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Excerpt

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CARLYLE'S PREFACE

It were unhappy for me if the reader should expect in this Work any full view of so complex a subject as German Novelwriting, or of so motley a body as the German Novel-writers. The dead wall, which divides us from this as from all other provinces of German Literature, I must not dream that I have anywhere overturned: at the most, I may have perforated it with a few loopholes, of narrow aperture truly, and scanty range; through which, however, a studious eye may perhaps discern some limited, but, as I hope, genuine and distinctive features of the singular country, which, on the other side, has long flourished in such abundant variety of intellectual scenery and product, and been unknown to us, though at our very hand. For this wall, what is the worst property in such walls, is to most of us an invisible one; and our eye rests contentedly on Vacancy, or distorted *Fata-morganas*, where a great and true-minded people have been living and labouring, in the light of Science and Art, for many ages.

In such an undertaking as the present, fragmentary in its very nature, it is not absolute, but only relative completeness, that can be looked for. German Novelwriters are easily come at; but *the* German Novelwriters are a class of persons whom no prudent editor will hope to exhibit, and no reader will engage to examine, even in the briefest mode of specimen. To say nothing of what has been accumulated in past generations, the number of Novelists at present alive and active is

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

GERMAN ROMANCE

to be reckoned not in units, but in thousands. No Leipzig Fair is unattended by its mob of gentlemen that write with ease; each duly offering his new novel, among the other fancy-goods and fustians of that great emporium. Lafontaine, for example, has already passed his hundredth volume. The inspirations of the Artist are rare and transient, but the hunger of the manufacturer is universal and incessant. The novel, too, is among the simplest forms of composition; a free arena for all sorts and degrees of talent, and may be worked in equally by a Henry Fielding and a Doctor Polydore. In Germany, accordingly, as in other countries, the Novelists are a mixed, innumerable, and most productive race. Interspersed with a few Poets, we behold whole legions and hosts of Poetasters, in all stages of worthlessness; here languishing in the transports of Sentimentality, there dancing the St.-Vitus dance of hard-studied Wit and Humour; some soaring on bold pinion into the thundery regions of *Atala, ou les Amours de deux Sauvages*; some diving, on as bold fin, into the gory profundities of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*; and very many travelling, contented in spirit, the ancient beaten highway of Commonplace.

To discover the grain of truth among this mass of falsehood, especially where time had not yet exercised its separating influence, was no plain problem; nor can I flatter myself either that I have exhausted the search, or in no case been deceived in my selection. The strength of German Literature does not lie in its Novelwriters; few of its greatest minds have put forth their full power in this department; many of them, of course, have not attempted it at all. In the seventeenth century, and prior, there was nothing whatever to be gleaned; though Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick Wolfenbüttel, had laid aside his sceptre, to write a novel,¹ in six thousand eight

¹ *Die Durchlauchtigste Syrerin Aramena* (Her Most Serene Majesty Aramena of Syria), 1669. On the whole, it is simple enough of our Magazines to inform us that the literature, nay, sometimes it is also the language, of Germany, began to be cultivated in the time of Frederick II. If the names of Hutten, Opitz,

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[More information](#)

CARLYLE'S PREFACE

3

hundred and twenty-two pages. Klopstock, Herder, Lessing, in the eighteenth century, wrote no novels: the same might almost be said of Schiller; for his fragment of the *Geisterseher* (Ghost-seer), and his Magazine-story of the *Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre* (Criminal from Loss of Honour), youthful attempts, and both I believe already in English, scarcely form an exception. The elder Jacobi's *Woldemar* and *Allwill* I was forced, not without consciousness of their merits, to pass over as too abstruse and didactic; for a like reason of didacticality, though in a far different sense, Wieland could afford me nothing which seemed worthy of himself and our present idea of him; and Klinger's *Faust*, the product evidently of a rugged, vehement, substantial mind, seemed much too harsh, infernal, and unpoetical for English readers. Of Novalis and his wonderful fragments, I could not hope that their depth and wizard beauty would be seen across their mysticism. Other meritorious names I may have omitted, from ignorance. Maler Müller's I was obliged to omit, because none of his fictions were, properly speaking, novels; and unwillingly obliged, for his plays and idyls bespeak a true artist; and the English reader would do well, by the earliest opportunity, to substitute the warm and vigorous *Adam's Awakening* of Müller, for Gessner's rather faint and washy *Death of Abel*, in forming a judgment of the German Idyl.

