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## GEORGE MEREDITH'S LITERARY RELATIONS WITH GERMANY.

### 1. *Points of Contact in general.*

GEORGE MEREDITH's interest in Germany lasted during the whole of his literary life. He spent perhaps the most impressionable period of his development, from his fourteenth to his sixteenth year, at the Moravian school of Neuwied on the Rhine. He has told us that the religious atmosphere of the place made a deep impression upon him. The instruction, in spite of the initial difficulties of the language, seems to have succeeded in stimulating his imagination and whetting his literary curiosity. We know that he read a great deal of German when he returned to England, and right on to the end of his life his appreciation of German letters never wavered. From the allusions in his novels and letters it is clear that his reading was very extensive, and his judgment shows great insight. In knowledge and soundness of criticism he is surpassed by no English literary man of the century, not excepting either Arnold or Carlyle. But his interest was not confined to literature. German music he rated even higher. The references to it, however, in books like *Sandra Belloni*, *The Tragic Comedians*, *One of our Conquerors*, *Celt and Saxon*, are always brief, if not superficial, and occasionally tinged with irony. Speaking of her German singing-master, Sandra Belloni says naively, 'He made me know the music of the great German. I used to listen: I could not believe such music came from a German'; and a little farther on she adds, 'He ate Austrian bread, and why God gave him such a soul of music I never can think.' We nowhere find a description of a piece of music, or its influence on a character, or an enthusiastic sentence on any composer; in fact, it is quite clear that this element of German culture did not influence Meredith, as a writer of books, to anything like the same degree as the literature. He returned to Germany from time to time and derived from his travels those impressions of landscape which he turned to such good account in works like *The*

*Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Harry Richmond*. There is nothing very striking in the Rhenish landscape in *Farina*, and the six sonnets, *Pictures of the Rhine*, are a little disappointing. In later books, however, notably the two mentioned above, there are many touches which bespeak keen observation. He notices the 'blue-frocked peasant swinging behind his oxen,' the 'roe moving across a slope of sward far out of rifle-mark,' the 'gaily kerchiefed fruit-woman,' the 'large white moth flitting through the dusk of the forest' and the bridge at Limburg on the Lahn, 'where the shadow of a stone bishop is thrown by the moonlight on the water brawling over slabs of slate.' He who has written such beautiful descriptions of English sunrises and spring freshness, has also in the chapter 'Nature Speaks' painted a remarkably fine picture of a thunderstorm in Nassau. In *Harry Richmond* we feel that the district of Sarkeld in Eppenwelzen (in the direction of Hanover) is drawn largely from imagination, but here, too, some things have been seen, particularly the sun-baked landscape described in the thirtieth chapter. In later books he gives effective sketches of the Tyrol, the castles of Hohenstauffen and Hohenzollern and the Black Forest. Sometimes we find, blended with the landscape, experiences which seem to be personal memories, the journey in the stuffy diligence in *Harry Richmond*, the boys' feeling of the contrast between the rude manners and the obvious natural kindness of the peasants, and their first impression of German fairy-tales as being 'uncanny, upsetting.' In German education Meredith was evidently much interested. His art, however, does not provide him with an opportunity for direct discussion. What he does is to show us through certain characters, Professor Julius von Karsteg and others, the German view of the English attitude to education. He chiefly criticizes our materialistic and utilitarian tendencies. In 1870 he sent his boy Arthur, in whose education he took the deepest interest, to finish his studies at Stuttgart, and in connection with this episode it is interesting to note that *Harry Richmond*, which gives a picture of a small German Court, discusses German and English education at large, delineates many typical Germans and records so sympathetically the impressions of a boy suddenly plunged into the midst of a new world, was published in 1871. In later years Meredith was a keen student of German politics, and no one more clearly or at so early a date foresaw the danger of German militarism. This has undoubtedly influenced his views on national military service, the need for which he emphasizes so strongly in books like *Diana of the Crossways*, *Beauchamp's Career*, *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, *Celt and Saxon*, and *One of our Conquerors*.

