



CRITICISM

VOLUME

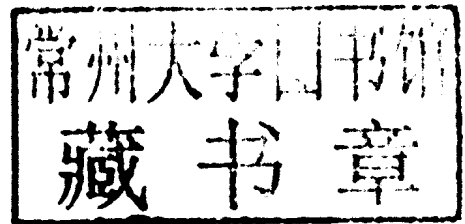
112

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 112

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

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- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
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Pierre-Jean de Béranger

1780-1857

French poet, lyricist, and autobiographer.

INTRODUCTION

The most popular poet in France in the early nineteenth-century, Béranger is almost completely unknown today. He was a strong proponent of the principles of the French Revolution and was revered as the poet who gave voice to the common people. He produced numerous popular songs, pairing his own lyrics with traditional melodies, as well as a great many highly topical verse satires.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Béranger was born in Paris on August 19, 1780, into a non-aristocratic family—the *de* became part of the family name when his father took the name Béranger de Mersix. Béranger's parents neglected him and he was raised by his grandfather. His formal education was limited to a small local school, followed by a school at Péronne, where the curriculum was based on the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He worked briefly as a printer's apprentice, and apparently picked up elementary French grammar from his employer. He also served as a waiter in an inn owned by his aunt, who schooled him in republican principles. He was attracted to the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity set forth in the early days of the French Revolution—values that would inform much of his later work. He began writing lyrics after meeting a group of songwriters in a tavern in Paris, and in 1804 sent some of his work to Napoleon's brother, Lucien Bonaparte, who became his patron, providing him with a small annuity. In 1809, he was given a position as a university clerk, which doubled his income. His songs began to circulate throughout France, and in 1815, Béranger published his first volume of lyrics. When the monarchy was restored, Béranger was charged with religious and moral outrage based on the risqué lyrics of some of his songs and on his irreverence toward the Catholic Church. He was imprisoned, but his cause was championed by a number of famous French literary figures—Victor Hugo, Charles Sainte-Beuve, and Alexandre Dumas—all of whom visited Béranger in prison. It is believed that the songs he wrote after his release—highly critical of the monarchy—contributed to the downfall of the Bourbon

government in 1830. In 1848, Béranger was elected to the Constituent Assembly, but resigned after a short time in office, preferring instead to continue his career as a songwriter. He died on July 16, 1857, and was given a large public funeral by the French government in response to the huge popularity he enjoyed among the French people.

MAJOR WORKS

Béranger published his first volume of songs, *Chansons morales et autres* in 1815, the same year the Bourbon monarchy was restored to power. The volume escaped government censure, although it contained one of Béranger's most famous political pieces, "Le roi d'Yvetot" ("The King of Yvetot") a mildly satirical song aimed at Napoleon. His next collection, *Chansons* (1821) did not fare as well, earning him a short prison sentence, a large fine, and the loss of his university position. In 1828, his fourth volume of lyrics and poetry, *Chansons inédites* brought another fine and an additional nine months' imprisonment. Most of his poems and songs, including occasional pieces prepared for the funerals of war heroes and poems celebrating the common people, deal with national issues and include satirical pieces directed at the various political regimes in power during Béranger's lifetime. In 1834, *Oeuvres complètes*, a four-volume collection of poems and lyrics was published. His work was translated into English and appeared in two collections during his lifetime: *One Hundred Songs* in 1847; and *Béranger: Two Hundred of His Lyrical Poems* in 1850. In 1857, the year of Béranger's death, his autobiography was published along with an updated collection of complete works; three years later, a four-volume collection of his correspondence was published.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Despite the enormous popularity Béranger enjoyed among his contemporaries—Sainte-Beuve called him "the most popular poet there has even been in France"—he is virtually unknown today. The topical nature of many of his poems and songs limited the appeal of his work to his own time, and he is chiefly remembered today as a tireless advocate of republican principles. He was enormously influential outside of

France as well as in his native land. J. B. Segall reports that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was an admirer of Béranger's work, defending him against the frequent charges that his lyrics were indecent and immoral, and praising him for his patriotism and "the very simplicity and uprightness of his own life." Joseph Phelan (see Further Reading) discusses Béranger's influence on Arthur Hugh Clough, for whom "the encounter with Pierre-Jean de Béranger was a formative poetic experience." Béranger "is cited and named in Clough's work on a number of occasions, and some of the most distinctive themes and features of Clough's poetry are directly traceable to Béranger's influence," reports Phelan. Matthew Arnold was also influenced by Béranger, however, Arnold and Clough had very different opinions on the value of his work. According to Phelan, "Béranger came to epitomize for Arnold the immorality and cynicism that plunged France into repeated revolutions and upheavals throughout the nineteenth century. Clough, in contrast, always saw in the French songwriter a valuable alternative to the sexual Puritanism, hypocrisy, and class division of British society."

