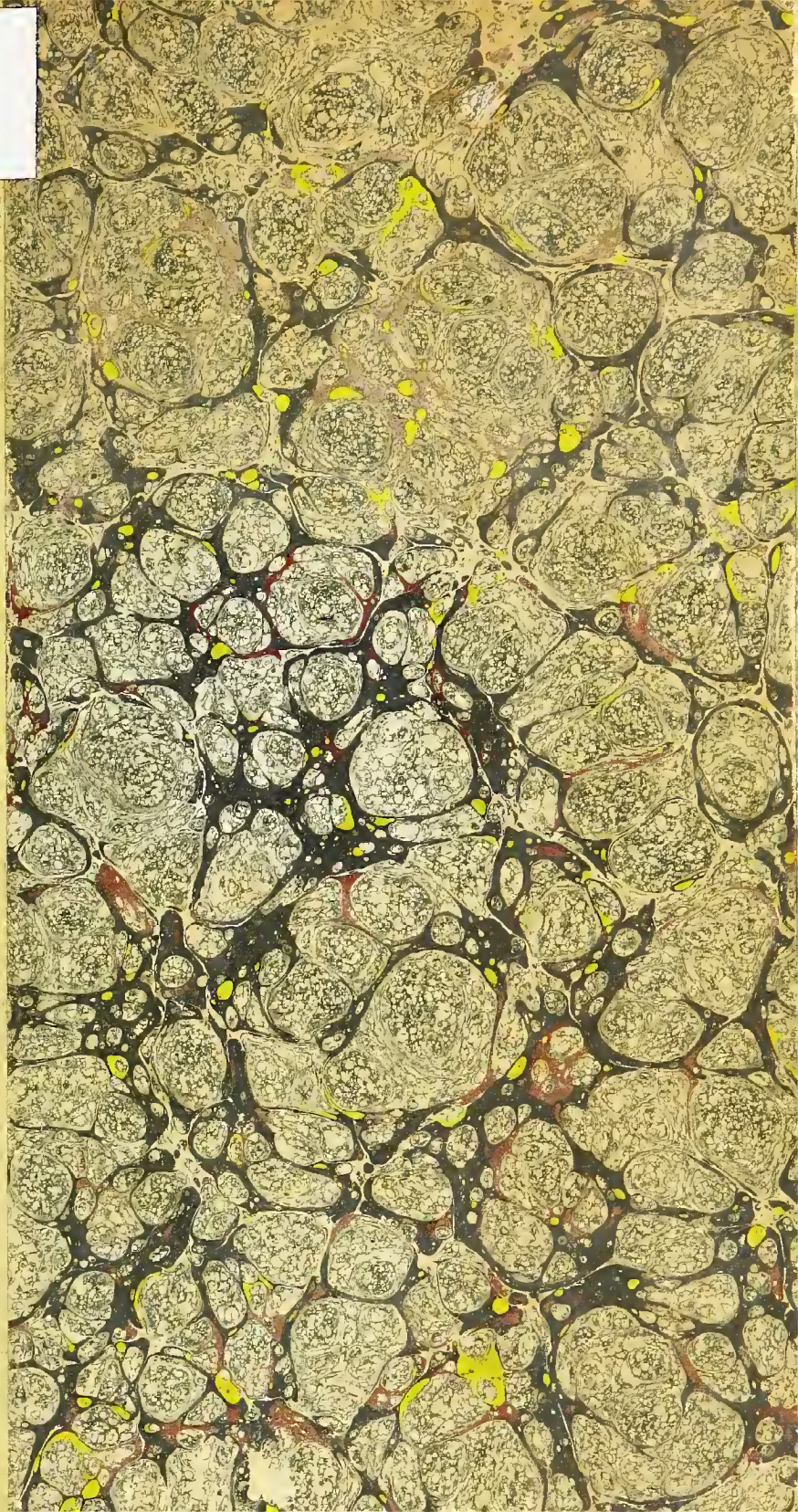


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THE
POETRY OF WILHELM MÜLLER

BY
JAMES TAFT HATFIELD



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The Poetry of Wilhelm Müller.

