

## ARTICLE X.

## VERSE TRANSLATIONS FROM MODERN GERMAN POETRY.

BY THE REVEREND JAMES LINDSAY, D.D.

It was no less a man than the late Mr. Gladstone who wrote, that "the whole of German literature may be said to lie between the years embraced by the life of Goethe." A strange judgment! How much it overlooks, including Heine and the noble host of modern lyrical poets of Germany! And poetry has no purer form of being, than when it is lyrical. Head and chief of that brilliant host stands Heinrich Heine. For brevity, wit, pathos, subjectivity, brilliance, and nameless charm, Heine is absolutely without a peer. Latest in time of the Romantic poets of Germany, he is first in rank. The Romantic School was, he tells us, "nothing else than the re-awakening of the poetry of the Middle Ages, as it had been manifested in song, in painting and sculpture, in art and life. But this poetry sprang directly from Christianity; it was a passion-flower that had its roots in the blood of Christ." Intensely self-conscious was Heine—self-exhibitive to the last degree—amid his poignant griefs. But yet he was not without love that linked him to humanity, even when he was most cynical and scornful. This love he enshrined in his poetry in ways so lyrically pure as to excel the works of Byronic art.

"So ever on I went for love, and ever,  
And still for love, yet Love approached me never."

Heine's diction is simplicity itself; his expression precision itself; his melody perfection itself; he has a fondness for strong antitheses and sharp transitions. The weird

and the melancholic are often found in him, and, as might be expected, a vein of German idealism is sometimes present. But in Heine there is passion, too, at times without any proper lyrical place. The following are characteristic of Heine. The tiny poem, "Like a Flower Thou Art," may be thus rendered:—

" Ah, like a flower to me thou art—  
So sweet and fair and pure in grace;  
I gaze on thee, and in my heart  
A sadness strange creeps on apace.

" For 'tis to me as though mine hands  
Were on thy head in blessing laid,  
I pray that of God's love the bands  
May keep thee pure and fair and staid."

The same simplicity and subjectivity, and the like individuality, mark Heine's little poem, "Thou Lovely Fisher Maid":—

" Thou lovely fisher maid,  
Thy craft draw here to land;  
Come, sit as in a glade,  
And talk we, hand in hand.

" Lay on my heart thine head,  
And fear thee here no more;  
Thy trust as free from dread  
As when thee billows bore!

" My heart is like the sea,  
Hath storm and ebb and flood,  
And many pearls there be  
In its fair deeps—wide-strowed."

Other poems by Heine exhibit his power of portraiture, and of graphically giving a story in the fewest words. But we forbear to quote, for others must be spoken of who are less known than Heine. Heine has much to be forgiven him. But we, in judging him, have also much to remember. Foolish, passionate, irreverent, lacking in wisdom and truly normal development, he certainly was, but not even these things need blind us to the beauties of his poet-

ry. The same Heine it was who, when he took to discoursing on "Religion and Philosophy," could speak so exquisitely of the Bible as to say, "He that has lost his God can find Him again in this Book, and towards him who has never known Him it wafts the breath of the Divine Word." He died "believing in one sole God."

Of recent German lyrical poets, none has been more popular than Emmanuel Geibel, Germany's greatest lyrical poet since Heine. Geibel's elevation of thought and sentiment are as conspicuous as the grace and harmony of his poems. One can hardly agree with the somewhat inappreciative estimate of Lichtenberger, who seems to find it necessary to deny them religious utility and poetic wealth, in order to magnify Heine. But the beauty and perfection of Heine's poetry have no need that injustice be done to others. Surely such a 'Prayer' as that of Geibel, of which in its *Ghazel* form I subjoin a rendering, does not lack in spiritual character, or poetic power, or daring theistic sentiment:—

"Lord, whom in depth of heart I bear, be  
 Thou with me!  
 Thou Fort of grace in peace and plague, be  
 Thou with me!  
 When shine of summer sun the cheek of  
 Man doth brown,  
 As when with roses fenc'd in youth, be  
 Thou my crown!  
 Preserve me, Well of Joy! lest I should  
 Haughty be,  
 And if I of myself despair, be  
 Thou with me!  
 Thy Spirit to me give, that pure my  
 Song may be,  
 And that no word may e'er accuse, be  
 Thou with me!  
 Thy blessing be as Vine-dew! Self can  
 Nothing be;  
 But that I may the highest dare, be  
 Thou with me!

O Thou, my Consolation, Strength, and  
 Sunlight free,  
 On to the end of life's brief day, be  
 Thou with me!"

The truth is, Geibel can on occasion be as heart-moving as Heine, as perfect in poetic form, while spotlessly free of the sarcastic and frivolous mockeries which so often mar the brilliant work of Heine. This on "Remorse" is also Geibel's, and has a touching power of its own:—

"Dark was the night, and hot the air,  
 To rest I did in vain repair,  
 My spirit sad and sadder grew:  
 For days of old before me passed—  
 In one long train they swiftly flew—  
 And from their flight wailed thus at last:

"Thy spring thou hadst, and didst but grieve,  
 Salvation, and didst not believe,  
 The heart which for true love was given  
 Thou hast on show and trifle spent:  
 So now thy soul with sorrow riven  
 In deepest loneliness is pent.

"Thine anxious prayer now rends the air—  
 Too late, too late, for thee to share  
 The peaceful rest thou else hadst known,  
 Thy heart doth loudly thee condemn.'  
 Ah, then, my face on pillow thrown  
 Poured flood of tears I could not stem."