Further information on Béranger's reception in Britain is provided by Phelan's study of contemporary English journals. As an opponent of the Bourbon monarchy, Béranger earned sympathetic reviews in the liberal press; his devotion to democratic principles endeared him to the radical press; and his politics as a whole brought on hostile reviews in the conservative Tory journals. Politics aside, however, the bawdiness of some of his lyrics and the licentious subject matter of many of his songs offended nearly everyone and became "the principal stumbling block to the appreciation of Béranger's work in Britain," claims Phelan.

Georges J. Joyaux has studied the contemporary reception of Béranger's poetry in America, and finds that his work was, with few exceptions, very well received. Americans considered him a version of the self-made man, according to the critic, who explains that "the cornerstone of Béranger's success was his ability to express, in the people's own words, the moral and spiritual sufferings of the country. This closeness to the people, the fight he led on its side for its emancipation, the facility with which one could read and also memorize his pieces, explain as well his success in America."

Today Béranger's work is of interest only to literary historians, although Joyaux acknowledges that even in the current histories of French literature, there is little mention of the once-famous poet and songwriter. Phelan reports that "it is difficult to find any mention of Béranger after 1870; some standard reference works on French literature fail to mention him at all; and only one full-length critical study has been devoted to him in France during the last fifty years."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

- Chansons morales et autres* (lyrics and poetry) 1815
- Chansons* (lyrics and poetry) 1821
- Chansons nouvelles* (lyrics and poetry) 1825
- Chansons inédites* (lyrics and poetry) 1828
- Chansons nouvelles et dernières* (lyrics and poetry) 1833
- Oeuvres complètes*. 4 vols. (lyrics and poetry) 1834
- Songs of Béranger* (lyrics and poetry) 1837
- Lyrical Poems* (lyrics and poetry) 1847
- One Hundred Songs* (lyrics and poetry) 1847
- Béranger: Two Hundred of His Lyrical Poems* (lyrics and poetry) 1850
- Oeuvres posthumes, oeuvres complètes* (lyrics and poetry) 1857

Other Major Works

- Ma biographie* (autobiography) 1857
- Correspondance de Béranger*. 4 vols. (letters) 1860

CRITICISM

J. B. Segall (essay date November 1899)

SOURCE: Segall, J. B. "An Estimate of Béranger by Goethe." In *Modern Language Notes* 14, no. 7 (November 1899): 206-13.

[In the following essay, Segall discusses the expressed opinion of Goethe on Béranger, which was, overall, quite favorable.]

I. GOETHE'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH BÉRANGER.

Goethe, who had always manifested an intense interest in what was going on in France, continued to keep abreast of the events of that country during the last years of his long life. The politics, art and science of France constantly preoccupied him. Above all he pursued with the keenest and liveliest sympathy, the birth, growth and unfolding of the new literature and its struggle with Classicism. The leisure moments snatched from the study of geology, mineralogy, physics, popular Slavic poetry, Chinese literature and what not, he devoted to a close consideration of the French writers. True, he is deeply interested in the contemporary productions of other nations, of England and Italy

particularly; however, he is attracted only by a comparatively small number of poets, like Burns, Byron, Scott and Manzoni, who had already acquired a wide reputation. For the younger German writers of the day he has little or no encouragement. To Eckermann he frequently speaks of them even in a disparaging tone. "There is no use helping the young German poets; it will not profit them anyhow." In France, on the other hand, it is the whole movement as such, literary, artistic, scientific, that he steadily pursued. Not one book of any account appears there which we do not find the old Goethe reading and meditating upon. Rising Romanticism with its kindred side-currents, the young phalanx of the Globe, the literary struggle between Classicists and Romantics, present to him a most interesting spectacle, fully as attractive as the scientific tilt between Cuvier and Geoffrey St.-Hilaire. He looks upon all those young men with approval and manifest sympathy, and would fain see at work in them his own spirit, the influence of his own thought.