ART. VI.—THE POETRY OF WILHELM MULLER.

THOSE who cherish Müller's poetry, and believe that it is destined to find more and more a place in the hearts of men, have seen with pleasure the many tributes of appreciation which have recently been paid him in all parts of Germany and in Greece, in connection with the hundredth anniversary of his birth—the seventh of last October. Were it not for certain assignable causes, it would seem beyond belief that he is so nearly unknown among English-speaking people. Our popular encyclopedias, even the *Britannica*, do not mention him, and the hospitable columns of the various volumes of Poole's *Index* have no entry under his name. Longfellow, with that fine poetic insight which did him honor, early recognized the value of Müller's lyrical gifts. In the second book of *Hyperion* he characterizes him with just appreciation,* and his translations of two of Müller's lyrics, under the titles "Whither?" and "The Bird and the Ship," have appeared in his works since 1839. Baskerville published three other translations. From the musical point of view, Franz Schubert showed his sympathetic estimate of Müller's work by his setting of the song-cycles "Die schöne Müllerin" and "Die Winterreise." These songs, so well known to English and American lovers of music, doubtless served Tennyson as a model in writing "The Window," and, perhaps, were not without influence upon "The Miller's Daughter" and "Maud." Unfortunately, the English translations which accompany Schubert's music, like nearly all translations of German songs, fail to give an adequate impression of the poetic quality of their originals. Professor Max Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop* contains an English translation of his Preface to the latest German edition of his father's poems—a most graceful tribute of filial piety. It should also be said that Dr. C. A. Buchheim has added to his many

* It is, perhaps, worthy of remark, in regard to Longfellow's quotation of the stanza from Müller's "little song where the maiden bids the moon good evening," that it is not the maiden, but the apprentice, who greets the moon, and that a closer translation would be:

This song is a wanderer's simple lay,
Which he sang in the full moon's flooding ray;
And those who read it by candlelight,
Cannot understand the song aright,
But 'tis easy to a child.

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other services to German literature in England that of having called specific attention to the value of Müller's poetry. This list practically concludes what has been done in English for our poet.

Foremost among Müller's qualities is his lively dramatic power, that highest form of literary expression, which, in some sense, reconciles the variant spheres of poetry and the depicting arts—Lessing's *Handlungen* and *Körper*. It is chiefly in his lyric cycles that our poet must be reckoned as a pioneer and creator of poetical form. No poet in any language has so happily carried out this strictly lyric treatment through a series of loosely connected songs, which at the same time show a definite progress in clearly marked action. German literature has not, it is true, been devoid of poems in which an indefinite *Er* holds more or less protracted discourse with an equally nebulous *Sie*. Uhland's *Wanderlieder* are older and, doubtless, exercised influence on Müller; but such works are not to be compared in respect of personification and action. Neither can we compare Browning's extended monologues. A near relative in English is, perhaps, to be found in Tennyson's "Maud;" but the latter, with its analytical introspection and the complexity of highly organized social life which it exhibits, is far enough removed from the pathetic simplicity of "The Winter Journey" or "The Rhenish Apprentice."

Here, as in almost every interesting movement in newer German literature, we can trace the fecundating influence of Goethe. In the series of four ballads beginning with *Der Edelknabe und die Müllerin* Goethe tried his hand at a new form—that of lyric conversations, the idea of which came to him upon his Swiss journey of 1797. Writing to Schiller, he says that they must make use of it in the future. "There are pretty things of the sort," says he, "in a certain older German period, and much can be expressed in this form. . . . I have begun such a conversation between a lad, who is in love with a *Müllerin*, and the mill brook, and hope to send it soon." The "certain older German" source is, without doubt, the mediæval *Volkslied*, which often suggests both the spirit and dainty melody which give charm to these dialogues. Goethe, doubtless, planned that all the four which were conceived at this time should form a connected romance; but this plan

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was confused, in its working out, by a distracting one of having the songs represent four distinct sources—Old English, German, French, and Spanish. The resultant series is disconnected and partly contradictory; yet it is easy to understand why Schiller's wife said, "I hope you will let the pretty miller's daughter and the brooks say a good deal more!"