'In the face of armed Europe this great nation is living on sufferance,' is one of his pithy remarks in this connection, and another runs, 'An invasion is what they want to bring them to their senses.' He does not criticize German militarism, although he enjoys a laugh at its excesses and the 'learned entomologist, botanist, palaeontologist, philologist,' who becomes 'at sound of drum a ready regimental corporal.' He prefers armed vigour to excessive sport and military somnolence, and calls upon England to prepare against the Teuton, so as not to be simply 'helpless flesh to his beak.' From a study of the German characters in the novels—there are some dozen life-size portraits and rather more not quite so fully sketched—and from the passages in his letters where he speaks of German men and manners, we can see that Meredith held very definite views about the Germans as a whole. In general it may be said that in these sketches he shows the impartiality of the man who has no reason to dislike and no special grounds for loving them. Especially interesting is the letter to John Morley of June, 1877, in which he suggests what the latter may feel on his first visit to Germany. At the same time he has given us some charming figures, especially of German women. He rated German scholarship very high, he was impressed by the solid qualities of the Germans, their 'strengthiness' and their achievements in many fields; he had at the same time a 'sense of their spiritual flatness,' a great dislike for their manners and no taste for their cookery. 'The play of sour and sweet,' he says in *Sandra Belloni*, 'and crowning of the whole with fat, shows a people determined to go down in civilization, and try the business backwards.' He was not a missionary of German culture. What he did was to present to us the truest picture of Germany that is to be found in English fiction, or, looked at from the other point of view, Germany as he had studied it and knew it provided him with a valuable store of raw material for his work as a novelist.

## 2. *Meredith's Appreciation of German Literature.*

The references to German Literature in Meredith's work are not restricted to his youth, but occur with even greater frequency in later years. From first to last he had the greatest admiration for Goethe. Carlyle is mentioned as having encouraged him in the study of German and of Goethe in particular. He says in his letters that he never wrote anything critical on Goethe, because Carlyle held the field and could do it better. Carlyle certainly had more of the enthusiasm of the discoverer, he was more 'wilful in his adorings,' but Meredith himself, in later years at least, had the deeper insight and the maturer judgment.

In 1864 he mentions Goethe along with Shakespeare, Molière and Cervantes as writers to whom he bows his head. He seems to have regarded Goethe as the most abiding literary influence in his life, but readers of the *Essay on the Idea of Comedy* cannot fail to be struck with the author's remarks on Molière. Meredith's own 'comic spirit,' his irony, his peculiarly whimsical, half-detached presentation of the humours of life mark him as, on the whole, more akin to Molière than to Goethe. In a review of Lord Lytton's *Poems* in 1868 he cites Goethe in support of the view that youthful writers, who strike out on new paths, should not be frowned upon. Genius is at all times a rare phenomenon. In the same article he speaks somewhat critically of Goethe's lyrical habit: 'Goethe's songs were the fruit of a long life. He tells us how they sprang up in him, and I do not doubt of his singing as the birds sing; but without irreverence it may be said that this was merely a self-indulgent mood to which German verse allured the highest of German poets. I love the larger number of them for his sake, not for their own.' His admiration for the man, his personality and view of life, was probably greater than for the artist. He even finds something of the 'comic spirit' in him, otherwise so rare in German literature, 'enough to complete the splendid figure of the man, but no more.' He knows the poet's foibles, and claims the right, 'while worshipping the splendid stature clothed in wisdom, to smile now and then.' Like Thackeray he disliked the 'sickliness' of Werther, but he is enthusiastic when something really great appeals to him. 'I have read *Das Göttliche* this morning,' he writes to John Morley in 1877, 'and with a feeling of new strength, which is like conception in the brain. This is the very spirit of Goethe. I have many times come in contact with it and been ennobled. Fault of mine, if not more! This high discernment, this noblest of unconsidered utterance, this is the Hymn for men. This is to be really prophet-like.....After midnight I sat and thought of Goethe: and of the sage in him, and the youth. And somewhat in his manner the enclosed came of it (the poem *Mentor and Pupils*).' The *Zigeunerlied* is a favourite of Harry Richmond, which he hums when he has too little to think of or too much. In a series of letters to Lady Ulrica Baring in 1901 and 1902, Meredith confesses to the cult of Goethe and criticizes some new books which he has been reading as 'mainly summaries, a great deal of them merely radotage.' In the year 1901 he wrote, 'I know Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Geibel, Freiligrath, Lenau,' and five years later he made, in reply to Dr H. Anders, the significant confession, 'As for me, you ask of my readings of the forma-

