CLASSIC GERMAN COURSE

IN ENGLISH

WILKINSON

THE AFTER-SCHOOL SERIES.

CLASSIC

GERMAN COURSE

IN ENGLISH.

BY

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PREFACE.

THE present volume has an object similar to that of each volume preceding in the AFTER-SCHOOL SERIES to which it belongs. It aims to enable readers knowing English, but not German, to acquire, through the medium of the former language, some satisfactory acquaintance—acquaintance at once general and particular—with the chief classics of German literature.

The method proposed of accomplishing this is—having first premised a rapid summary sketch and characterization of German literature as a whole—to select, with some Spartan hardness of heart, from among German authors no longer living, those generally acknowledged the best, and present these through translation, in specimens from one or more of their respective masterpieces—whether prose or verse—accompanied with such comment, biographical, explanatory, critical, as may be judged desirable in order to securing the fairest and fullest final impression on the reader's mind, primarily, of the true characteristic individual quality of each author treated, and, secondarily, of each author's historic relation and influence.

The limits imposed by the size in which the volume appears were accepted by the writer as on the whole judiciously chosen, but, at any rate, as fixed and unchangeable. His simple problem has been—problem simple, though found far enough from easy—to make the best possible use of the inelastic space at his disposal. Considerate judges will estimate his success with wise respect to the conditions under which he has necessarily worked.

Hitherto, in the present series of books, some regard has steadily been had to the proportion in the study of foreign tongues, living and dead, observed by the average American school of higher education. Modern languages, especially the French and the German, but more especially the German, have of late been encroaching somewhat on the ancient preserves prescriptively belonging to those two great languages of antiquity, the Greek and the Latin, in the courses of study established by our colleges and universities. Thus far, however, their place therein remains, and, as the present writer thinks, properly remains, generally less than that of their elder kindred. The room, therefore, narrow though it be, given, in the pages which follow, to German literature, is after all not so very inadequate—measured in comparison with the quasi-authoritative standard, to which, as now hinted, habitual deference has, throughout this series of volumes, been paid.

It has not been thought necessary, or even desirable, in fulfillment of the purpose of the present volume—more than in the case of the volumes preceding in the series—that the author should frequently either make new translations of his own, or secure such from other hands, for the extracts to be introduced. A fresh version will indeed here and there be found in these pages; but for the most part recourse has been had to translations previously existing in English. In general, for each case as it arose, the writer has compared various translations one with another, as also, of course, with their common original, sufficiently to satisfy himself what rendering was, all things considered, best suited to his purpose; and then, besides, in the particular passages finally selected from considerable works for transfer to his pages, he has collated his chosen version with the corresponding German text, in order to make corrections or improvements observed by him to be needed. In some instances, however —instances in which the authority of the translator, either for scholarship or for literary skill, was great—he has remitted this caution.

Nothing further, perhaps, in the way of explanation, is required—unless to say that the present writer may be understood, acting under a sense of serious responsibility, to have formed independently for himself, though, naturally, not without much comparative study of various discussion by others, the literary, and by occasion the ethical, judgments and opinions which he has here committed himself to express.

On the whole, it is a humble work, for a work so arduous and so full of risk to himself, that the writer herewith submits to the public. He hopes that he shall at least be found to have done no injustice, either to the authors whom he presents, or to the readers to whom he presents them.

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I.

GERMAN LITERATURE.

To Germany may justly be accorded the paradoxical distinction of possessing at once the most voluminous and the least voluminous national literature in the world. Our meaning is, that while the aggregate bulk of books written and printed in the German language would probably be found to exceed, and even vastly exceed, that of those written and printed in any other language whatever, you would certainly look elsewhere in vain for a second example of a national literature in which the proportion of what, judged at once for substance and for form, could be pronounced choice and admirable was equally small. The German genius is prolific in thought, it is eager for expression; but of beauty in expression for thought, it is far, very far, from being correspondingly, we need not say capable, but desirous. The result is, as we have intimated, that, while of literature, in the large, loose sense of the term, the Germans have even an over-supply, of literature in the strict, narrow sense, they possess comparatively little. Little comparatively, we say; for absolutely they possess much. And of this much in quantity, a part at least is in quality very fine.

Our concern, in the present volume, will be chiefly with what is best in German literature. We shall leave to one side, merely mentioning perhaps, as we pass, all that enormous contribution of the German mind to classical scholar-

ship, to sacred hermeneutics, to dogmatic theology, to metaphysic speculation, to exact science, to historical research. This has been, it still is, it always will be, immensely important to the accumulation of intellectual treasure for the human race; it is even widely and enduringly important to the development of literature—the literature of the world at large, as well as of Germany; but proper literature itself it is not. In short, literature in the higher sense of that term—polite literature—has never yet been to Germany the favorite, fullest expression of the national genius.