What Goethe indicated Müller performed, starting with a more thorough knowledge of the *Volkslied* than was accessible to Goethe. The most complete cycle, the tragi-comedy "Die schöne Müllerin," is in twenty-three songs, of which twenty have been set to music by Schubert. Its prologue breathes the odors and suggests the sounds and sights of spring which are to pervade the whole—the pure air, far from the narrow walls of the city, the woods, fields, valleys, and heights, the clattering mill, the rushing brook, the merry hunter, and the wandering apprentice. Then comes a splendid song, full of the bounding, exultant joy of being "on the road," vibrant with the merry whirl and whirring of the wheel and the stones and the tumbling of the noisy water. "O, Wand'ring is the Miller's Joy" is itself enough to make the poet's memory dear to his people. The following song, "Whither?" is discussed by Longfellow in *Hyperion*, where he gives a remarkably faithful and melodious version, which fails only in translating the pretty word-play,

Du hast, mit deinem Rauschen,
Mir ganz berauscht den Sinn.

Following this come the other members of the cycle, in most charming metrical variety, for, of the entire twenty-three songs, only four are in the same meter, which is the light ballad form that Heine so often uses; and this variety is no mere conceit, but offers the vehicle for the fullest musical expression of every emotional phase of the little drama. Müller is a musical poet, in the deepest sense of the word, as Sidney Lanier was musical; and this is indicated by his recognition by many composers. I do not refer merely to the melodic flow of his diction, nor to the smooth and varied rhythms, but to his art in composition, to his development of motive and theme, to *Stimmungen*, color, and tone. He points toward that day when music and literature, no longer underestimating one another,

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shall unite in reciprocal interpretation. It is interesting to read Müller's own words :

I can neither sing nor play; and yet, for all that, I do sing, and play too, when I am composing. If I could only express the melodies that come to me, my songs would be more pleasing than they are. Well, perhaps a kindred spirit may be found some time, whose ear shall catch the melodies from my words, and who will give me back my own.

As regards the metrical variety,* we have, now, the anapestic clatter of the mill wheel :

See, a mill among the alders,
Which their shade half conceals ;
Through murm'ring and singing,
Comes clatter of wheels ;

now, the more pensive trochaics of

When she's sitting at the brookside ;

then, the pure song-form of "Impatience," with its recurring refrain,

Thine is my heart, and shall be thine forever ;

while the increasing vehemence of the young miller's passion comes to its climax in the rhapsodic outbreak of "Mine !" with its single rhyme throughout :

Brooklet, cease that song of thine !
Wheels, your noisy hum resign !
Merry wood birds who combine,
All in line,
Let your tuneful lays decline !
There, where twine
Spray and vine,
Shall resound one rhyme divine :
The sweet miller's daughter, she is mine !
Mine !
Spring, are these the only flowers of thine ?
Sun above, canst thou not brighter shine ?
Lonely, ah, must I repine,
With that word of blessing, "mine,"
Nor be understood through nature's vast design !

Upon this follows the ominous "Pause," and the entrance of the unabashed hunter, breaking ruthlessly into the preserves of the miller's apprentice, whose agitation can find outlet only in six-foot iambs,

Where now, so swift, so whirling-wild, my dearest brook ?

* In the translations the purpose has been to give an accurate syllabic reproduction of the original form.

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And for each chapter in his rapidly developing experiences the proper mode is found, up to the last scene—the soothing lullaby of the brook, with the closing accord :

The moon climbs high,
Clear is the sky—
And the heaven up yonder, how far away!

Sudermann, in his *Geschwister*, brings out effectively the culminative emotional force of the moods of this series.

