GERMAN WIT: HEINRICH HEINE

Westminster Review, LXV (January, 1856)

* * *

'NOTHING,' says Goethe, 'is more significant of men's character than what they find laughable.'[3] The truth of this observation would perhaps have been more apparent if he had said culture instead of character. The last thing in which the cultivated man can have community with the vulgar is their jocularity; and we can hardly exhibit more strikingly the wide gulf which separates him from them, than by comparing the object which shakes the diaphragm of a coal-heaver with the highly complex pleasure derived from a real witticism. That any high order of wit is exceedingly complex, and demands a ripe and strong mental development, has one evidence in the fact that we do not find it in boys at all in proportion to their manifestation of other powers. Clever boys generally aspire to the heroic and poetic rather than the comic, and the crudest of all their efforts are their jokes. Many a witty man will remember how in his school days a practical joke, more or less Rabelaisian, was for him the *ne plus ultra* of the ludicrous. It seems to have been the same with the boyhood of the [human race.][4] [The history and literature of the ancient Hebrews gives the idea of a people who went about their business and their pleasure as gravely as a society of beavers; the smile and the laugh are often mentioned metaphorically, but the smile is one of complacency, the laugh is one of scorn. Nor can we imagine that the facetious element was very strong in the Egyptians; no laughter lurks in the wondering eyes and the broad calm lips of their statues. Still less can the Assyrians have had any genius for the comic: the round eyes and simpering satisfaction of their ideal faces belong to a type which is not witty, but the cause of wit in others.][5] The fun of [these] early races was, we fancy, of the after-dinner kind-loud-throated laughter over the wine-cup, taken too little account of in sober moments to enter as an element into their Art, and differing as much from the laughter of a Chamfort[6] or a Sheridan as the gastronomic enjoyment of an ancient Briton, whose dinner had no other 'removes' than from acorns to beech-mast and back again to acorns, differed from the subtle pleasures of the palate experienced by his turtle-eating descendant. [In fact they had to live seriously through the stages which to subsequent races][7] were to become comedy, as those amiable-looking pre-Adamite amphibia which Professor Owen has restored for us in effigy at Sydenham, [took perfectly au sérieux][8] the grotesque physiognomies of their kindred. Heavy experience in their case as in every other, was the base from which the salt of future wit was to be made.

Humour is of earlier growth than Wit, and it is in accordance with this earlier growth that it has more affinity with the poetic tendencies, while Wit is more nearly allied to the ratiocinative intellect. Humour draws its materials from situations and characteristics; Wit seizes on unexpected and complex relations. Humour is chiefly representative and descriptive; it is diffuse, and flows along without any other law than its own fantastic will; or it flits about like a will-o'-the-wisp, amazing us by its whimsical transitions. Wit is brief and sudden, and sharply defined as a crystal; it does not make pictures, it is not fantastic; but it detects an unsuspected analogy or suggests a startling or confounding inference. Every one who has had the opportunity of making the comparison will remember that the effect produced on him by some witticisms is closely akin to the effect produced on him by subtle reasoning which lays open a fallacy or absurdity, and there are persons whose delight in such reasoning always manifests itself in laughter. This affinity of Wit with ratiocination is the more obvious in proportion as the species of wit is higher and deals less with words and with superficialities than with the essential

qualities of things. Some of Johnson's most admirable witticisms consist in the suggestion of an analogy which immediately exposes the absurdity of an action or proposition; and it is only their ingenuity, condensation, and instantaneousness which lift them from reasoning into Wit-they are reasoning raised to a higher power. On the other hand, Humour, in its higher forms, and in proportion as it associates itself with the sympathetic emotions, continually passes into poetry: nearly all great modern humorists may be called prose poets.