Béranger, more than any other poet, attracts Goethe's attention. So highly does he speak of him that some German critics have taken exception to his almost unqualified praise. A strong sympathy draws Goethe towards Béranger. Its manifestations are but fragmentary, mere snatches of conversation, suggestions of the moment, remarks thrown out at haphazard; yet they afford some light on Béranger's character and genius, being, as they are, expressions of Goethe's deep and broad life-experience, of his clear and free thought.

Just when Goethe's acquaintance with Béranger begins cannot be ascertained. It seems even as if he did not learn of him as early as he might have done. At least no mention of him could be traced preceding the year 1823; Goethe's diary leading down to 1822 does not even contain his name. And still, Béranger had achieved fame long before that. In 1813 his witty satire, *le Roi d'Ivetot*, first spread his name beyond the *caveau*. In 1815 appeared his first volume containing songs of love and merriment. The year 1821 brought his second volume which already reveals the entire Béranger; only the humanitarian and cosmopolitan leaning of 1848 are wanting. There we find, besides his love-songs, some of a political, Voltairian and patriotic tendency respectively; and also some of a purely lyric character, the *Chansons Intimes*, songs that go to make up the Béranger of the anthologies. Even then the chansonnier's name is spread broadcast over the land and beyond its boundaries. The government of Louis XVIII, the courts and press, gratuitously advertise his songs throughout Europe, and Béranger, borne by the sympathies of the nation, gaily quits his poor attic-room to spend his three months' term in the comfortable cell of the Sainte-Pélagie. In spite of all that, nothing whatever, in his letters or diary, shows that Goethe, who was interested in everything, knew ought of these occur-

rences. And although in 1823 he "commented upon and paraphrased some of Béranger's songs, with great originality and good humor," in 1825, the third volume of songs, exhibiting much the same spirit as the first, appears without any echo in his talks with Eckermann. That was the year Goethe was celebrating, in a splendid jubilee, the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival in Weimar.

It is in 1827 that Goethe is found energetically pursuing the development of French literature. He repeatedly speaks to Eckermann about Béranger; again and again he returns to him down to the last year of his long life. He praises him in his letters to his most intimate friends;² he sends them the famous songs;³ his French visitors he questions most eagerly about Béranger, and likewise his German friends who return from their tour to Paris. "Béranger's inimitable songs are daily in Goethe's thoughts."

In Eckermann, Béranger had found an enthusiastic and devoted friend; to him he is always "the excellent Béranger." Goethe's sympathetic remarks are refracted through the prism of Eckermann's sympathy; they both read him, and manifested for him a most lively interest; they had an intimate knowledge of his songs, with all that love for him that enlightens judgment and imparts to it due tolerance.

II. BÉRANGER'S POLITICAL SONGS.

Goethe repeatedly takes occasion to express his preference for Béranger's love-songs rather than for his political songs, "the pure everlasting truths of nature being superior to mere party sentiment." For poems written in the interest of party, for war songs, and even patriotic songs, the latter necessarily implying hatred, and a desire for the destruction of a foreign nation, even though the ruin constitute a loss to humanity, Goethe never had any great sympathy. During and after the German wars of liberation, he was frequently charged with indifference regarding the fate of his country, with egotism and lack of patriotism.

"Because they cannot touch my talent, they aim at my character. . . . And, between ourselves, I did not hate the Frenchmen, although I thanked God that we were free from them. How could I, to whom culture and barbarism are alone of importance, hate a nation which is among the most cultivated on earth and to which I myself owe so great a part of my own culture? . . . Besides, there is a point where national hatred disappears altogether, and one stands to a certain extent above nations, and feels the weal and woe of a neighboring people as keenly as if his own people were concerned."

At times, though, Goethe admits the importance of political songs. War songs, he says, suit Körner perfectly well. He concedes that the latter with Arndt and Rückert had exercised some influence. But he does not dwell

on any intrinsic literary value that they might possess. For the political songs of Béranger alone he finds words of approval and even of admiration.