During a certain limited period of time, such did indeed seem almost to be the case. The period which had its long and splendid culmination in Goethe was, no doubt, a predominantly literary period in Germany. Long, we thus suffer ourselves to call the culmination of that period; yet in truth, accurately considered, the culmination was not long, but short. It seems long only in a kind of illogical, illusive association with the lengthened life-time and lengthened productive activity of Goethe himself, the space between whose birth and whose death spans well-nigh the entire chief literary history of Germany. Klopstock published the beginning of his *Messiah* in 1748; in 1749 Goethe was born. What was there in German literature before the *Messiah* of Klopstock? In 1832 Goethe died; in 1826 Heine had published the first installment of his masterpiece, the *Pictures of Travel*. What has there been in German literature since?

Of course, we speak broadly, and with only approximate truth. Klopstock was not the earliest, and Heine is not the latest, of German authors. Still, it is one of the chiefly remarkable things about the history of literature in Germany that that literature should first have been so tardy in beginning, and then should have apparently exhausted itself in a development so sudden and so short.

So tardy, however, in beginning, as we shall thus seem to have represented, German literature in reality was not. You have to run back from Klopstock, two centuries, to Luther,

to find the true moment from which to date the dawn of a national literature in Germany. *The* national literature *of* Germany, we ought perhaps rather to say. For even before Luther, the German mind had, as it were unconsciously, grown at least one literary product, important enough to be justly called in itself a literature, and racy enough of the soil from which it sprang to be called emphatically a *national* literature. We refer, of course, to the anonymous epic, the *Nibelungen Lied*, so styled. This poem, however, the Iliad of the German-speaking race, belonged, not only in its probable first state of pure oral tradition, but also in the modified written form to which a later age reduced it, to an order of things that had been completely superseded long before Luther appeared. The epic itself, in Luther's day, had been forgotten, or at least lost utterly out of sight. In truth, a catastrophe in literary history had intervened, which separates the age of the *Nibelungen Lied* from the age of Luther as absolutely as classic Greek and Roman antiquity is separated from the times in which we live. Nay, this comparison understates the fact. For with the now living literature of Germany the *Nibelungen Lied* has far less genetic connection than have the foreign and ancient literatures of Greece and Rome. It is proper, accordingly, to treat the current German literature as a growth rooting itself in a national past no more remote than the age of the Reformation. Luther, it deserves to be added, did not in his time stand solitary, though he stood supreme, as founder of modern German letters. Hans Sachs is a late-resuscitated name—a name which should never have been suffered to sink into need of resuscitation—worthy to ride in the same orbit of literary fame with Luther, as a brilliant, though inferior, satellite by his side. Ulrich von Hütten, too, was a knightly man of letters, who, with far less of shrewd, homely popular instinct than characterized either one of these two contemporaries of his, had genius enough and wit enough to have made his part in the *Epistolæ Obscurorum Virorum*, had he, when writing his contribution to that immortal

series of pasquinades, written in German instead of in Latin, a permanent classic of the language.

But Luther's was the true vivific literary, as well as religious, mind of the period. The mighty master-spirit of the great Reformation stamped with his foot on his native soil, and forthwith, obedient to the sign, there sprang up, for his "dear Germans," along with a purified Christianity, a new vernacular literature. These two things, but, alas, not these alone. Wars, too, were awakened—dreadful wars, amid which, and in the sequel of which, for whole generations, literature and Christianity alike seemed near going hopelessly down together in Germany. Seldom in the history of the world has it happened that a civilized country, destined after all to survive, and to survive in eventual power, was brought so close to the brink of irrecoverable desolation as was Germany (1618–1648) by the Thirty Years' War. No wonder, if a people almost annihilated did little more than persist, and perhaps somewhat revive, during the first ages succeeding.

Even, however, during the flagrancy itself of the Thirty Years' War, some brilliant flames shot up to show that the German national mind, though deeply smothered, was yet not quenched. It was now that Kepler, the great mathematical philosopher, confidently committed to the keeping of the world his magnificent contributions to the science of astronomy—with that majestic, prophet-like saying of his, never surpassed for sublimity by any uninspired utterance of man's: "My book may well wait a century for a reader, since God has waited six thousand years for an observer." Leibnitz's infancy was rocked by the dying throes of the thirty years' earthquake that shook Germany; but Leibnitz, a peer in intellect of the greatest of philosophers, and naturally, withal, as Kepler was not, a literary man, wrote almost exclusively either in Latin or in French, and so added nothing to the proper wealth of his country in letters. One name alone stands conspicuously forth—though even this one solitary name conspicuously not to the reader, only to the student

of literature—as continuer, for those desolate years, of German literary history. Opitz was in letters a great boast, a great authority, and really a great beneficent force, to his contemporaries; but the fact that Opitz's name, the foremost of his day—and his day of renown was long, it outlasted his life—should signify exactly nothing whatever now, except to the specialist, sufficiently illustrates the completeness of the swoon in which the literary mind of Germany was sunk.