There are other cycles of the same sort; and in shorter groups of related poems the same treatment comes to view, as in those which have to do with the life of the Bohemian musician, the rustic love-lays of the Italian reaper and herdsman, and the manly poems of German hunter life. In all of them can be noticed the distinct personification and characterization, the sprightliness of movement, the wide range of feeling. The tone is that of everyday life, and the diction is full of homely, direct expressions and of those crisp word-effects in which the German tongue abounds—not displayed and sported with, as is Rückert's wont, but subordinate to a purpose. What simple intensity of feeling! Again and again there is the sudden outbreak of compressed emotion which is the very soul of lyric poetry. We know it in Heine and Geibel and, more by suggestion, in Goethe. So, in "The Winter Journey," where the wanderer, whose tears fall into the snow, tells it that it is to melt and flow into the brook and thus pass, at length, the abode of his beloved in the town:

Through the town thou wilt be going,
Through its cheerful streets thou'lt roam;
When thou feel'st my tears a-glowing—
There, that is my darling's home!

The justest criticism is that the characters are idealized; the wandering German apprentice is as little delineated here as is the typical shepherd in English pastoral poetry. However, there is no false sentiment, and the poet is true to his conception.

The dramatic gift is further shown in the treatment of individual subjects, as in the strong delineation of "The Wandering Jew," and, especially, in the ballad "The Bell-Founder of Breslau," concerning which we frankly avow our opinion that it is the best naïve popular ballad in modern literature, viewed from any standpoint—its artless language, its native

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tone, its distinct and limited personification, its stirring situation, its uninterrupted action, its tragic climax, its moral justification, its harmonious resolution and simple ending ;—but one must exercise self-restraint.* Müller has entered as fully as any German author into the spirit of the national *Volkssied*, and his reproductions have the very note of unconscious, impersonal simplicity which belongs to this class of poetry. He never becomes declamatory, stiff, or consciously rhetorical ; nor does he wrest the beauty of the lyric into any other service. As genuine popular types may be mentioned “Tears and Roses” and “The One called Dead.” In “Brotherhood” we notice brevity of form, combined with deepest feeling.

With great felicity he has, also, reproduced the very spirit and color of an alien popular literature. His stay of more than a year in Italy, after the completion of his academic studies, especially his summer in Albano, in 1818, afforded him a highly prized opportunity to become intimately acquainted with popular Italian life and songs upon their native soil ; and the fruit of this sympathetic study appears in his “Rustic Songs,” the “Songs from the Gulf of Salerno,” and “Serenades in Ritornelles.” In the alternate songs of the first set we have a vivid suggestion of the ancient dialogue of raillery. With the spirit is also exhibited the form, with much ingenuity, the experiments in assonance being quite as successful as Rückert’s feats in foreign modes—and equally, in our opinion, a doubtful investment, though a meed of admiration cannot be withheld from the linguistic talent which can overcome the difficulties of the excessively artificial and complex form of the ritornelle, as Müller uses it.

It is hard to speak with moderation of his preeminent powers as an interpreter of nature, alive and animate in a thousand teeming forms—an interpreter at whose side German literature can place few representatives. What exhilaration in action, what joy of mere existence ! His poems of nature are full of fresh air. Can any wholesome being fail to catch the contagion of rapturous jubilation in the spring song beginning,

Fling wide the sash ! fling wide the heart !
O, quickly ! O, quickly !

* In a translation of this ballad (*Germania*, July, 1893), we have attempted to reproduce its simple tone and the slightly archaic flavor of its diction.

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with its lively personification of inanimate nature? How the mild breezes, the dazzling sun rays, the twitter of birds, and the laughter of brooklets come out in "The Birch Grove near Endermay," just as the chilly mood of winter pervades "The Winter Journey." All the wholesome sea gales that blow go trumpeting and fluttering through the lines of "The Bird and the Ship." Longfellow's translation here is inadequate, because of the loss of the feminine rhyming cadence, which adds sensibly to the careening movement; and for obvious scruples Longfellow has dropped out the sixth stanza from his version.* We prize very highly that little group, "Seashells from the Island of Rügen," with their delightful portrayal of all the refreshing charm which the surging sea offers to the jaded comer from the distant inland—the briny air, the dashing of the surf, the gleaming sand, on which lie shining pebbles and seashells; and the fancies of the poet are as unforced and variegated as the aspects of nature. So, in "Sea and Sky:"

As each bright cloud is painted on the sea,
As from its bosom flash the sunbeams free;
Even as it trembles with each zephyr light,
That hovers downward from the distant height;
So is my heart thy sea—my heaven, thou;
Wilt thou its waves at length repose allow?