On May 4, 1827, a grand dinner was given at Goethe's, in honor of his guests Ampère and Stapfer. Ampère expatiates on Mérimée, Alfred de Vigny, and other young French writers. Goethe, however, speaks first and last of Béranger. Although his political songs, he says, are inferior to his love songs, Béranger has proved by the former the benefactor of his country. In him, the French had found the very organ of their national misfortunes. It was he who uplifted their courage by the memories of the glorious deeds of the emperor, whose great qualities he adored without, however, desiring a continuance of his despotic sway.

Only shortly before that, between a discourse on what he designates as Peter the Great's blunder in building the new capital, St. Petersburg, in an unhealthy region, and the communication that the fish sent him had arrived in good condition, Goethe had advised his friend Zelter to read Béranger, adding:

"In him you will see in the most evident manner what talent, or rather genius, may achieve, provided it appear at a pregnant moment, and stand up for its convictions regardless of any consequence. Have we ourselves not commenced in much the same manner?"⁴

In 1828 appeared Béranger's fourth volume, in every respect a worthy successor of the preceding ones. That the French government entertained a high opinion of its value and efficacy, was promptly demonstrated by its giving the author hospitality in its prisons for nine months, and imposing upon him a fine of ten thousand francs. In the face of this event, Goethe's change of opinion towards Béranger, "the benefactor of his nation," is remarkable. For, clearly it was not Béranger who had changed, as in this volume he appears the same he had been when Goethe had passed such favorable judgment upon him. But the term of his imprisonment had now been trebled, and the fine imposed upon him multiplied by twenty. Evidently, his merits, if anything, must have increased in proportion. But Goethe, at that moment, is in another mood. True, as then, we find him at table, but this is no grand dinner; no French men of letters are there to talk to him of beautiful Paris, no gaiety, no animated conversation. Instead, he is talking of revolutionary Greece, and old Goethe hates revolutions. Kapodistrias, he points out, is not at all the right man. To organize a revolutionized country the strong hand of a soldier is needed. Take for instance Napoleon. Of course, this name,—anything did,—suggests the French literature of the day: Cousin, the philosopher, Villemain, the critic, and Guizot, the historian, that illustrious trio of liberalism at the Sorbonne, who, under the more constitutional Martignac

ministry, just then initiated, had been restored to their chairs. Béranger's relentless warfare, when a more liberal era seemed to be ushered in, could not but offend Goethe.

"It serves him right," he says, speaking of the penalty imposed upon Béranger; "his last poems are, indeed, subversive of all order and public decency; he has fully deserved the punishment by his offences against king, state and peaceful citizenship. His early poems, on the contrary, are cheerful, harmless, and quite appropriate to create a circle of gay and happy people, which indeed, is the best that can be said of songs."

Now, Béranger's first collision with the narrow and illiberal government, directed by the clergy, dates back to 1821, the period of the high-tide of the reaction, and since there had been no truce. Among the convulsions of 1813 Goethe had published his *Westöstlicher Divan*, and then he was sixty-four. Our chansonnier had, when but forty-eight, wantonly forsaken the muse of love and pleasure, his true muse. That Goethe could not possibly forgive. Verily, nine months and ten thousand francs were hardly commensurable with such a formidable offense.

About one year later we find Goethe busy in classifying the treasures he had just received from David. The medallions of the young poets of France are displayed upon his table; also the works of Sainte-Beuve, Balanche, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Alfred de Vigny, Jules Janin and others. France has sent her respectful homage to the great German poet. Goethe overflows with joy.

"David has procured me by his presents most happy days. The whole week the young poets have been keeping me busy, and by the fresh impressions I receive from them they afford me new life."

He then speaks of Emile Deschamps, Mérimée and, in particular, of the excesses of some of the Romanticists. The Romantic poets, he remarks, are too subjective; in all their works we detect the Parisian; and when Eckermann asks if that were also the case with Béranger, he affirms it. But, he adds, his personality is so great that it is well worth while to represent it. And although not a friend of political songs he would gladly put up with such as Béranger wrote. First of all, his subjects are of paramount importance: his affectionate admiration for Napoleon and his glorious exploits, his hatred of the domination of the "Pfaffen," and of the darkness threatened by the Jesuits. How can our sympathies be withheld from such things? Nor is he merely the exponent of a party. Because of the wide national interests Béranger stands for, he is the great spokesman of the people. He had, to be sure, at different critical periods, hearkened to the aspirations, desires and needs of the nation. That has, however, only confirmed him in himself, since he learned that his own soul was in harmony with that of the people; but he was never