tive kind. They were first *The Arabian Nights*, then Gibbon, Niebuhr, Walter Scott; then Molière, then the noble Goethe, the most enduring. All the poets, English, Weimar, Swabia and Austrian.' Schiller seems not to have been so congenial to him. Apart from a lengthy reference to *Fiesco* in *The Tragic Comedians*, he is seldom mentioned more than by name. Heine he calls the 'incomparable Heinrich,' but in the above novel he describes his verses as 'lucid metheglin, with here and there no dubious flavour of acid, and a lively sting in the tail of the honey.' Somewhat earlier, in 1868, he had said, 'He is the unique example of a man who made himself his constant theme, and he pursued it up to the time he was rescued from his mattress-grave. By virtue of a cunning art he caused it to be interesting while he lived. I feel the monotony of it grow upon me often now when I take up the *Buch der Lieder*, the *Neuer Frühling* and the *Romanzero*.' This criticism, coupled with the remarks on Goethe's lyrical subjectivity, shows that while Meredith admired the German lyric to a certain extent, he does not speak at all like one who would fain emulate. And, in fact, his own poetry differs not only radically from the simple, subjective song of Heine or of Goethe in his youth, but also from the traditional style and tone of the German lyric as a whole. In this sphere of Meredith's literary work there is no trace of German influence.

In addition to these references to the foremost literary names there are many allusions to men like Harnack, Mommsen, Niebuhr, Mörike, Hoffmann, Richter, Zschokke. And the way in which they are mentioned makes it clear that Meredith was familiar not only with their work, but even with their personal peculiarities, methods of composition and style. In a review of 1908 he shows himself at home in the essential differences between certain forms of English and German metre. On German literature as a whole he has only one remark, made in 1872, which seems to sum up his judgment, 'A people with so fine a literature.' In the *Essay on the Idea of Comedy*, however, he lays his finger on one of the weak spots in German letters, the lack of the 'comic spirit.' German attempts at comedy remind him of the dancing of Atta Troll. Lessing's comedy he considers dull, with too obvious a tendency. Richter's description of Siebenkäs and his Lisette is the 'best edition of the German comic.' The German literary laugh is infrequent, or rather, monstrous. Spiritual laughter they have not yet attained to; sentimentalism waylays them in the flight. Here and there a Volkslied or Märchen shows a national aptitude for stout animal laughter; and we see that the literature is built on it, which is hopeful so far.

The Germans have had no comic training, nor much of satirical. Heinrich Heine has not been enough to cause them to smart and meditate. Nationally, as well as individually, when they are excited they are in danger of the grotesque. Their irony is a missile of terrific tonnage, their sarcasm like a blast from a dragon's mouth. 'They have great gifts and sound good sense, but the discipline of the comic spirit is needful to their growth. We see what they can reach in that great figure of modern manhood, Goethe. They are a growing people: they are conversable as well; and when their men, as in France, and at intervals at Berlin tea-tables, consent to talk on equal terms with their women, and listen to them, their growth will be accelerated and be shapelier.'

### 3. *Meredith's Work in its Relation to German Literature.*

One of Meredith's first literary efforts was a translation of Mörike's ballad *Schön Rohtraut* for the *Leader* of 1850; the piece was included in the *Poems* published in the following year. His youthful work *Farina* is, broadly speaking, a German fairy-tale. It contains only one non-German character. It is linked on partly to the tales of knightly adventure so popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, partly to the Märchen which the German Romanticists Tieck, Brentano, Fouqué and the brothers Grimm had made so popular. It abounds in quotations from the Minnesang, but they are quotations only in the same sense as the verses in *The Shaving of Shagpat*. They reflect, however, the tone and spirit of the Minnesingers. There are snatches from the old ballad of Rotbart and an analysis of the ballad of St Ottilie. German legend, too, is drawn upon for the story of Bertha of Bohemia and Hilda of Bavaria. But even in this early work Meredith's individuality asserts itself. Not one of the Romanticists would have written the story in quite the same way. The style reminds us more of Heine than of them. We note already the author's love of aphorisms; 'A sham dragon, shamming sleep, has destroyed more virgins than all the heathen Emperors, says old Hans Aepfelmann of Düsseldorf.'

