

Heinrich Heine: His Works and Their
Influence on German Literature.

BY

AMELIA DARLING ALPINER.

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alpiner
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H I S W O R K S A N D T H E I R I N F L U E N C E O N
G E R M A N L I T E R A T U R E .

The excitement which pervaded all Europe about the year 1830 and gave the first rude shock to the political system of 1815 was especially violent in Germany. Dark clouds were rapidly rising on the political and social horizon, and the period of bright serenity and calm was followed by a spirit of restlessness, a morbid, feverish reaching out after an unattainable ideal.

In such tumultuous times the Romantic literature of Germany had its rise. First there was the School of Scoffers, whose followers, brilliant, reckless and Byronic, treated Philosophy, romance, art and holy faith with contempt.

With the growth of dissatisfaction, deeper and more serious expression arose; but despite the more serious attitude everything was put into rhyme and Liberty gave tone to everything.

Then came the Rehabilitationists, as they were called, with drums and trumpets, and finally a school point-

ing to the Germany of the future;--- and to this school Heine belonged.

Some one has said that the world only cares about the five plain facts of a man's biography which relate to his birth, occupation, rank, residence and death. Of these we wish to speak as life-phases of a new star, arisen on the German horizon in the vanishing of Schiller's glorious day. Faint and uncertain at first, the star steadily grew in brilliancy until it dazzled the eyes of men with its glow.

Heine, the Jewish lad of Dusseldorf-on-the-Rhine, was born in the last month of the last year of the eighteenth century, or as he himself has said, "The last rays of the moonlight of the eighteenth and the first rosy dawn of the nineteenth century played round my cradle."

His father, a successful Berlin banker, hoped to train the boy to his own business and sent him to school as soon as he could speak plainly. But the boy was a dreamer and could not bring his mind to dull routine. He would not devote himself to regular studies and at the age of nineteen, having accomplished nothing at home, he was sent to his uncle in Frankfort, and he here decided to learn the trade of his father, but he was in no way able to carry out his resolutions and fell in love with his cousin. Through her he lost

his lover's and gained his poet's soul.

His earliest verse, occasioned by his disappointment and wounded love, did not contain the true spirit of poetry, characteristic of his more mature efforts, but they certainly were the most beautiful, impressive and widely effective mode of saying those things which at that very time most deeply affected him. Take as an illustration the poem entitled "Die Wahloerlobten"--- "The Betrothed," translated by Arthur Dexter.

Thou cryest, look'st on me, and tryest
To think that for my grief thou cryest---
Thou knowest not, woman, thine own woe
Draws from thine eyes the tears that flow.

'Twas writ in the great book above
That we must one another love
Thy place was on my breast that so
Thou might have learned thyself to know;
Freed from the complaints of common race,
Oh, flower, borne in my embrace
Up to a higher life with me ---
I would have given a soul to thee.

I know it now. By God! thou art

She whom I loved. How sore the smart
When, in the moment when we know,
The hour strikes which bids us go.
And "Welcome" sounds but as a way
To say "Farewell." We part to-day
Forever. In the heights of Heaven
No hope to meet again is given.

Thy beauty in the dust is prone;
Thou liest crushed and overthrown.
Far other is the poet's lot;
To death e'en Death can doom him not;
The crash of worlds shall pass us by,
Living in land of song for aye,
In Avalon, where fairies dwell ---
Fair corpse, forever fare-thee-well!

Following this episode, unfortunate for him as unrequited love is for anyone who believes as Heine did that "it is love that gives to any human being his worth," he went to Bonn to study law. The profession chosen obliged him to renounce the faith of his fathers. A sacrifice to religion, at all times a test of courage and truth, was not so for Heine; his baptism was merely for the purpose of secur-

ing for himself the rights of a German citizen. His disloyalty to his race was followed by his betrayal of his comrades and friends, and his attitude toward Judaism is briefly stated in his "Reise Bilder." These are his words:---"Do not speak to me of the old Jewish religion; I would not desire it for my worst enemy. One has nothing but contumely and shame from it. I tell you it is not a religion --- it is a curse of fate."

He left Bonn with his studies unfinished and went to Berlin, where in the salon of his friend, Rachel Levin Boerne, among the literary lights of his day, his poetic fancies quickened. To students of Heine there is no more pleasant period of his life than the two years spent in the Prussian capital. The doors of the most intellectual society of Germany were opened to the handsome young poet, who is described as "beardless, blond and pale, with no prominent feature but of so sharp a stamp that he drew the attention at once and was not readily forgotten." Here his moral convictions were directed and strengthened by the philosophy and personal influence of Hegel, and in 1822 he joined the "Society for the Culture and Improvement of the Jews" and became one of its most influential members, although he confessed that he was not an enthusiast for the Hebrew faith

but that he was eager to work for the rights of the Jews and their civil equality.