misled into saying anything but what already was living in his own heart. Thus Goethe vindicates completely Béranger's conduct as well as the motives thereof. He approves of his Napoleonic cult, of his fight against the clergy, of his stand for the rights of the nation against the government. And still one year later we find Goethe adhering to his judgment. He criticises, on that occasion, a German poet,⁵ whose reputation was due solely to the animosities he expressed as the organ of his party, and in whom hatred supplied the place of genius. By way of contrast he points to Béranger; he, Goethe says, never served any party. He feels too much at one with himself for the world to be able to give or take ought from him. This is Goethe's last utterance on Béranger, about one year before his death. Béranger, then, Goethe holds, was of thoroughly independent character. Far from catering to public sentiment, he expressed and influenced it, his genius being strong enough by dint of its own inner support. And even as a poet of political songs, his fame owed but little, if anything, to party spirit, and everything to their intrinsic poetic worth.

That was the time of the Restoration with its reaction in state and church, as well as in taste and manners, against both the excesses of the revolution and its enduring results. Because the bulk of the people were then, rank and file, for freedom, Béranger, their foremost standard-bearer, was vilified by some critics as a time-serving demagogue. With more moderation, but greater subtlety and weight of opinion, Sainte-Beuve discovered in vanity the true motive of Béranger's stolid independence. Had not Béranger refused the censorship offered to him under the Hundred Days, resented the advances of the Bourbons, declined the portfolio extended to him by the Citizen-King, as well as the fauteuil in the Academy, maintained, by his refusal to accept his election into the republican assembly of 1848, his stout independence even against the sovereign people? The springs of his actions were, then, Sainte-Beuve declares, vanity pure and simple, and a desire to pose before the public. However, when an attitude struck in order to mislead the people into thinking one an honest man, is consistently adhered to in spite of the most powerful temptations and in spite of an utter lack of material rewards; and when, in addition to all that, it is not in one instance gainsaid by any dishonest act in both public or private life, then must we, indeed, admit that attitude to be but the sincere expression of deep-seated, solid conviction, and do justice to the admirable sameness and firmness of Béranger.

III. THE INDECENCY IN BÉRANGER'S SONGS.

By the adepts of absolute monarchy, which in its essence is the embodiment and glorification of egotism, and by those of theocratic rule, for which hypocrisy is the fundamental law of society, Béranger, decried as the pupil of Voltaire, has always been held up to the naïve

and credulous as the bogey of indecency and immorality. There is, indeed, a great deal of unconventionality in Béranger's songs.

From time to time Goethe expresses his sentiment upon this delicate question. To start with, we may point out that he recognizes that Béranger, as a satirical poet, must needs deal with the perversions and vices of his time.

"Béranger always reminds me of Horace and Hafis, both of whom also stood above their times, satirically and playfully dealing with the depravity of morals. Béranger bears the same relation to his surroundings. . . . It is the very perversion of the time that has revealed Béranger's better nature."

Goethe, furthermore, brings out the moral influence of Béranger's songs. They render men cheerful and happy. "His songs have every year made millions of joyous people." His *chansons* have elevated the masses.

"They are perfectly understood even by the working classes; and being so high above the level of the commonplace, they accustom the masses to higher and nobler thoughts. And of what more can any poet boast?"

To that let us add Béranger's ennobling appeals to the patriotism of the nation, his plea for contentment, his contempt of the poor man's jealousy of the rich and powerful, and the very simplicity and uprightness of his own life. Goethe did not live to witness Béranger's sympathies for the low and down-trodden and the nation's struggle for freedom. And lastly Béranger's songs in which, rising above the love for country, he dreams of universal peace and a brotherhood of the peoples, would have brought him close to Goethe's heart, and more than atoned for the unconventionality of his early productions.

Criticism of Béranger's lightness of tone is not wanting, however. Now it is the patrician in Goethe that protests:

"Béranger, being of low station, does not loathe licentiousness and coarseness sufficiently; he treats them still with a certain sympathy."

On another occasion, Béranger's songs have to stand a comparison with a Chinese novel, the result being a most disastrous one for the songwriter. Goethe thinks very highly of the morality of the Chinamen.

"With them everything is purer and more moral than with us. What a strange contrast to this Chinese novel is furnished by Béranger's songs. The subjects of most of these are of an immoral nature, and but for the high art which renders them supportable, nay even attractive, I should very much loathe them."