At an early stage in his career Meredith wrote the delightfully humorous story, *The Gentleman of Fifty and the Maid of Nineteen*. It did not become known, however, until it appeared in the Memorial Edition in 1896. The general idea is undoubtedly derived from Goethe's *Der Mann von fünfzig Jahren*, one of the stories in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. This was translated by Carlyle in 1824, but Meredith



may have known it in the original. The points of resemblance are as follows:—(1) The outlines of a somewhat peculiar story, representing the estrangement of a young engaged couple through the irresistible attraction of the girl to a man past middle life; (2) Alice prefers the older man because of his scrupulous regard for dress and personal appearance—the two men in Goethe's story are contrasted in the same way; (3) Mr Pollingray has a horror of growing old and of being called old—the Major in Goethe's story has the same feeling and grasps eagerly at the opportunity of renewing his youth with the artificial aids of his actor friend; (4) The attitude of the elderly lover is similar in the two cases—Mr Pollingray lets himself drift into love, yielding to his good nature, while the Major is won over by the openly lavished affection of Hilarie; (5) In both cases the conclusion is left to the reader's imagination. With Goethe the widow was obviously intended to solve the difficulty, while the French Countess, soon to become a widow, may have been meant by Meredith to perform the same function. In both of the stories, at any rate, marriage between nineteen and fifty seems at the end to be out of the question. On the other hand, it would be unfair to Meredith to leave out of account the very considerable differences in the details of the narratives. Hilarie is swayed almost wholly by feeling, Alice is a girl of intellect and will, although her passion is equally tender and impulsive. Meredith describes with great psychological care the change in the feelings of Alice towards Mr Pollingray. In Goethe Hilarie's love is presented as a fact from the beginning, and, strange to say, she is described as the niece of the Major. The settings of the two stories have nothing in common. Meredith's is peculiarly English, while Goethe's might have been written in any language. Meredith has chosen a peculiar form, a series of chapters headed 'He' and 'She,' in which he analyses alternately the feelings of Mr Pollingray and of Alice. The humour and style of the piece are Meredith's own.

In *The Tragic Comedians*, published in 1880, Meredith has built up a novel out of the tragic events which led to the death of Ferdinand Lassalle in 1864. The sensation in Germany had somewhat died down, and Meredith may have been interested in the subject by the appearance of Georg Brandes' famous monograph on Lassalle, which appeared first in a German magazine and later as a book. It was, as its author claims, the first study of Lassalle in literary form, 'dette første og hidtil eneste literære Porträt, der er gjort af Lassalle.' Brandes considers Lassalle as scholar, agitator and lover. To Meredith, interested though



he was in Lassalle, the psychological study of the mind of the heroine in the tragedy, Helene von Dönniges, presented the more fascinating problem. How could Helene, with her ardent love for Lassalle, throw him over under parental compulsion and marry within six months the man from whom Lassalle received his fatal wound? Meredith has followed very closely the early book of the heroine, *Meine Beziehungen zu Ferdinand Lassalle*. The dialogue is frequently almost word for word the same. Sometimes, however, the accounts vary. Occasionally this is caused by a mere slip, as where Meredith speaks of Helene consulting her aunt, while in reality it was her grandmother. The circumstances in which Helene first heard the name Lassalle and the date of their first meeting are different. Much of the conversation, in Berlin and later, is added by Meredith. He leaves out some interesting scenes, changes the locale of others, and, towards the end of the story, avails himself of material of which Helene, after being shut up by her father, knew nothing. Here he has followed the published letters and diary of Lassalle. A criticism of Helene's letter to the Countess takes the place of the letter itself. He has omitted the reproaches of Lassalle to Helene when she ruined his whole plan by precipitating matters and leaving her father's house. In the part played by Lassalle, the general picture of his character and the explanation of his fall—'He perished of his weakness, but it was a strong man that fell...If the end was unheroic, the blot does not overshadow his life...A stormy blood made wreck of a splendid intelligence'—Meredith is completely at one with Georg Brandes. One may compare Meredith (p. 256 ff., edit. of Ward, Lock, Bowden and Co., 1892) with Brandes (pp. 560 and 567, *Samlede Skrifter*, v. VII, Kjöbenhavn, 1901). Some of the details of the story, not found in Helene's book, such as Lassalle's visit to Munich, the appeal of the Countess to Bishop Kettler, the description of Lassalle's feverish activity and his despair when baffled, may have been suggested by Brandes' account. Chapter nine in Meredith may be compared with Brandes, p. 553 ff. Like Brandes, Meredith hints at the streak of Jewish blood in Helene's veins, a fact which she did not mention herself. There is not much original matter in the book. Chief interest attaches to the famous defence of light fiction put forward by Lassalle, the criticism of the English as a 'power extinct, a people gone to fat' and the appreciation of Bismarck, which, though based on Lassalle's remarks, has been greatly added to by Meredith. On the whole *The Tragic Comedians* is one of the weakest of the novels. The idealistic picture of the heroine is unconvincing in view of the course of events.