Heine's first volume of poems, printed in 1821, awakened only slight interest but when the "Reise Bilder" came from the press and upon the appearance of "Das Buch der Lieder" enthusiasm was unbounded. Mendelssohn and Schumann set the words of his short poems to music, and Paris beckoned him. He yielded to the invitation, but refused to become naturalized in France for he would not give up the right to have "Here lies a German poet" engraved on his tomb-stone.

The "Reise Bilder" and "Das Buch der Lieder" are his masterpieces. In the former we accompany the student through the most strikingly beautiful scenes and find his adventures as entertaining as though travelling with him. There is something in the German language which gives the finishing touch to expression and this is lost in translation. The following extracts, however, from the Harz Reise, contain the poetical thought if not the feeling;---

"Nature, like a great poet, knows how to produce the grandest effects with the fewest materials." "The Germans have the remarkable habit of embodying a thought in everything they do."

"Perfumes are the feelings of flowers and as the human heart, imagining itself alone and unwatched, feels most deeply in the night-time, so it seems as if the flowers in musing modesty await the mantling eventide ere they give themselves up wholly to feeling and breathe forth their sweetest odors."

Heine was essentially a lyricist; the heart of the man was as changeful as the sea he loved so well, and his emotions are reflected in his verse, much of which has the sea for its theme. And so realistic does he make his surroundings that we can feel ourselves on the very ocean shore when he says:---

Thou fairest fisher maiden
Row thy boat to the land
Come here and sit beside me
Whispering hand in hand.

Lay thy head on my bosom
And have no fear of me;
For carelessly thou trustest
Daily the savage sea.

My heart is like the ocean
With storm and ebb and flow,

And many a pearl lies hidden
Within its depths below.

Another illustration of his passion for everything
in nature is the Storm translated, as is the former, by Emma
Lazarus. It reads:---

The tempest is raging,
It lashes the waves,
And the waves foaming and roaring in wrath
Tower on high and the white mountains of water
Surge as though they were alive ;
While the little ship overclimbs them.
With laborious haste
And suddenly plunges down
Into the black, wide-yawning abyss of the tide.

O sea,
Thou mother of beauty, of the foam-engendered one,
Grandmother of love, spare me!
Already scenting death flutters around me
The white ghastly sea mew
And whets his beak on the mast
And hungers with glutton greed for the heart
Which resounds with the glory of thy daughter,

And which the little rogue, thy grandson,
Hath chosen for his playground.

Though modern still the Minnesanger spirit was in him and he wove his songs from his own heart's experience. It takes a mere glance at many of his remarkable songs, for so musical are most of them that no other term seems to fit them, to realize his depth of feeling. There could be no more in eight short lines than in these:---

Thou seemest like a flower,
So pure and fair and bright;
A melancholy yearning
Steals o'er me at thy sight.

I fain would lay in blessing
My hands upon thy hair,
Imploring God to keep thee,
So bright and pure and fair.

He never tried classic meters nor assumed fictitious characters although he was very imaginative. No one ever understood effect more thoroughly than did Heine and to his discredit be it said he never was deterred by a scruple of shame from producing the effect wished. He lacked, with all his brilliancy, a moral tone and was deficient in self-

respect as in respect for others.

The irony in Heine is very marked and is probably the result of the ideal of self parody of the Romanticists which was established in the humorous literature of the time. His ironical tone is so strong that it is said that his will was the only thing he had written without it.

The "Lorelei," a translation of which follows, is indicative of the increased literary skill of the Romantic school.

I know not what it signifies
That I so sad must be:
A legend fraught with olden ties
Comes vividly to me.

The air is cool and I listen
While quietly flows the Rhine,
The tops of the mountain glisten
In the evening's bright sunshine.

A beautiful maiden is sitting
Within this won'drous place,
And the light on her jewels flitting
Reflects her beautiful face.

A golden comb she is using
And she sings a song the while;
And of dear home ties is musing
In clear melodious style.

The sailor with passionate yearning
In his ship is thrilled to-night
He no longer heeds the warning
But gazes anon at the sight.*

And now ship and sailor are swallowed
By the dark and angry waves
And the Lorelei strangely unhallowed
Has arranged for them watery graves.