Let us remember, however, that the masses of the people are influenced not by literary poetry, but by the songs they sing. Compared with the ordinary creations of the *caveau*, Béranger's licentious songs, however, mark a great progress, and it is only regrettable that they have not succeeded in dislodging them altogether from their strongholds. What is really needed for the populace of Paris is another popular poet of the genius of Béranger.

The part played by licentiousness in Goethe's work is too well-known to be dwelt upon here. It may, however, be of some interest to note the old Goethe's own opinion of that feature, and his comparison on that score of one of his earliest productions with Béranger's songs. As a matter of fact, the young Goethe, the Goethe of the storm and stress period, had, in point of freedom of thought and expression, by far outstripped the young Béranger. Goethe's creations of that time, composed largely in the spirit of the lighter French literature of the Eighteenth Century, are not even redeemed by the wit and elegance characteristic of that style of literature; their humor is coarse and clumsy. Most of them were destroyed by Goethe himself; but one fragment, in his posthumous writings, most suggestively entitled *Hanswurst's Hochzeit*, and dating back to 1775, discloses to us a Goethe who shows tastes that cannot, in his case, be excused by "a low station." But one year before his end he feelingly talks about that literary escapade to the ever-admiring Eckermann.

He regrets he could not finish that work, and the good Eckermann laments that it so exceeds all bounds that even the fragments cannot be reproduced.

"Goethe then read to me the cast of personages which filled nearly three pages, and were about a hundred in number. There were all the imaginable nicknames, at times of the coarsest and jolliest kind, so that one was kept in continuous laughter. Many referred to bodily deformities and depicted a person so well that he was brought life-like before the mind's eye; others indicated the most various indecencies and vices, presupposing a deep insight into the depths of the immoral world."

It was not possible to finish the piece, said Goethe.

"In Germany, society is too narrow to allow of the production of such things. On the broader ground of Paris, such eccentricities may be ventured upon; there one can be a Béranger, which is entirely impossible in Frankfort or Weimar. . . . Just fancy Béranger, instead of being born in Paris, and brought up in the metropolis of the world, the son of a tailor in Jena or Weimar."

And again, "what an isolated and poor life we (the German poets) are leading after all!" Constantly the image of Paris, the world-city he had never seen, looms up in his mind, and something like a sad regret is heard, like a sigh coming from very, very far. His description of Paris, the superiority of its social culture to anything

that has ever existed, must be read in full, in order to appreciate Goethe's deep-rooted sympathy for French civilization. The man who with evident satisfaction said to Eckermann:

"Es ist doch eigen, ich habe doch so mancherlei gemacht, und doch ist keines von allen meinen Gedichten das im lutherischen Gesangbuch stehen könnte,"

could not very well be too severe with the witty and frolicsome Béranger, and it clearly appears from what precedes that Goethe's occasional fits of harshness with the licentiousness of the *chansonnier* do not in any way impair his earlier verdict as to the fundamental morality of the *chansons*. Despite casual criticisms, Goethe, at heart, sympathizes with that very freedom which he condemns in the Parisian poet; and, in one of his confidential moods, as was seen, laying bare the innermost recesses of his soul, he confesses to his familiar that, had it not been for the narrowness of German provincial life, his own development might have presented features not unlike those of the French *chansonnier*.

IV. BÉRANGER'S POETIC GENIUS.

From the very start, Béranger's genius had appealed to Goethe and met with an admiration which he freely and unstintingly expressed whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Above all, Goethe dwells with predilection upon Béranger's originality as a poet. To him the original personality of Béranger stands out foremost among the poets of the day.

"In him is all the substance of an important personality. Béranger is a nature most happily endowed, firmly grounded in himself, developed purely from himself, and quite in harmony with himself. He has never asked: What would suit the times? What produces an effect? What pleases? What are others doing?—in order that he might do the like. He has worked simply from the core of his own nature, without troubling himself as to what the public, or what this or that party expects."

It is the sincerity of the poet's inspiration that Goethe admired so much; it was of himself he said,

"I have never affected anything which I have not experienced, and which has not urged me to production. I have only composed love-songs when I have loved. How could I write songs of hatred without hating."

In point of art, those songs are pronounced perfection itself. Indecent subjects shock Goethe: Béranger's art renders them attractive. Political songs he does not like, but he admires those of Béranger.