It is the merit of Geibel to have stood for spiritual ideals in the midst of a skeptical generation, and to have voiced human aspirations after the Divine in forms both lovely and pure. One more instance from Geibel must suffice; it is a rendering of his poem on "Sorrow as God's Messenger":—

"Ah! Sorrow is God's messenger: holy words of solemn measure  
 Brings it to us, opening softly portals of deep-hidden treasure.

"But alas! our errant vision, dust-bedimmed by our own wantings,  
 Cannot see the tract of shadows to be but the angel's hauntings.

"That its bitter cup should save us seems to us an idle fancy,  
 And its meaning sadly missing, hail we it with tears of frenzy.

"But if e'er, in heavenly vesture, that same angel shall have fled us,  
Swift and dazling then the glory which its lustrous head will shed us.

"Thro' the veil will then break forth the sheen which silver wings do  
carry,  
And the soul, with solemn awe, will learn what Guest did with it  
tarry."

It cannot be pretended that, in such renderings, we have carried over the force, power, and point of the originals, but at least we have given some idea of the quality of their lyrical poetry. Geibel was, it may be added, an excellent verse translator of English, French, Greek, Latin, and Spanish poets. That German Apollo, Heine, excelled—and it was a developing excellence—in the depth and completeness with which his lyrical poetry seized and voiced the realities of experience. Our hearts leap up to find their feelings expressed in Heine very much as they do in the case of Burns, and far more than they do in the lyrics of Shelley. For the exquisite beauty of Shelley's lyrics is not shot through with the element of reality. Real enough, no doubt, his lyrical materials were to Shelley himself, but they are unsubstantial to us, and do not hold men to the end like the best of the incomparable Burns and the inimitable Heine. An infinite help to Heine it was that he would perpetuate the work of those mighty liberators of intellect, Luther and Lessing, and that he saw in the Romantic movement "a wholesome reaction" against "the horrible and colossal materialism that had grown up, and had overshadowed all spiritual glory." Like the essential poet he was, Heine had no real sympathy with a *Nil admirari* philosophy. Geibel has augmented his own poetic influence by linking a national impulse to the fine melody of his strains. But it is the spiritual side of Geibel's poetry which has lent it transfiguring power and celestial beauty, even when viewed side by side with the ethereal loveliness of Heine's poetry. On lower and more human ground, who will be long content with what may be called

the society poetry of Moore or Beranger, when Burns and Heine, with their strong natural and primary instincts and interests, are ever with us?

Lenau, generous-hearted and nature-loving, was sad and unfortunate in his life. His incurable despondency did not keep him from leaving us some of the finest lyrics in modern German poetry. This poem on "The Child's Voice" is his:—

"A sleeping child! be still! in these calm features  
Can Paradise itself be brought before us;  
Sweetly it smiles, as heard it angel chorus,  
Its lips bespeak the joys of heav'nly creatures.

"Be still, O World, with lies so loud and many,  
Disturb not thou the truth, of the child's fair dream!  
Let me hear the sounds that from its slumber stream,  
Let me catch a grace like which I know not any.

"Ah! the child, that recks not how my soul is moved,  
Hath, by its darkling murmurs, brought me blessing—  
More than calm of rustling wood hath blessing proved:

"So a longing hath for home upon me come—  
More than when the rains fell, heath-refreshing,  
Or when far bells call'd me from the mountains home."

Freiligrath is a poet marked by strong political tendencies, but gifted with the highest mental energy and imaginative power. Herwegh, like Freiligrath, had powerful political instincts, and his poems also are marked by much vigor, all the more, perhaps, from being political. Political strife has, however, sometimes diverted poetry in Germany from its true course. Hamerling, who stands not always at his highest, has a brilliant fancy and great descriptive power. This charming madrigal, "Many a Dream," is his:—

"Many birds have fled,  
Many flowers have bloomed,  
Many clouds have sped,  
Many stars been doomed.  
From rock and forest fountain,  
Have waters many stream'd,  
Dissolved, too, is the mountain  
Of dreams my heart hath dream'd."

These poets, with other lyrists like Scheffel, Keller, and Sturm, are sufficient to show how rich has been the recent lyrical poetry of Germany. The best productions of its recent poetry have been lyrical. And when to the lyrics we add the many conspicuous examples of excellent narrative poetry, from the sonorous strains of Freiligrath onward, we see how little justice resides in the judgment that German literature ended with the life of Goethe. Because we "open our Goethe," we need not close later volumes of lyric verse. Because we allow Goethe to be sovereign of German literature, we need not forget the after poetry to which Goethe has given form and classic mold. For not a little of that poetry has been beautiful and impressive, albeit Heine alone since Goethe has held the attention of the whole of Europe. Besides, who can doubt how much of that lyric excellence is due to the unapproached greatness of Goethe, whose lyrical power and charm are un fading? Thus it has fallen out as might have been expected; for it had been impossible that German poetry should decay while German faith and idealism remained, and came into so great poetic inheritance. Too much fine humanism, and too much "wise passiveness," remain in the German mind, before Nature and the mysteries of existence, for poetry there to fade or fall. Goethe has been for its creating, transforming, fertilizing, not for its extinction. He put upon it the stamp of Hellenic genius, and carried it out, beyond the Romantic lights, to the sanity, health, and enjoyment of the Grecian sky. That is to say, his was a natural classicism—leaning wholly on genius and Nature—which left a literary impress on his land which no country can parallel. But we are free to confess, while contending for justice to poetry since Goethe, that German literature is to-day saved by hope—the hope of an era when something better shall arise within the realm of poetry than has been hers since Heine.