Review

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The German Lyric. By JOHN LEES. London: J. M. Dent & Sons. 1914. 8vo. 266 pp.

The opening sentence of Dr Lees' Foreword (dated April, 1914): 'A short history of the German lyric for English readers should need no apology,' has gained much in suggestiveness since last summer. At a time when relations between England and Germany were growing comparatively harmonious, any good book on this subject, far from needing an apology, would have been sure of a hearty welcome. As things are, it is to be feared that Dr Lees' book will not be so cordially received in many quarters as it might otherwise have been. But there are, no doubt, many amongst us who will consider it especially welcome just now as a reminder that even Germany is not really so black as she has allowed her diplomatists, her militarists, and even some of her lyricists to paint her recently.

The author's primary object has been 'to supply a lucid and concise guide to students of German minor poetry,' but he hopes that his book may also 'serve a wider public, and attract readers to authors whom hitherto they may not have known.' The principle that no man can serve two masters is particularly applicable to an attempt to cater at the same time for the two very different classes of readers thus indicated. Fortunately Dr Lees appears to have aimed not so much at meeting impartially the demands of both these classes, as at acting chiefly as counsellor and guide to the not yet quite mature student, who should certainly find the book both helpful and stimulating. It may at the same time, to a limited extent, serve a wider public; but most general readers will, it is to be feared, feel a lack of detailed appreciation of individual poems, and fail to be infected by an enthusiasm that cannot possibly find adequate expression in a 'lucid and concise guide.'

In his first chapter the author discusses (with rather frequent thrusts at Witkop) the nature and characteristic features of lyric poetry in general, and of the German lyric in particular. With regard to the former, a number of interesting questions—the difficulty of defining the lyric, the canon of inner truth, the importance of form, methods of composition—are dealt with somewhat briefly, but at sufficient length to give the student a general idea of the aesthetic and psychological problems arising from a critical study of lyric poetry. At the same time a fuller treatment of these questions, with more numerous quotations and references, might have considerably enhanced the value of this chapter to the best type of student. The main characteristics of the German lyric in particular are, however, very satisfactorily summarised in the eight pages devoted to this purpose, though the statement that to the Minnesinger 'only certain themes were permitted' is likely to mislead the reader ignorant of the great variety of themes actually found in their work. A poet of real originality, such as Walther von der Vogelweide, was subject to no other restriction in his choice of themes than such as were imposed by the range of his experience and his own sense of fitness. Some misconception will

probably be caused also by the summary treatment of poetic licence, as far as grammatical forms are concerned, in the one sentence: 'The sign of the past participle may be omitted, and many other such anomalies are not only permitted but quite common.' The suggestion of wholesale and wanton mutilation of standard forms conveyed by this sentence as it stands is unfortunate.

Dr Lees's plan of dealing with the history of the German lyric in seven periods, to each of which one chapter is devoted, is, on the whole, convenient and well adapted to the needs of the student, though the Minnesang and the Folksong might with advantage have each had a chapter to itself and been treated in more detail. And many of the names of the more unimportant poets might have been omitted without detriment to the value of the book. By doing so, and by confining himself more strictly to the lyric, as opposed to the ballad, the author would have saved space which might profitably have been devoted to a fuller treatment of some of the most important lyricists, and in particular to more frequent quotations and a more detailed appreciation of their most characteristic poems. Although a good general characterisation of Heine's poetry, for example, is given in about 7½ pages (exclusive of a page devoted to *Die Grenadiere*), not a single poem is discussed in any detail, while only 16 lines, in all, are quoted in illustration of his so varied themes, moods, and styles. It is true, of course, that the omission of all references to ballads would have tended towards monotony and detracted from the general usefulness of the book. It would, perhaps, have been still better if the author had decided from the first to deal equally with both the lyric and the ballad, restricting himself, if he preferred, to the nineteenth century.

In his appreciations of the individual poets Dr Lees quite rightly gives his own judgments, even though they may not always agree with those of other, and especially of German, critics. Approaching his subject with the detachment of the appraiser rather than the ardour of the enthusiast, he gives generally sound and sober estimates of the value of each writer's work, indicating briefly his strong (and sometimes his weak) points, his chief characteristics, and the themes that most attracted him. The quotations and references to individual poems are, on the whole, well chosen, though, as has been suggested above, not so numerous as might be wished.

It is the last two or three chapters, in particular, that form the more valuable part of the book. The earlier chapters, dealing with poets on whom final judgment was passed long ago, naturally enough lack freshness. But in dealing with the lyric of the nineteenth century Dr Lees fills a gap that has long wanted filling. No poet of the first rank is left unnoticed; a due sense of proportion is shown in allotting to each his or her fair share of space and attention; and in his characterisations and criticisms the author usually shows real powers of appreciation and discrimination. And yet, apart from such differences of opinion as arise from the fact that individual tastes vary, one finds oneself at times quite unable to agree with the judgments expressed. It is an overstatement of the case, for example, to say of Storm's *Trost*, *Schliesse mir die Augen beide*,

and *Das aber kann ich nicht vertragen*, that the language is as simple as that of the *Folksong*, and that there is no reflection. Even the first two of these contain lines (e.g., 'Ich sehe die Schatten der Zukunft nicht') to which this description is hardly applicable; while in the case of the third it seems quite inappropriate in face of such a stanza as:

Indessen von den Gitterstäben
Die Mondesstreifen schmal und karg
In deine Gruft hinunterweben,
Und mit gespenstig trübem Leben
Hinwandeln über deinen Sarg.

It is difficult, again, to see why *Abseits* should be mentioned as a typical example of Storm's love of the mysterious. Like a delicately executed landscape painting, it gives us in fine detail a realistic picture of a remote corner of the moorlands in which Northern Germany abounds; the bright midday sunshine, the colour and fragrance, the sounds of insect and bird life, the peaceful existence of the cottager and his family, the stroke of the distant village clock, and over all a dreamy glamour; but no hint of the mysterious. And in another place we are told that 'the humorous is akin to tragedy and sympathetic pity' in Keller's *Das Köhlerweib ist trunken*. There can be no doubt about the tragedy, and we may agree that the poet was moved by sympathetic pity; but where is the humour? On the other hand Kopisch's well-known *Blücher am Rhein*, which is essentially humorous, is mentioned among his 'serious pieces.' It is difficult to account for such apparent errors of judgment as these except on the assumption that slips have been made in the more mechanical work of classification.

With regard to points of minor importance it may be added that, though the proofs have evidently been read with care, the following misprints have escaped notice: pp. 76 and 79 'elegaic,' p. 95 'zug,' p. 106 'wir,' p. 113 'Burgschaft,' p. 123 'Zürich,' p. 142 'Krieg-slieder'; that in a few quotations (e.g., pp. 79, 95, 96, 106) small letters are used at the beginnings of lines where we should expect capitals, in conformity with the practice otherwise followed throughout the book; that the objection taken to the rime 'preist: heisst' is not really warranted by the pronunciation of these words; that, while a few bibliographical references are given in foot-notes, many more would have been welcome and useful; and that, whether by accident or design, no mention is made of the famous *Nürnberger Trichter*, the publication of which illustrates more vividly than anything else the low level to which poetry had sunk about the middle of the seventeenth century.

In spite of the weaknesses that have been pointed out, Dr Lees' book is a useful addition to the comparatively small number of English works dealing with modern German literature. It may be recommended to students, and if it does also find favour with a wider public, we may, let us hope, look forward to a second edition of still greater value.

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