"These songs are perfect, and are to be considered as the best in their kind, especially when we have in our mind the merriment of the refrains, without which they would be almost too serious, too witty and too epigrammatic."

"Béranger has never been to a Classical school or university; and yet his songs are so full of mature cultivation, so full of wit and the most refined irony, and there is such artistic perfection and masterly handling of the language, that he is the admiration, not only of France, but of all civilized Europe."

And then he proceeds to show that it was only in an environment as favorable as that presented by the superior culture of Paris, that Béranger could develop so much perfection. And he concludes thus:

"We Germans are but of yesterday. We have indeed been properly cultivated for a century; but a few centuries more must elapse before so much mind and elevated culture will become universal amongst our people that they will appreciate beauty, like the Greeks; that they will be inspired by a beautiful song, and that it will be said of them 'it is long since they were barbarians.'"

What is genius? The creation of vital force, enduring and incessantly productive beyond our own life. That is Goethe's definition.

"Whether one show himself a man of genius in science, like Oken and Humboldt, or in war and statesmanship, like Frederick, Peter the Great, and Napoleon, or whether one compose a song like Béranger, it all comes to the same thing; the only point is, whether the thought, the discovery, the deed, is living, and can live on."

Béranger's songs will live in the hearts of the people, and Napoleon's glory itself lives on in those songs.

At times the artist in Goethe bursts into unrestrained praise:

"With him there is nothing snatched out of the air, nothing of merely imagined or imaginary interest; he never shoots at random; but, on the contrary, has always the most decided, the most important subject. . . . And how masterly is his treatment on all occasions! How he turns about and rounds off every subject in his own mind before he expresses it! And then, when all is matured, what wit, spirit, irony, and persiflage, and what heartiness, naïveté, and grace, are displayed at every step!"

True, there is nothing vague, misty, nebulous in Béranger's songs, and but little melancholy and sentimentality. They who find poetry only in the stars, clouds, ancient castles and graveyards, in the remote, old, mysterious, imperceptible and unintelligible, have, of course, never found any poetic sentiment in Béranger. Being, moreover, most naturally, always confronted with the great body of Romantic poetry, Béranger's definiteness and clearness of thought, often considered to be unpoetical qualities, are the more conspicuous. Few poets and critics there are in France of the Nineteenth Century, who do not more or less proceed from, or were not at some

one time under the influence of the modes of thinking or feeling and of the exaggerations of the Romantic school. Accordingly, they find Béranger extremely prosaic. Goethe's Romantic period, however, had long been over; he belonged to neither of the contending political and literary parties; his Classicism was broad and tolerant, his sympathies manifold and various. He was in a position to judge fairly and grasp the characteristic features of Béranger:

"Seemingly, events that are transitory ought to be preferable as subjects of poetry, because something fleeting, moving, must be very welcome to the poet. But as we can not prescribe his subjects to the poet, it depends solely upon him to give the highest poetic expression to what is permanent. Perhaps no one has better succeeded in this than Mr. Béranger."

However much Béranger's poetic glory might have been carped at in France, and in spite of a few sporadic protestations on the part of some German critics, Goethe's judgment has, on the whole, persisted in Germany. To quote only two men, a critic and a poet:

"Of all French poets, whether Classic or Romantic, Béranger alone is understood by the Germans as easily and directly as is a German poet. Germans sing his songs as enthusiastically as do the French themselves. Béranger attracts us because to us he represents in the purest manner the French mind. Brought up in the study of Molière, La Fontaine, and Voltaire, also well acquainted with Rabelais, he had not allowed himself to be misled by the models of Horace."

It was reported to Heine on his sick-bed that some poetaster had said that Béranger was no poet. The great lyricist, who abhorred French Classical poetry, replied: "Pas un poète, Béranger! Eh, mon petit monsieur, c'est la lyre la plus sonore des temps modernes!" The modest *chansonnier* himself, however, did not presume to play that exalted instrument; the *mirliton* was all he claimed. But on that humble reed-flute he excelled. And from it streamed forth melodies of contentment, joy, love and liberty, such as rejoiced and rejuvenated the heart of the old Goethe.