The poem "Vineta" in this series is a very good type of a form of simile in which the comparison is left to the reader. The first three stanzas give the material scene, the last three the play of fancy. In the popular legend, the proud city of Vineta lies sunken in the sea between Rügen and the mainland, and many a fisherman has caught glimpses of its reflected glory and heard the faint throbbing of its mysterious bells:

From the sea's deep, deep recesses cometh
Faintest sound of distant evening bells,
Bringing to our ears its wondrous tidings;
Of a city far submerged it tells.

Sunk beneath the ocean's heaving surface,
Stand for evermore its ruins old;
From its roofs and towers, deeply hidden,
Shine again reflected rays of gold.

*A manifest error has perpetuated itself in all the editions of our American poet. In the last stanza, the word *Jubelgesang* appears constantly as "weary song." It seems certain that Longfellow must have written "merry song," and that by an easy misreading of his sinuous handwriting the wrong form found its place in the text, first published in 1839. After this time Longfellow seems not to have paid further attention to Müller's poetry.

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And the seaman, who at ruddy evening
Once hath felt its weird reflection's charm,
Saileth ever toward the selfsame vision,
Though steep cliffs be near to do him harm.

From my heart's deep, deep recesses cometh
Faintest sound, like distant evening bells.
Ah, it bringeth to me wondrous tidings;
Of the love once loved again it tells.

For a world of beauty there lies hidden,
There forever stand its ruins old;
Only in my dreams, that come at midnight,
Shine again its heavenly rays of gold.

Then I fain would plunge beneath the surface,
And would sink in its reflected gold;
And, at times, methinks an angel message
Calls me back into that city old.

The "Songs from the Gulf of Salerno" glow with a Heyse-like prodigality of tropical light and color. Very charming is the little Italian picture, "The Fortunate Fisher-maiden:"

From shore I watched her fishing
Out in her rowboat small;
The fish leaped to the meshes,
As though 'twere to a ball;
The net seemed all too little—
Not one would stay below;
She took it all right calmly,
And thought, "It must be so."

Then from her boat she landed;
She stood upon the sand.
The ocean surged and struggled,
As though 'twould rush on land.
And at her feet bright corals
And seashells it did throw;
She picked them up right calmly,
And thought, "It must be so."

I, sorry shepherd lover,
What is my wooing worth—
Its flowers and its ribbons?
Hers is the whole round earth.
All hearts beat warmly toward her—
A heart of stone must glow;
She heeds it like the sea surf,
And thinks, "It must be so."

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If I could offer to her
The heavens' evening blue,
The stars' bright silver sparkle,
For her 'twere nothing new ;
She'd hold it up before her
And say, " 'Tis mine, you know,"
Would quite forget to thank me,
And think, " It must be so."

What boots thy timid tinkling,
Thou paltry lute of mine ?
Although her window's open,
She heeds no note of thine ;
For flutes, and horns, and trumpets,
And merry pipes that blow—
She's dancing to their measure,
And thinks, " It must be so."

With his other titles Müller must be allowed that of the poet of German wine, *par excellence*. Heine tells, in the *Harzreise*, of singing some of Müller's songs at a roaring supper on the Brocken. Müller's exuberant spirits find that outlet which was characteristic of the day in which he lived, in the swing and fling of convivial songs. It is no disloyalty to the better spirit of abstinence of our own time and country that we can enjoy the hearty mirth and social unconstraint reflected in these songs. Says the poet :

My muse has turned in
At the innkeeper's door,
Has tied on her apron,
And wanders no more.
She's minded to tend there
The table and bin ;
See, she stands at the gateway
And beckons me in.