Whether Meredith was consciously idealizing her character or not may be left to speculation; those, however, who have read the subsequent adventures of Helene von Racowitza in her Autobiography will have little doubt that Meredith's representation of her as the grand tragic figure was a fatal misconception of her character and a mere beating of the air.

In Meredith's literary work there are a number of minor resemblances to German thoughts and methods, individually unimportant, but suggestive when taken together. One notes his liking for Diaries, the Pilgrim's Script, for example, in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, or the Old Buccaneer's Book of Maxims in *The Amazing Marriage*. These things are well-known features of German fiction, introduced sometimes to help the story along, sometimes as a convenient receptacle for the author's own aphorisms. Ottilie in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* and Clara in *Richard Feverel* are near relatives, and their diaries have much in common. In the same novel there is a famous scene where Richard learns that the wife whom he has abandoned has given him a son. It should be compared with the similar situation in *Wilhelm Meister* (Bk. VII, ch. 8), if only to see with what power, amounting to absolute genius, Meredith has surpassed his predecessor. The trenchant criticism of Horace in *The Tragic Comedians* is more German than English. 'There is a curious coincidence in the warning which Meredith gives to men not to confide to a woman their admiration for another woman. Women know one another too well to make reliable confidantes. Goethe makes the same remark in *Wilhelm Meister*: 'Sie kennen sich unter einander zu gut, um sich einer solchen ausschliesslichen Verehrung würdig zu halten.' The debate on Hamlet between Clotilde and Alvan reminds us of the discussion of the same theme in *Wilhelm Meister*. The reader of Meredith knows his whole-hearted appreciation of the joys of life, and his skill in setting Nature and human moods in harmony. He will frequently note his tendency to indicate symbolically what is coming, as in the picture of the withered tree in *The Tragic Comedians*. He will find that he rescues Diana from her despair by revealing to her the healing powers of Nature. To understand and take Nature as she is, Meredith said, is to get on the true divine high-road. These things could be paralleled from Goethe over and over again; but they are not confined to Goethe, although peculiarly characteristic of his art. Diana, Meredith once said, would have been appreciated by Goethe. It may be thought significant by some that Meredith's first regular novel deals with the education of a young man—perhaps the most popular

theme in German fiction since *Wilhelm Meister*. But Meredith's treatment is individual; the outlines of the picture and the detail are peculiarly English. On the point of style critics have compared Meredith with Richter—a cruel injustice to Meredith! It may certainly be pointed out that where Meredith breaks in upon the narrative to speak about the usefulness of dots, when words fail, or to discuss, as in *Sandra Belloni*, the nature of sur-excited sentiment, or where he stops to talk confidentially to the reader about his way of telling a story, he is adopting an attitude which Richter delighted in. But, again, this is no more peculiar to Richter than it is to Laurence Sterne. Meredith's individuality, in fact, was too pronounced to allow his style to be influenced very much by anyone. Meredithese is a very different thing from Jean Paulism. On the other hand, from his visits to the continent and his intimate acquaintance with its people and their literature, he undoubtedly derived a great deal. And what he could assimilate did not consist merely of casual impressions and suggestions, but of something that forms a foundation of George Meredith the writer and reformer. His mental horizon was widened, his culture expanded: he gained a keener eye for racial differences, particularly for the insular English types in whose delineation he revels. He looks at England from an eminence, and it is his study of European society and culture chiefly that has helped him to reach that height. He has a fine sense of racial temperament, as we see not only in his German characters, but in the English, Welsh and Irish ones as well. His cosmopolitanism has frequently made him critical, but it has nowhere rendered him un-English. It has pointed his irony and whetted the edge of his satire, but both are tempered by his sunny humour and natural kindliness. It is with a twinkle in his eye that he makes the priggish Mr Warwick say, 'You are to know, dear Emmy, that we English are the aristocracy of Europeans,' or puts into the mouth of Lady Watkin, innocently unconscious of the irony, the smug remark, 'She speaks excellent French—all European languages, Mr Redworth.'

JOHN LEES.

ABERDEEN.