Notes

1. *Goethe's Gespräche*. Leipzig, Biedermann, 1889, and *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, John Oxenford, Unless otherwise designated, the quotations in this essay are taken from the *Gespräche*.
2. *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, Berlin, 1834. Goethe an Zelter, March 3, 1827.
3. *Ibid.* Zelter an Goethe, March 14, 1827.
4. *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*: Goethe an Zelter, March 3, 1827.
5. Supposed by Düntzer to be Wolfgang Menzel.

6. His grandson, in reality.
7. *Werke*, Kürschner, Bd. 32 (*Nachgelassene Werke*. Sechster Band, S. 178-184).
8. Julian Schmidt, *Geschichte der franz. Litteratur seit Ludwig xvi*. 1874, Erster Bd., p. 472.
9. Dr. Louis P. Betz, *Heine in Frankreich*. Zürich, 1895, p. 138.

Moritz Levi (essay date December 1906)

SOURCE: Levi, Moritz. "Mon Habit." *Modern Language Notes* 21, no. 8 (December 1906): 250-51.

[In the following essay, Levi compares and contrasts Béranger's *Mon Habit* with "Der alte Reiter und sein Mantel" by Carl von Holtei.]

Mon Habit.

Béranger.

I.

Sois-moi fidèle, ô pauvre habit que j'aime!
Ensemble nous devenons vieux.
Depuis dix ans je te brosse moi-même,
Et Socrate n'eût pas fait mieux.
Quand le sort à ta mince étoffe
Livrerait de nouveaux combats,
Imite-moi, résiste en philosophe:
Mon vieil ami, ne nous séparons pas.

II.

Je me souviens, car, j'ai bonne mémoire,
Du premier jour où je te mis.
C'était ma fête, et, pour comble de gloire,
Tu fus chanté par mes amis.
Ton indigence, qui m'honore,
Ne m'a point banni de leurs bras.
Tous ils sont prêts à nous fêter encore:
Mon vieil ami, ne nous séparons pas.

III.

A ton revers j'admire une reprise:
C'est encore un doux souvenir.
Feignant un soir de fuir la tendre Lise,
Je sens sa main me retenir.
On te déchire, et cet outrage
Auprès d'elle enchaîne mes pas.
Lisette a mis deux jours à tant d'ouvrage:
Mon vieil ami, ne nous séparons pas.

IV.

T'ai-je imprégné des flots de musc et d'ambre
Qu'un fat exhale en se mirant?
M'a-t-on jamais vu dans une antichambre
T'exposer au mépris d'un grand?
Pour des rubans la France entière

Fut en proie à de longs débats;
La fleur des champs brille à ta boutonnière:
Mon vieil ami, ne nous séparons pas.

V.

Ne crains plus tant ces jours de courses vaines
Où notre destin fut pareil;
Ces jours mêlés de plaisirs et de peines,
Mêlés de pluie et de soleil.
Je dois bientôt, il me le semble,
Mettre pour jamais habit bas.
Attends un peu; nous finirons ensemble:
Mon vieil ami, ne nous séparons pas.

Der alte Reiter und sein Mantel.

Carl von Holtei. (Aus dem Melodrama: Leonora, 1827).

I.

Schier dreissig Jahre bist du alt,
hast manchen Sturm erlebt;
hast mich wie ein Bruder beschützt,
und wenn die Kanonen geblitzt,
wir beiden hab'n niemals gebebt.

II.

Wir lagen manche liebe Nacht,
durchnässt bis auf die Haut;
du allein hast mich erwärmet,
und was mein Herze gehärmet,
das hab' ich dir, Mantel vertraut.

III.

Geplaudert hast du nimmermehr,
du warst mir still und treu;
du warst mir getreu in allen Stücken,
darum lass' ich dich auch nicht mehr flicken,
du Alter würdest sonst neu.

IV.

Und mögen sie mich verspotten,
du bleibst mir theuer doch;
denn wo die Fetzen 'runter hängen,
sind die Kugeln hindurch gegangen,
jede Kugel die macht' ein Loch.

V.

Und wenn die letzte Kugel kommt
in's deutsche Herz hinein:
lieber Mantel, lass dich mit mir begraben,
weiter will ich von dir nichts haben;
in dich hüllen sie mich ein.

VI.

Da liegen wir zwei Beide
bis zum Appel im Grab!
Der Appel der macht Alles lebendig,
da ist es denn auch ganz nothwendig,
dass ich meinen Mantel hab'!