Heine is the successor and continuator of Goethe in Goethe's most important line of activity, "as a soldier in the war of liberation of humanity." But he was not willing to continue in the old order of things to which Goethe was accustomed. He was ready for war, and a battle with Philistinism.--- Philistinism, as Arnold defines it, which meant strong opposition to weak and hesitating application of modern ideas to life. It was a war of reason against custom. Heine was ready to learn that "his doll was stuffed with

sawdust" and to work for the founding of newer things. This led to his love for the French, the people more ready to grasp new ideas than any other and to move at the call of reason. It also explains his hatred for the narrow-minded English who fear to tread a new path.

After 1831 he made his subject matter accord with questions of modern life. He opened a new field uniting French spirit and German ideas and culture. It is his intense modernism, absolute freedom, the wit of France, and the culture, thought and sentiment of Germany, combined with his clearness and plastic power, that make him remarkable. His descriptions of persons and places are veritable etchings, but with all his genius, for it is genius, there is a want of determined, resolute adherence to a great and noble purpose. With his deep poetic perception and his unconstrained ease of expression which accomodated itself to its subject with charming readiness, there was oftentimes utter negligence and slovenliness of composition.

He has been called the "German Byron" and the name is a most appropriate one. Like Byron, Heine was a born poet and there is a striking similarity in the circumstances which influenced each of them, even from their earliest years, since each dates his first poetry from juvenile passion for

a cousin.

We find the same cosmopolitan and universal poetic character, as a result of intense, susceptible natures, drawing scenes from every city and society through which they passed, in both the English and the German poet. The passionate, despondent Byron, dissatisfied with the existing order of things, fond of praise, rank and fashion is almost a counterpart of the sensual, sea-loving Heine. Their very works are similar in tone and the general truth of descriptions is acknowledged by those who have travelled in the same countries. Dr. Elze claims an intellectual parentage of Byron for Heine.

Although not generally acknowledged, it is worthy of mention that Heine's writings exercised a marked influence in the direction of social reform. One of the first and fiercest apostles of socialism, as it would be termed now, his morbid idealism must have ripened the conviction that the great mass of humanity are engaged in a bitter struggle for a pitiful existence; staggering under the burden of degrading poverty brought about by cruel oppression. Hence his venomous accusations against social institutions, the governments, the rotten church and the privileged classes, who by their greed and selfishness perpetuate this human misery.

Very few of his poems or prose works have this as their exclusive theme, but the utterances of his deep conviction abound in all of his writings and he never misses an opportunity to give vent to his deep sealed hatred. Some of his phrases are almost sublime in their savage directness and felicity of expression and many have been frequently quoted by socialist orators.

It is said that Engel, the Anarchist, when led to the gallows at Chicago, recited the following poem, written by Heine:---

The Weavers.

With thirsty eyes, darkened by grieving,

Gnashing their teeth, a web they are weaving

"Thy shroud we are shaping, O Germany old

"And into it weaving a curse, three-fold

Weaving, a-weaving!

"A curse on God!--- In vain supplication

"We prayed him in horrors of cold and starvation

All bootless we waited, and hoped and believed ---

Us has he bemocked and befooled and deceived ---

Weaving, a-weaving!

"A curse on Kaiser, the rich man's Kaiser

For woes of the poor no kinder nor wiser

He lets us when from us our last groat is wrung

As though we were dogs, be shot at, and hung ---

Weaving, a-weaving!

"A curse on country, the fatherland rotten

Where shame and disgrace flout, and truth is forgotten

Where every bloom fades untimely away

And royally battens the worm on decay ---

Weaving, a-weaving!"

He exerted a strong and valuable influence by the grace and freshness of his earlier poetic works against the sickly romantic and unnatural taste into which the imitators of the Suabians had fallen. This is his claim to the regard of posterity. Connected with the name of Heine is the disgrace belonging to those who belie greatness of natures by littleness of achievements --- who do not labor to further the triumphs of truth, nor to bless the world with creations of abiding beauty, but express their own feverish dissatisfaction and unreasonable desires, or gratify their vain thirst for immediate applause.

Heine was possessed of a highly strung, susceptible

nature, a nature which needed only the controlling power of pure and manly faith to accomplish many noble results.

Guided, not by eternal principles, but by shortsighted wilfulness, he flung himself out of the great movement of righteousness, truth and beauty, by which, and not by violent, extravagant impulses of multitudes or individuals, the providence of God leads on the progress of Mankind.