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Edited by Henry Duff Traill

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The Works of Thomas Carlyle

VOLUME 21:
GERMAN ROMANCE
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE GERMAN I

EDITED BY HENRY DUFF TRAILL



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CENTENARY EDITION

—
THE WORKS OF
THOMAS CARLYLE
IN THIRTY VOLUMES

—
VOL XXI

GERMAN ROMANCE

WITH BIOGRAPHICAL AND

CRITICAL NOTICES

I

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Musæus

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THOMAS CARLYLE

GERMAN ROMANCE

TRANSLATIONS

FROM THE GERMAN

WITH BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL NOTICES

IN TWO VOLUMES

I

MUSÆUS

DE LA MOTTE FOUQUE

TIECK

LONDON
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1898

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INTRODUCTION

THE works composing this volume date from the most arduous period in Carlyle's career. Success had not yet dawned upon him; his means were still painfully narrow; and he had just entered upon the doubtful experiment of matrimony. He was at this time supporting himself wholly by contributions to the literary reviews, and had not yet obtained that admiring acceptance among their editors which he was afterwards to acquire. He had tried verse-writing with results discouraging, at any rate, to every one but himself; and had proved even to his own satisfaction that he was quite unfitted for novel-writing. Naturally he was glad in such circumstances to accept any literary employment which was offered him; and the nature of this particular commission is described with much candour in a note to the collected Edition of 1857, wherein he speaks of *German Romance* as 'a Book of Translations, not of my suggesting or desiring, but of my executing as honest journeywork in defect of better.' He could, of course, hardly speak with so much freedom as this in the preface to the original edition, yet it is not difficult even there to discern evidences of his personal indifference to, if not positive distaste for, his work, and of his disturbing doubts as to whether it was worth performing at all. The following, for instance, is anything but an enthusiastic account of the romantic material from which he had to select:—

'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

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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 has 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.'

A more discouraging 'foreword' can seldom have been penned; and one cannot but admire the magnanimity of the publisher who could print it without remonstrance.

Carlyle, however, goes on to point out other serious difficulties in the way of satisfactory selection. The field open to him was severely limited by causes for which neither he nor his authors could be held responsible; so that, as he puts it, '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.' This fact, he adds, has especially to be borne in mind with regard to two of the authors, Fouqué and Richter. The former's best-known work *Undine* had already found a translator, and both the *Hesperus* and the *Titan* of the latter were no doubt deemed inadmissible on the ground of length. But to us in these days the choice of authors seems much more curious than the selection from among their works—so unequal do they now appear in merit, and so vastly does one of them tower over the rest. Whether Jean Paul *der einzige* still enjoys the reputation among his countrymen which once was his, or whether, unlike his great English admirer, and in some sense imitator, he has failed to reconcile posterity by sheer force of genius to the eccentricities of his style, I hardly know; but, as compared with his companions in these volumes, there can be no doubt of his superior claims to posthumous life. Musæus, Tieck, Hoffmann, Fouqué, are none of them lacking in merit of various kinds, but for humour and imagination, for power of thought and mastery of language, the strongest of them will not bear comparison with Richter.

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Even the differences among themselves are marked, and their conjunction is not to be wholly accounted for on the score of a common vogue. Ludwig Tieck indeed reached the zenith of his fame and the height of his productive activity in the first quarter of the present century; and though the new romantic movement, of which he was one of the pioneers, had by that time exhausted itself, the versatility of his powers enabled him to retain his hold upon the public by his work in a totally different *genre*. Fouqué had captured the European world by his *Undine* in 1814, and Hoffmann's feverish activity had only closed with his life in 1823. But Musæus when the Translations appeared had been forty years in the grave, and it is difficult to believe that such reputation as he enjoyed in his lifetime had so long survived him. It is perhaps not fanciful to believe that remote as are both Tieck and he from the modern fashions of romance, one can detect an air of the archaic and out of date about the earlier as compared with the later writer. Carlyle's criticism of both of them—'journeywork' applies only to his task of translation—is as sympathetic as he knew how to make it. The truth is that he has evidently described the variety of Tieck's gifts and the versatility of his powers as a romancer from a more extensive study of his works than the specimens, which alone with his limited choice he was able to give, are at all well calculated to illustrate. They are all of what may be called the seriously romantic order, quite devoid either of the symbolic or of the satirical suggestion which might have interested Carlyle in them. As it is, his too obvious want of sympathy with them and with their whole *genre* betrays him into an almost comically apologetic tone. He tells the reader, plump and plain, that he cannot boast of having 'any very certain, still less any very flattering presentiment' respecting their reception; that their merits, 'such as they have, are not of a kind to force themselves on the reader,' who, on the other hand, is 'seldom inclined to search out merit for himself'; that 'the ordinary lovers of witch and fairy matter will remark a deficiency of spectres and

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enchantments' and 'will complain that the whole is rather dull,' while 'cultivated freethinkers again, well knowing that no ghosts or elves exist in the country, will smile at the crackbrained dreamer with his spelling-book prose and doggerel verse, and dismiss him good-naturedly as a German Lake-poet.' With which parting commendation of a romancer whose merits are so unobtrusive as to be virtually non-existent, and whose stories are likely to prove equally disappointing to those who like fairy tales and those who do not, this truly singular preface is brought to a close.

Widely different is the manner in which Carlyle introduces Richter to his reader. Here he was dealing with a writer for whom he felt genuine admiration and love; and he discourses of him with a spirit and an eloquence which we look for in vain in the other three introductory essays. His sketch of Jean Paul's literary genius is a mere outline compared with the fuller and more finished portrait of the *Miscellanies*; but even this brief appreciation of the German humorist contains many passages of striking power, and one in particular of almost autobiographic significance. To characterise the works of Richter 'would,' he says, 'be difficult after the fullest inspection; to describe them to the English reader would be next to impossible.'

'Whether poetical, philosophical, didactic, or fantastic, they seem all to be emblems, more or less complete, of the singular mind where they originated. As a whole, the first perusal of them, more particularly to a foreigner, is almost infallibly offensive; and neither their meaning, nor their no-meaning, is to be discerned without long and sedulous study. They are a tropical wilderness, full of endless tortuosities; but with the fairest flowers, and the coolest fountains; now overarching us with high umbrageous gloom, now opening in long gorgeous vistas. We wander through them enjoying their wild grandeur; and by degrees our half-contemptuous wonder at the Author passes into reverence and love. His face was long hid from us: but we see him at length in the firm shape of spiritual manhood; a vast and most singular nature, but vindicating his singular nature by the force, the beauty and benignity which pervade it. In fine, we joyfully accept him for what he is, and was

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meant to be. The graces, the polish, the sprightly elegances which belong to men of lighter make, we cannot look for or demand from him. His movement is essentially slow and cumbrous, for he advances not with one faculty, but with a whole mind ; with intellect, and pathos, and wit, and humour, and imagination, moving onward like a mighty host, motley, ponderous, irregular and irresistible. He is not airy, sparkling and precise, but deep, billowy and vast. The melody of his nature is not expressed in common note-marks, nor written down by the critical gamut ; for it is wild and manifold ; its voice is like the voice of cataracts and the sounding of primeval forests. To feeble ears it is discord, but to ears that understand it deep majestic music.

De te fabula narratur. Carlyle had not yet found his later and characteristic manner ; but the time was not far distant when almost every line of this picturesque description was to become applicable to himself.

H. D. TRAILL.