Many of the *Tafellieder* are very light, and the collection endures much culling ; but the jollity of " Est, Est," " King Wine," and " Noah's Ark " is indestructible. The situation in " The Tippler and his Horse " is comparable to that in the " Bab Ballads." " The King of Hukapetapank " is typical of the sheer hilarity of many of the set :

In Hukapetapank there lived
A monarch without peer,
Who, by an ancient use, got drunk
Once every blessed year.

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And not a soul dared taste of wine
In all that lovely land,
So long as on a single leg
That king contrived to stand.

But when the king sank to the floor
And from his throne did fall,
The living then waxed riotous
Within that royal hall ;
They drank from pitcher and from plate,
From hat and hand they drank—
Lords, ladies, servants, man, and beast,
In Hukapetapank.

Each one became a royal guest,
Long as the king did sleep,
And open in the palace stood
The cupboards broad and deep.
The beggar, as from flowing brooks,
With crown wine filled his cup,
And thought himself a very king—
But then, the king woke up !

Alas, the fun was over now,
Though much was still unquaffed ;
The henchmen strode into the house,
And roared, " What, are you daft ? "
And whoso lay, or sat, or stood,
Befuddled, or clear-brained,
Was straightway as a toper seized
And in the court arraigned.

So 'twas in Hukapetapank,
And so it goes to-day ;
'Twere pity for so good a use
To fall into decay.
But look alive when *Majestät*
Begins to rub his eyes.
A fool is he who lingers then ;
Who starts for home is wise !

But there is a more earnest side to these drinking songs. In the praise of Rhine wine is the praise of something which belongs to the old German days, something which has remained unchanged from the times of national power and unity :

German, free, unspoiled, and lusty,
In the German land,
Only wine remains among us
By our river's strand.

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It was a period when men of ardent political aspirations had little in the external situation to afford cheer or mirth or anything other than bitterness of spirit. It is characteristic of absolutism that it shuts off the highest outlets of human activity and relegates men to some medium of self-forgetfulness.

I speak now of Müller as the poet of freedom—his best-known rôle ; for many who are otherwise unacquainted with him are familiar with his title, *Griechenmüller*. With maturing powers, which were unfortunately to be ended at thirty-three years of age, he deepens in intensity and fire. His series of "Greek Songs" would demand large consideration in our estimate of his personality and influence, had it not already been somewhat fully presented to English readers.* A close parallel in spirit and form could be drawn between the "Greek Songs" and Whittier's "Voices of Freedom." The note of earnestness seems conspicuously lacking in the poems of earlier days, the days of his contemporaries Körner, Arndt, and Schenkendorf. Though he left his university studies to fight in the war of liberation, there is no echo, however faint, of its spirit in his younger years ; and yet no heart beat higher with the pure passion for liberty. This lies in the very independence of Müller's nature. The patronage of a prince could not debase the sterling metal of his manliness :

Not with golden chains of honor, in the cage of mean control,
Has my prince laid me in fetters and wrought evil to my soul ;
In his country's fairest garden vine-clad house he gave to me,
And, all free, I sing my measures out into an air as free.

Such a song is worthy of him. Glad and free are love and lays.
Hail, O prince! no servile parrot needest thou to prate thy praise.

A liberal of the liberals, he felt keenly the oppressive years of the conservative reaction ; but those were not times when empty words were noble. In 1821 began the revolt of the Greeks against the devastating tyranny of Turkey—no ideal, stainless national uprising, like the great days of Prussia in 1813, but, for all that, a supreme struggle of the modern representatives of the mighty name of Hellas against barbarism and heathenism. Müller sent out set after set of "Griechenlieder" flaming with tremendous passion—sometimes, it must be con-

* See Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. III, p. 108, ff.

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fessed, reflecting the savage bloodthirstiness of their subject. It is, perhaps, not too much to say that Müller made reactionary Europe feel the pulsations of freedom and compelled it into sympathy with the heroic efforts of the Greeks, while sounding fearlessly the note of the inherent rights of man. The drumbeat of these long lines shook the heavy air of dungeons and fortresses.