This, however, was the time of Paul Gerhardt, that noblest of the Lutheran lyrists, leading a numerous choir of brethren in sacred song. The Christian Church still, and now in many different tongues, sings some of the sweet, pathetic hymns born of that time of trouble in Germany. "O, sacred head, now wounded" (in its German form a translation by Gerhardt from a Latin hymn of the twelfth century, by Bernard of Clairvaux), is one of these. "Give to the winds thy fears," a more heroic strain, also Gerhardt's (John Wesley's paraphrase), is another inheritance to us all from the German psalmody of this period.

If Luther bequeathed to Germany the inestimable advantage of a catholic literary language, thus first making it possible for a catholic German literature to exist, this service of his to letters, creative of unity and conducive to strength, was in part offset by another, an indirect result of his activity, tending, on the contrary, to division and feebleness. For when the tumults of the Thirty Years' War subsided at last, then, in addition to the general death-like exhaustion of national strength produced by the struggle, there was found to have been precipitated in deposit upon Germany a political system of so many petty states and sovereignties, independent of each other, that the German republic of letters had, and could have, no recognized center and capital. The state of things that existed before was like indeed, but less evil. Luther, thus, at the same time that he originated a condition of the language friendly, had in effect originated a political condition, temporarily, at least, more hostile than ever, to the prospect of unity and prosperity for

the literature of Germany. The inspiring sentiment of national unity, of national dignity, was lost. Worse: the sentiment of national liberty had expired. For the hundred separate governments under which Germany was left to groan were a hundred separate despotisms, crass, stolid, stupid, and all of them organized to be vexatiously meddlesome in proportion as they were ridiculously small. And, to think of it!—during the time that, on the country which had but lately given its mightiest launch to the modern human mind, this nightmare of literary impotence was resting—during that very time, in England, Milton was chanting his *Paradise Lost;* in France, the clustered glories of the reign of Louis XIV. were filling the heavens with light!

But a great change impended for Germany. A bold, long step forward was now suddenly to be taken in that grand forced march toward national unity for Germans which it was reserved for our own times to see finished at last in triumphant arrival at the goal, when, with far-heard sound of celebration, King William was proudly—too proudly?—crowned at Versailles first Emperor of Germany.

A century had passed after the close of the Thirty Years' War, and Frederick the Great, in 1740, became king of Prussia. In this shaker of kingdoms the German spirit asserted itself once more. It ceased to sleep as if the sleep of death. The fresh impulse felt was military and political, rather than literary or even intellectual; but the law of the conversion, or translation, of force works very widely, and the movement from Frederick, which began in war and in politics, went over also, transposed, into the world of the intellect and of literature. Besides, the new king was, in his way, a man of letters. True, he was, as it were, a foreign man of letters, despising the language to which he was born, and himself writing only in French. But there was at least light now where had been "darkness visible" before; and a ray of light from the throne—much more, when the throne is that of Frederick the Great—becomes "illustrious far and wide." The royal example contributed at first to

confirm the wretched tendency already then prevalent among Germans to imitate slavishly in literature the omnipotent French; but it also in the sequel incited some stronger, freer spirits, notably Lessing—that Luther of a literary reformation in Germany—to declare their intellectual independence. Even those German authors themselves, of Frederick's time, whose literary mission it was, as they conceived it, to practice and to teach obedience to French canons in the art of writing, were pricked with patriotic ambition to prove to the disdainful monarch of Prussia that native German genius, uttering itself in native German speech, was not so wholly to be despised. Gottsched was the chief of such; but it is creditable to Frederick that Gellert, a quite different writer, less aggressively French, succeeded better than Gottsched in making a favorable impression on the royal arbiter. As between these two writers, the general verdict has since confirmed the preference of Frederick.

Whether or not it was some spirit breathing in the free air of Switzerland, there arose contemporaneously in the Swiss city of Zurich a German literary school, with Bodmer at their head, who waged open war on the French classicism of Gottsched and his fellows. The Zurich circle, however, in refusing to be French, did not after all become truly independent and German. They were only otherwise, perhaps more judiciously, dependent, and—English. Bodmer published a German translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost.* This was a literary event of prime importance for Germany. It gave her the *Messiah* of Klopstock; and, with the publication of the *Messiah* of Klopstock, the long-arrested development of German literature began fairly to go forward again. Lessing, Herder, Wieland, Goethe, Richter, Schiller, and a score of names only less than these, now follow one another in rapid succession, or jostle each other in crowded simultaneous appearance. The firmament of German literature is suddenly full. It blazes with stars and with constellations.

