



THE
LITERATURE OF
GERMANY

BY
J. G. ROBERTSON
Professor of German in the University
of London

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HENRY HOLT & Co., NEW YORK
CANADA; WM. BRIGGS, TORONTO
INDIA; R. & T. WASHBOURNE, LTD.



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NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY



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PRINTED BY
THE LONDON AND NORWICH PRESS, LIMITED
LONDON AND NORWICH

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INTRODUCTION

It is not perhaps for the literary vendor to praise the wares he has to lay before his readers, even when, as in the present case, these wares are a literature to which he only undertakes to act as a guide ; but a word might be said here in plea for a better understanding of the subject to which the following pages are intended to provide an introduction. There is a certain feeling abroad in modern England—a feeling which was, however, not shared by older generations—that the literature of Germany is of subordinate value, that it is less worthy of study than other modern literatures ; that it possesses a more limited range of immortal works essential to the general culture of mankind. This is noticeable in the small output of books dealing with German poetry in England, in the inferiority of our English translations from the German compared with those from the French, Italian and Spanish ; in the consequent neglect of even the masterpieces of this literature in

our many collections of universal literature for popular consumption, and in our general ignorance of what the Germans are thinking and doing in the world of letters.

Comparisons between one literature and another are difficult and not always desirable ; we do not propose to infringe on the province of individual or national taste by trying to institute any such here. Nor do we wish to dispute the fact that German literary history presents a record of broken and often unrealised endeavour ; that its development is irregular as that of no other modern literature in Europe ; that its appeal in even its best works is frankly a national one rather than a cosmopolitan one. But there is one claim we would make for this literature, a claim which this little book will try to justify, namely, that German literature is an essentially modern literature ; by which we mean that, in its entire range, from early mediæval times onwards, it is in peculiarly close touch with the thinking and feeling of to-day. The reason for this quality is to be sought in the overweening, even one-sided, individualism of German poetic art ; it deals more persistently and constantly with the individual human soul than with the external world ;

it is essentially subjective. German mediæval poetry may not be as successful in making "the golden Middle Age gorgeous upon earth again" as other mediæval literatures; but it gives us more penetrating glimpses into the inner life of the denizen of the Middle Ages, and thereby awakens a sympathetic interest in the modern reader. Its interpretation, again, of that great new-birth which we associate with the word Reformation appears in the still modern form of a liberation of the individual from a world that took no stock of individuals. Lastly, the great German literature of the eighteenth century deals constantly with problems, ethic as well as æsthetic, which are as vital and real to us to-day as they were to that far-off time. We have to accept frankly the comparative absence of the formal beauty which the Latin peoples of Europe can point to in their literatures; Germany has no Dante, Ariosto or Tasso; no Lope de Vega; no Corneille or Molière; but, on the other hand, her essential contribution to the wealth of the world's imagination has always centred in the interpretation of heart and soul. Her literature, in spite of its broken endeavour, its fragmentary incompleteness, possesses in this universal subjectivity a

perennial fascination ; it realises the dream of her great Romantic thinkers at the beginning of last century of a universal poetry ; it links up the Middle Ages with modern times ; reveals, by virtue of its preoccupation with the psychical and the emotional, the common humanity that binds the European of to-day with his ancestors far back in the darker ages. It is thus less supreme beauty of expression that we have to look for in the great poets of the German past, than that modern affinity, which makes Wolfram von Eschenbach and Walther von der Vogelweide the most modern of mediæval poets, that brings Luther into line with the commanding personalities of more recent times, that makes Lessing a critic of our own day and Goethe still a modern poet.

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CHAPTER I

THE MIDDLE AGES

It is customary for the literary historians who describe the earliest phases of German intellectual life, to distinguish two periods in mediæval literature which, following the nomenclature adopted for the corresponding stages in the development of the German language, they call Old High German and Middle High German. The first of these periods, which extended from about the middle of the eighth to about the middle of the eleventh centuries, may be disposed of here in comparatively few words. The truth is that the particular race of Germanic peoples with which we have to deal, was exceedingly backward in its intellectual development. Other members of the great Germanic family made much more rapid progress. The Goths,