To Müller's maturer and more earnest powers belong his three hundred epigrams. It would be an attractive digression to consider the poetic value of this class of writing in a literature which owns a Logan, an Angelus Silesius, a Lessing, and a Goethe. Whatever opinion may be held on this point, it is certain that many of Müller's epigrams are to be numbered among the *ἔπεα πτερόεντα* which are to live. At first, in a lighter vein, they touch with genial humor on love and wine, then show a more stinging satire and a sticking barb to the arrow, particularly in those directed against pride of birth and official presumption. I cite a few :

JUSTICE AND LOVE.

Justice to each one says, "Have what is thine!"
But Love to each one says, "Have what is mine!"

QUERY.

Plant, would'st rather, closely sheltered, under narrow glass remain,
Or beneath the open heaven feel the storm, the sun, the rain?

THE WINGED WORD.

Has the word the lips once quitted, you'll o'ertake it nevermore,
Though next moment your repentance scurry off with coach and four.

THE REAL INSTRUCTOR.

Follow not, as learner, him to whom the thronging crowds resort,
Who would make a doctor out of each who comes, as though in sport;
Who, with pains, can show the doctor that he is a learner still—
Seek his low and lonely portal, and pass humbly o'er its sill.

VALUE OF ANCESTORS.

Ancestors are ciphers, which, to ciphers added, naught amount;
Set an integer before them, and the ciphers all will count.

RULE OF LABOR.

Be idle and halloo—
Get fed for two;
Work and keep quiet—
Scraps are your diet.

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PRAYER WITHOUT WORKS.

Lazy at work, but zealous in praying;
No one to pump, but fine organ playing.

TWOFOLD ART OF GOVERNMENT.

To hate the people and to fear it to tyrants seems a maxim right;
That ruler's wise and good who loves it, yet dares to hold its censure light.

THE WISE WOMAN.

For Heaven's sake, a thousand women, O Solomon, thou wisest man!
"I'm searching always to discover a single wise one if I can."
He searched, unwearied and undaunted; and when, at last, one came to hand,
He there found waiting—God-a-mercy!—an Ethiop from Blackman's Land!

HEAVENWARD GLANCES.

Do you know why Goodman's glances always wander toward the skies?
'Tis because he dare not look a fellow-creature in the eyes.

Müller, whose own life was of so short a span, is particularly the poet of the young. His unspoiled, almost childish, freshness of emotion; his graceful delicacy and charm, added, in so many of his themes, to vigorous manliness; his simplicity and sincerity of feeling; his contagious vitality, are factors which are especially attractive to young Americans and which have a legitimate place in their growth and development. Something there is in him which perfectly responds to the poetic impulses of youth. And is not unspoiled youth, as the normal state, always poetic? Admitting a considerable proportion of trifles in the body of his works, we are none the less compelled to recognize the permanency of the greater part. He is a popular poet, in the best sense of the term—as Burns is a popular poet, and as much of Longfellow's work is increasingly popular. One of the first earnest workers in the inspiring field of thorough-going Germanic studies and cradled in the romantic school, he felt how to make available the æsthetic materials of mediæval German; and, as the interpreter and continuator of its vital spirit, in terms of distinctly contemporary life, he must be regarded as one of its most valuable exponents.

The admirable edition of his poems by his son, Professor Max Müller, a type of all that such an edition ought to be, is quite available, and offers what seems to be especially needed in these days of improved "text-books" and anthologies—the complete body of the author's poetical works as the subject-

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matter for study and comparison. Those who regard what is simple and artless as shallow and beneath the dignity of earnest students, who think lightly of "Der Glockenguss zu Breslau" because it is not a "Kraniche des Ibykus" or yet an "Erlkönig," who contemn "Die schöne Müllerin" in comparison with a "Maud" or a "Fra Lippo Lippi," may pass our poet by; but as long as that which comes from the heart shall go to the heart his name must keep an honored place among those which are to live and be loved.

James Taft Hatfield



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