German literature, considered as a body of recognized classics, remains to this day very much what the great age

of Goethe bequeathed it to the world. We need not therefore bring down our historical sketch to a point lower than the date here reached.

Briefly now as to the forms or kinds in which the literature thus sketched has appeared.

Unlike the French, and like the English, German literature inclines as naturally to assume the form of verse as it does the form of prose. In epic poetry, however, that is, epic poetry of the first class, it cannot be reckoned rich. The two chief German poems which might claim for themselves the highest epic rank are the *Nibelungen Lied* and the *Messiah* of Klopstock; of which the former is rather interesting and remarkable than really great, and of which the latter is remarkable, perhaps, but hardly either great or interesting.

In dramatic poetry German literature is strong; Schiller's single name being sufficient to give it beyond cavil that character. With Schiller's name, however, are to be joined the names, not far unequal to his, of Goethe and of Lessing, as representatives of the drama in Germany. It is to tragedy, rather than to comedy, that the grave German genius instinctively turns to find its favorite dramatic expression. Still, Lessing was witty enough to be a successful writer of comedy. German Molière, there is none; but that he would have liked to be one is a confession of Lessing's.

In lyric poetry German literature may vie with any other literature, either of ancient or of modern times. What battle pæans are finer than Körner's? What strains of patriotism more spirit-stirring, or more pathetic, than Körner's, Arndt's, Uhland's? What love-ditties sweeter than the best of Goethe's and the best of Heine's? What songs of sentiment tenderer than those which any one of these masters of the German lyre upon occasion sings? And finally, what hymns of worship nobler than a few at least which Luther and Paul Gerhardt have led the whole Christian Church in lifting up on high?

If we go now from verse to prose, we light at once upon a kind of literature in which German prose and German verse find common ground, and in which German literature easily surpasses every other national literature in the world. We refer to the literature of folk-lore: the traditionary tale, the fairy story, the popular myth, the romance of the supernatural. Goethe speaks of the "eternal womanly." So we might speak of the "eternal child-like," and predicate this as a common characteristic of the German mind. And of the German child-likeness of genius there is no better expression than that found in its "Märchen," so-called; a class of stories in which the improbable, the whimsical, the weird, the ghostly, the grotesque, runs riot without check. The brothers Grimm are universally known as masters in this kind. Goethe, who loved to try his hand at whatever man could do, wrote Märchen. So did Tieck, so did Hoffman.

In history—to make the transition now from the world of fancy to the world of fact—in history, considered as science and as philosophy, Germans have long been pioneers, discoverers, leaders, marching in the van and forefront of the world; but in history, considered as literature, they are not proportionately conspicuous. The historians Niebuhr, Neander, Ranke, Mommsen, are great names; but even Mommsen, the most brilliant writer of the four, is less brilliant as a writer than he is profound and exhaustive as an historical scholar. And it is curious, almost paradoxical, that of the brilliancy which does belong to him as a writer, a large part is the brilliancy of the advocate and the sentimentalist, rather than the brilliancy of the narrator. Respecting Schiller, it may be said that it is chiefly his fame as poet that keeps up his credit as historian.

In criticism, Germany again takes high rank—the very highest, perhaps, according to what is now accepted as the wisest current opinion. This remark applies to criticism in that wide sense of the word which includes criticism of art, as well as criticism of literature. Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Schlegel, Humboldt, Goethe, are held to have ad-

vanced the work of the critic from mere empiricism to the dignity of a science and a philosophy.

In metaphysics, in psychology, in speculative theology, and in exact scholarship as well, there have always been found Germans to take great delight and to achieve remarkable results. There are, in the realm of pure thought, no names, ancient or modern, mightier than Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling. German theologians we need not name, nor German scholars. But, as has already been hinted, the results of such intellectual activity have not often been presented to the world by Germans in form to constitute elegant literature.

There is one kind of literature in which Germans have always been singularly weak, and that is the literature of public discourse, eloquence, oratory. Whether it is due to fault in the language, to defect in the national genius, or to infelicity of historical circumstance, the fact remains, that there is absolutely almost no great oratory in German literature. If Luther is not the only exception, we at least can not name any other. With the growth of freedom in Germany, perhaps, this will change. But which is it that produces the other? Does freedom give birth to eloquence? Or is it eloquence that gives birth to freedom?

So much for the different recognized species or forms in which German literature has appeared.

In the course of its appearing in these various forms, German literature has exhibited certain exterior peculiarities of which something has been already incidentally said in preceding pages. We may perhaps usefully resume and supplement the suggestions thus made.

The abundance of books in German, the comparative scarcity of German books highly admirable at once for matter and for form, the lateness of German literature in beginning, the interruptedness of its subsequent history, are points which have been sufficiently remarked.

A further point attracting attention in the present survey is the dependent, imitative, parasitic disposition constantly