A graver objection than that of omissions, is that, in my selections, I have not always fixed upon the best performance of my author; and to this I have unhappily no contradiction to give, nor any answer to make, except that it lay not in the nature of my task to avoid it; and that often not the excellence of a work, but the humble considerations of its size, its subject, and its being untranslated, had to determine my choice. In justice to our strangers, the reader will be pleased

Lohenstein, etc. etc. are naturally unknown to us, we ought really to have heard of Luther. Nay, was not *Jacob Böhme* rendered into huge folios, with incomparable diagrams, in the time of James I. ? And is not Hans Sachs known (by name at least) to all barbers ?

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

GERMAN ROMANCE

to bear this fact in mind : with regard to two of them, to Fouqué and Richter, it is especially necessary.

By a secondary arrangement, in surveying what seemed the chief names among the German Novelwriters, we have also obtained a view of the chief modes of German Novelwriting. The *Mährchen* (Popular Tale), a favourite, almost critical topic among the Germans, is here twice handled ; in what may be called the prosaic manner (by Musäus), and in the poetical (by Tiecke). Of the *Ritterroman* (Chivalry Romance) there is also a specimen (by Fouqué) ; a short one, yet I fear, in many judgments, too long. Hoffmann's *Golden Pot* belongs to a strange sort (the Fantasy-piece), of which he himself was the originator, and which its sedulous cultivation, by minds more willing than able, bids fair, in no great length of time, to explode. Richter's two works correspond to our common English notion of the Novel ; and Goethe's is a *Kunstroman* (Art-novel), a species highly prized by the Germans, and of which *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the first in date, is also in their mind greatly the first in excellence.

If the reader will impress himself with a clear view of these six kinds ; and then conceive some hundreds of persons incessantly occupied in imitating, compounding, separating, distorting, exaggerating, diluting them, he may have formed as correct an idea of the actual state of German Novelwriting, as it seemed easy with such means to afford him. On the general merits and characteristics of these works, it is for the reader and not me to pass judgment. One thing it will behove him not to lose sight of : They are German Novelists, not English ones ; and their Germanhood I have all along regarded as a quality, not as a fault. To expect, therefore, that the style of them shall accord in all points with our English taste, were to expect that it should be a false and hollow style. Every nation has its own form of character and life ; and the mind which gathers no nourishment from the everyday circumstances of its existence, will in general be but scantily nourished. Of writers that hover on the confines of faultless

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[More information](#)

CARLYLE'S PREFACE

5

vacuity, that write not by vision but by hearsay, and so belong to all nations, or, more properly speaking, to none, there is no want in Germany more than in any other country. It would be easy to fill, not four, but four hundred volumes with German Novelists of this unblamable description; thereby to refresh the reader with long processions of spotless romances, bright and stately, like so many frontispieces in *La Belle Assemblée*, with cheeks of the fairest carnation, lips of the gentlest curvature, and most perfect Grecian noses, and no shade of character or meaning to mar their pure idealness. But so long as our Minerva Press and its many branch-establishments do their duty, to import ware of that sort into these Islands seems unnecessary.

On the whole, as the light of a very small taper may be useful in total darkness, I have sometimes hoped that this little enterprise might assist, in its degree, to forward an acquaintance with the Germans and their literature; a literature and a people both well worthy of our study. Translations, in this point of view, can be of little avail, except in so far as they excite us to a much more general study of the language. The difficulties of German are little more than a bugbear: they can only be compared to those of Greek by persons claiming praise or pudding for having mastered them. Three months of moderate diligence will carry any man, almost without assistance of a master, over its prime obstacles; and the rest is play rather than labour.

To judge from the signs of the times, this general diffusion of German among us seems a consummation not far distant. As an individual, I cannot but anticipate from it some little evil and much good; and look forward with pleasure to the time when a people who have listened with the most friendly placidity to criticisms¹ of the slenderest nature from

¹ Voltaire's patronising letter to Ramler, in which he condescends to grant the Germans some privileges of literary citizenship, on the strength of "Monsieur Gottched" (Gottsched, long ago acknowledged as the true German

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

GERMAN ROMANCE

us, may be more fitly judged of ; and thirty millions of men, speaking in the same old Saxon tongue, and thinking in the same old Saxon spirit with ourselves, may be admitted to the rights of brotherhood which they have long deserved, and which it is we chiefly that suffer by withholding.

