochgelobte Sakrament  
 Wird deinen Jammer lindern.

The daughter's frenzy is as true to nature.

O Mutter, Mutter! was mich brennt  
 Das lindert mir kein Sakrament!  
 Kein Sakrament mag Leben  
 Dem Todten wieder geben!

The agonized feelings of Leonore express themselves in the subsequent verses of the poem, in language which it may have been impious in the poet to have written. But has despair ever been painted in colours so terrifically vivid?

The spectre horseman arrives, appearing to Leonore as her long lost Wilhelm, and her burning love is described as naturally as was the awful feeling which before overwhelmed her.

Ach Wilhelm erst herein geschwind,  
 Den Hagedorn durchsaus't der Wind,  
 Herein in meinen Armen  
 Herzliebster zu erwärmen!

The wild unearthly mirth of the horsemen expressed in short abrupt exclamations, is equally powerful with the rest of this strange romance. His repeated "Hurrah! die Todten reiten schnell!" makes the blood run cold. In a mind such as Bürger's, the ravings of Leonore imply no disrespect for religion in the poet. German authors in general are

\* *Literal translation.*—The grave is deep and still, and horrible its brink; it covers with a black veil, an unknown country. The song of the Nightingales sounds not in its bosom, the roses of friendship fall only on the moss of the hillock. Forsaken brides wring bitterly the hands in vain, the cries of the orphans pierce not into the deep ground. Yet in no other place dwells the sought-for rest; only through the dark gate do we go to our home. The poor heart, here below tossed by many a storm, obtains true peace, only where it no more beats



little scrupulous about the means which they employ for working on the minds of their readers. There is nothing holy in heaven, nor terrible in hell, which they have not seized on and embodied with their own wild and feverish conceptions. The most audacious of human compositions is Richter's Schaudervoller Traum.

Leonore is a poem well known to all German scholars, and to readers in general by translations; but my object is to excite English readers to the study of German, and this purpose I conceived I should better effect by hinting at the original beauties of a popular poem, than by laying before them any less known production. No translation can give any idea of the ballad of Leonore.

The best proof of the richness and flexibility of the German language is its well known power of exhibiting in translations, the genius and spirit of all other tongues. This advantage it is admitted to possess in a degree to which no other tongue can lay the least claim. Voss's translation of Homer, may well be reckoned the best in any language, for in no other tongue but the German could the compound epithets of the Grecian poet be translated or tolerated. In Voss's mother tongue they are natural, in any other they are disgustingly pedantic.

As the Germans have succeeded in almost every department of literary composition, it is impossible to attempt in a short essay any general criticism on their most famous authors. Of their literature in general, it may be said that, as it is more original, it is more natural than any other in Europe, for in Germany every one writes as seems good in his own eyes; there is no such thing among the German writers as a despotic code of literary laws, which genius is obliged to obey. The Germans

alone, of all the nations of Europe, have completely emancipated themselves from the imitation of the writers of Greece and Rome, which, in proportion to the extent to which it has been carried, has more or less debased modern literature. Imitation is the destroyer of talent, and no writer can become truly great by imitating another; but the grand curse of modern literature is, the imitation of the ancients, with whose faith, institutions, and manners, the inhabitants of the modern world can feel no sympathy. The German critics are deserving of eternal gratitude, for having brought into contempt the servile spirit of French literature, with all its absurd laws for extinguishing genius. The French of our day are themselves beginning to see the folly of conforming to the notions of propriety and correctness laid down by formal pedants. German poetry is not a lifeless image representing the once living classic muse, but a rival spirit

herrlich in der Jugend Prangen,  
Wie ein Gebild aus Himmelsbö'n.

Romantic poetry is that which comes home to the bosoms of the men of our day. The Germans are the great masters in this poetry, they have flung away the now cold and uninteresting fictions of the ancients, and displayed the sombre glories of Scandinavian mythology,

düster  
Wie in rabenschwarzer Mitternacht.

The faith of Christians and the superstitions by which that faith has sometimes been encrusted, are more interesting in our day, than the stories of the Grecian gods and goddesses; and I may venture to say they are essentially better fitted for works of imagination. Is not Christianity the most poetical of all religions, even if it were

not the only true revelation from heaven?

But not only do the Germans avoid the aping of a foreign literature, but amongst themselves they refuse to imitate each other. When a great writer appears, his admirers testify their respect for his genius, not by imitating him, but by striving to rival him. This is the homage that ought to be paid to great men.

Of the works of the Germans, perhaps their writings of fiction are the best known to the English reader. German Romances are distinguished by their power of working up the feelings of the reader by the description of every thing that is terrible in this and in the other world. He who delights in having his passions agitated to the last degree, will riot luxuriously in the works of the German Romancers. I know that this world is infested with sciolists, who call all this morbid feeling and diseased imagination, who complain that there is too much passion in Werther, and that Faust is too horrible. In this matter, my own taste is completely German. In reading fiction, I wish to feel all the passions in their utmost intensity. I think a tale of terror cannot be too terri-

ble, nor a tragedy too tragical. In Romance, I would, if possible, deepen the sorrows of Romeo and Juliet, I would add horrors to the story of Ugolino, nor would I allow the bleeding Nun to come or go in any less appalling form: "Zerdrückt uns diese flatterenden Funken nicht! Lasset uns sogar die dunkeln peinlichen Träume als hebende Halbechatten der Wirklichkeit! Und womit will man uns die Träume ersetzen, die uns aus dem untern Getöse des Wasserfalls wegtragen in die stille Höhe der Kindheit, wo der Strom des Lebens noch in seiner kleinen Ebene schweigend und als ein Spiegel des Himmels seinen Abgründen entgegen zog?"\* It is a strange objection to make to a writer who designs to write horrible things, to tell him that he is too horrible, that he harrows up the soul and freezes the blood, and that his descriptions produce too strong an excitement in the reader. This carping is as absurd as the fashion of which Hazlitt has spoken, of finding fault with a writer for being too brilliant. The hackneyed critic, after severely chastising an author for his faults, falls on him and abuses him on account of his beauties.

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\* Extinguish not to us these flitting sparks! Leave us even the dark painful dreams as relieving half shades of the reality! And wherewith will they replace to us the visions that draw us away from the deep noise of the cataract into the still height of childhood, when the stream of life in its small plain silently and as a mirror of heaven drew towards its abyss.