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for instance, who had settled in the south-east, on the Danube, as early as the fourth century, possessed a remarkable translation of at least part of the Bible into their own tongue, the work of their famous bishop Ulphilas or Wulfila; and the Germanic races that immigrated into our own island, were intellectually more advanced than their continental cousins. Even the Low German tribes in the north of the continental area, showed themselves capable of having their imagination stirred at an earlier date than the High Germans of the south. In fact, if we were to remove from the record of early German poetry the quota contributed by the Low Germans, what is left would be of very little value indeed. Old High German literature consists in great part of mere translations of the Church liturgy, of prayers, fragments of sermons and similar aids to the religious life. Even poems which earlier scholars used to think showed traces of an earlier, pre-Christian imagination, are now more rightly judged to owe their embellishments to monkish variants of familiar Biblical imagery. The most considerable monument of Old High German verse is the *Gospel Book* of Otfrid, of the ninth century, the first

German poem in rhymed, as opposed to alliterating, verse ; it is, however, tedious and didactic, and confuses the simple story of the life of Christ by superimposing subtle, scholastic interpretations upon it.

The real poetry of this early twilight of the German mind is to be sought amongst the Low Saxon tribes of the north. To these Saxons we owe an alliterative verse translation of the Bible, of which the largest section preserved to us is a life of Christ, the so-called *Heliand* or *Saviour*. There is in this old poem a vivid sense of reality ; for the poet possessed the gift, rare in those days, of seeing the world which he transferred to his poem, with his own eyes ; he was able to interpret the happenings of the far-off eastern story, as if it were being enacted again before him, and in the rude surroundings of his own home. In addition to this naïve realism, the poet of the *Heliand* had something more than a mere memory of the pre-Christian traditions of the Germanic peoples ; Christ in his eyes has become a veritable Germanic hero. With all its interest, however, the *Heliand* must yield to another fragment of this early time, which owes its preservation at least to Low German tradition. This is the *Hildebrandslied*, or

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Lay of Hildebrand, in which, almost for the only time, we catch a glimpse of the primitive German spirit before the coming of Christianity; in this brief fragment of an old heroic story—describing how a father returns from long years of exile and is obliged to engage in combat with a son who obstinately refuses to recognise him, we have a splendid testimony to the poetic imagination of the Germans in that rough, primitive time before it was chastened and mellowed by the influence of Christianity

To find the vital literature of these dark centuries we have to turn not merely to Saxon literary monuments, but also to Latin. That blotting-out of the vernacular which accompanied the ascendancy of the mediæval Church, was more conspicuous in Germany than elsewhere. The dynasty of the Saxon emperors—Heinrich I., the three Ottos and Heinrich II., in whose hands the fortunes of the German-speaking world lay for over a century (919-1024)—withdrew the enlightened encouragement of the use of the mother-tongue, which characterised Charles the Great and his successors Ludwig the Pious and Ludwig the German, and, from the whole tenth century, the darkest of all the dark ages as far as

Germany was concerned, we hardly possess a line written in the German tongue. The only visible sign of continuity in the literary tradition is to be seen in the work of men who wrote in Latin. Prominent among such writings are *The Lay of Waltharius*, a polished epic by a monk, Ekkehard of St. Gall, of the story, which is also to be found in early English literature, of Walther and Hildegund; the *Ecbasis Captivi* (*The Escape of the Captive*), the earliest version, written in Lorraine, of the Beast Epic, that vivid, realistic form of allegory which was to play a large rôle in later mediæval literature; and lastly, one of the earliest of European romances, *Ruodlieb*, in which there is some intimation of a return to a healthy joy in living, and a delight in action and adventure. *Ruodlieb* is a forerunner of the vast body of European romance which flourished under the influence of chivalry.

We can hardly say that there was any very clear connection between the sparing literary remains of this early period and its political history. The great age of Charles the Great left hardly a trace on his own people; and its echo in later times in Germany was faint and reflected compared with the enthusiastic hero-worship with which this monarch, as

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Charlemagne, was regarded in the land of the Western Franks. Still less did the later Carlovingians mean to German poetry, and the Saxon emperors, with their exotic and Byzantine tastes, meant least of all. The real defining force in literature in those early days was the Church; literature was the immediate product of the monastery in so far as the art of writing was practically limited to the monks, these being the only members of the community who could read and write. How serious a disadvantage this could be for literature is seen at the outset of the new period of German literature in the eleventh century, when the Old High German speech had given place to that simpler modification we know as Middle High German; for with the rise of the Cistercian order of monks, Europe was at the mercy of a rigid, pessimistic asceticism, which fell like a blighting night-frost on the tender new-growths of secular poetry. "Remember death," "renounce the joys of life" was the eternal cry, and it was reiterated in a wide variety of forms through all the literature of the time.

Gradually, however, as the eleventh century moved on, the secular spirit began to free itself; the grip of the Church relaxed. Care-