Antichrist of Wit) is still held in remembrance ; so likewise is the Père Bouhours's extremely satirical inquiry, *Si un Allemand peut avoir de l'esprit ?*

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MUSÆUS

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[More information](#)

JOHANN AUGUST MUSÆUS

JOHANN AUGUST MUSÆUS was born in the year 1735, at Jena, where his father then held the office of Judge. The quick talents, and kind lively temper of the boy, recommended him to the affection of his uncle, Herr Weissenborn, Superintendent at Allstadt, who took him to his house, and treated him in all respects like a son. Johann was then in his ninth year: a few months afterwards, his uncle was promoted to the post of General Superintendent at Eisenach; a change which did not alter the domestic condition of the nephew, though it replaced him in the neighbourhood of his parents; for his father had also been transferred to Eisenach, in the capacity of Councillor and Police Magistrate. With this hospitable relative he continued till his nineteenth year.

Old Weissenborn had no children of his own, and he determined that his foster-child should have a liberal education. In due time he placed him at the University of Jena, as a student of theology. It is not likely that the inclinations of the youth himself had been particularly consulted in this arrangement; nevertheless he appears to have studied with sufficient diligence; for in the usual period of three years and a half, he obtained his degree of Master, and what was then a proof of more than ordinary merit, was elected a member of the *German Society*. With these titles, and the groundwork of a solid culture, he returned to Eisenach, to wait for an appointment in the Church, of which he was now licentiate.

For several years, though he preached with ability, and not without approval, no appointment presented itself; and when at last a country-living in the neighbourhood of Eisenach was offered him, the people stoutly resisted the admission of

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[More information](#)

their new pastor, on the ground, says his Biographer, that "he had once been seen dancing." It may be, however, that the sentence of the peasants was not altogether so infirm as this its alleged very narrow basis would betoken: judging from external circumstances, it by no means appears that devotion was at any time the chief distinction of the new candidate; and to a simple rustic flock, his shining talents, unsupported by zeal, would be empty and unprofitable as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. At all events, this hindrance closed his theological career: it came in good season to withdraw him from a calling, in which, whether willingly or unwillingly adopted, his history must have been dishonest and contemptible, and his gifts could never have availed him.

Musäus had now lost his profession; but his resources were not limited to one department of activity, and he was still young enough to choose another. His temper was gay and kindly; his faculties of mind were brilliant, and had now been improved by years of steady industry. His residence at Eisenach had not been spent in scrutinising the phases of church preferment, or dancing attendance on patrons and dignitaries: he had stored his mind with useful and ornamental knowledge; and from his remote watch-tower, his keen eye had discerned the movements of the world, and firm judgments of its wisdom and its folly were gathering form in his thoughts. In his twenty-fifth year he became an author; a satirist, and, what is rarer, a just one. Germany, by the report of its enemies and lukewarm friends, is seldom long without some Idol; some author of superhuman endowments, some system that promises to renovate the earth, some science destined to conduct, by a north-west passage, to universal knowledge. At this period, the Brazen Image of the day was our English Richardson; his novels had been translated into German with unbounded acceptance;¹ and

¹ See the Letters of Meta, Klopstock's lady, in *Richardson's Life and Correspondence*.

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[More information](#)

MUSÆUS

11

Grandison was figuring in many weak heads as the sole model of a true Christian gentleman. Musäus published his *German Grandison* in 1760; a work of good omen as a first attempt, and received with greater favour than the popularity of its victim seemed to promise. It coöperated with Time in removing this spiritual epidemic; and appears to have survived its object, for it was reprinted in 1781.

The success of his anonymous parody, however gratifying to the youthful author, did not tempt him to disclose his name, and still less to think of literature as a profession. With his cool sceptical temper, he was little liable to over-estimate his talents, or the prizes set up for them; and he longed much less for a literary existence than for a civic one. In 1763, his wish to a certain extent was granted: he became Tutor of the Pages in the Court of Weimar; which office, after seven punctual and laborious years, he exchanged for a professorship in the *Gymnasium*, or public school of the same town. He had now married; and amid the cares and pleasures of providing for a family, and keeping house like an honest burgher, the dreams of fame had faded still farther from his mind. The emoluments of his post were small; but his heart was light, and his mind humble: to increase his income he gave private lessons in history and the like, "to young ladies and gentlemen of quality"; and for several years took charge of a few boarders. The names of Wieland and Goethe had now risen on the world, while his own was still under the horizon: but this obscurity, enjoying as he did the kind esteem of all his many personal acquaintances, he felt to be a very light evil; and participated without envy in whatever entertainment or instruction his famed contemporaries could afford him. With literature he still occupied his leisure; he had read and reflected much; but for any public display of his acquirements he was making no preparation, and feeling no anxiety.

After an interval of nineteen years, the appearance of a new idol again called forth his iconoclastic faculty. Lavater