Some confusion as to the nature of Humour has been created by the fact, that those who have written most eloquently on it have dwelt almost exclusively on its higher forms, and have defined humour in general as the sympathetic presentation of incongruous elements in human nature and life; a definition which only applies to its later development. A great deal of humour may co-exist with a great deal of barbarism, as we see in the Middle Ages; but the strongest flavour of the humour in such cases will come, not from sympathy, but more probably from triumphant egoism or intolerance; at best it will be the love of the ludicrous exhibiting itself in illustrations of successful cunning and of the lex talionis, as in Reineke Fuchs, or shaking off in a holiday mood the yoke of a too exacting faith, as in the old Mysteries. Again, it is impossible to deny a high degree of humour to many practical jokes, but no sympathetic nature can enjoy them. Strange as the genealogy may seem, the original parentage of that wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy, philosophy, and feeling which constitutes modern humour, was probably the cruel mockery of a savage at the writhings of a suffering enemy-such is the tendency of things towards the [good and beautiful on this earth!][9] Probably the reason why high culture demands more complete harmony with its moral sympathies in humour than in wit, is that humour is in its nature more prolixthat it has not the direct and irresistible force of wit. Wit is an electric shock, which takes us by violence, quite independently of our predominant mental disposition; but humour approaches us more deliberately and leaves us masters of ourselves. Hence it is, that while coarse and cruel humour has almost disappeared from contemporary literature, coarse and cruel wit abounds: even refined men cannot help laughing at a coarse bon mot or a lacerating personality, if the 'shock' of the witticism is a powerful one; while mere fun will have no power over them if it jar on their moral taste. Hence, too, it is, that while wit is perennial, humour is liable to become superannuated.

As is usual with definitions and classifications, however, this distinction between wit and humour does not exactly represent the actual fact. Like all other species, Wit and Humour over-lap and blend with each other. There are bon mots, like many of Charles Lamb's, which are a sort of facetious hybrids, we hardly know whether to call them witty or humourous; there are rather lengthy descriptions or narratives, which, like Voltaire's 'Micromégas', would be humourous if they were not so sparkling and antithetic, so pregant with suggestion and satire, that we are obliged to call them witty. We rarely find wit untempered by humour, or humour without a spice of wit; and sometimes we find them both united in the highest degree in the same mind, as in Shakspeare and Moliere. A happy conjunction this, for wit is apt to be cold, and thin-lipped, and Mephistophelean in men who have no relish for humour, whose lungs do never crow like Chanticleer at fun and drollery;[10] and broad-faced, rollicking humour needs the refining influence of wit. Indeed, it may be said that there is no really fine writing in which wit has not an implicit, if not an explicit action. The wit may never rise to the surface, it may never flame out into a witticism; but it helps to give brightness and transparency, it warns off from flights and exaggerations which verge on the ridiculous-in every genre of writing it preserves a man from sinking into the genre ennuyeux. And it is eminently needed for this office in humorous writing; for as humour has no limits imposed on it by its material, no law but its own

exuberance, it is apt to become preposterous and wearisome unless checked by wit, which is the enemy of all monotony, of all lengthiness, of all exaggeration.

Perhaps the nearest approach Nature has given us to a complete analysis, in which wit is as thoroughly exhausted of humour as possible, and humour as bare as possible of wit, is in the typical Frenchman and the typical German. Voltaire, the intensest example of pure wit, fails in most of his fictions from his lack of humour. Micromegas is a perfect tale, because, as it deals chiefly with philosophic ideas and does not touch the marrow of human feeling and life, the writer's wit and wisdom were all-sufficient for his purpose. Not so with Candide. Here Voltaire had to give pictures of life as well as to convey philosophic truth and satire, and here we feel the want of humour. The sense of the ludicrous is continually defeated by disgust, and the scenes, instead of presenting us with an amusing or agreeable picture, are only the frame for a witticism. On the other hand, German humour generally shows no sense of measure, no instinctive tact; it is either floundering and clumsy as the antics of a leviathan, or laborious and interminable as a Lapland day, in which one loses all hope that the stars and quiet will ever come. For this reason, Jean Paul, the greatest of German humorists, is unendurable to many readers, and frequently tiresome to all. Here, as elsewhere, the German shows the absence of that delicate perception, that sensibility to gradation, which is the essence of tact and taste, and the necessary concomitant of wit. All his subtlety is reserved for the region of metaphysics. For *Identitat* in the abstract, no one can have an acuter vision, but in the concrete he is satisfied with a very loose approximation. He has the finest nose for *Empirismus* in philosophical doctrine, but the presence of more or less tobacco-smoke in the air he breathes is imperceptible to him. To the typical German—*Vetter Michel*—it is indifferent whether his door-lock will catch, whether his tea-cup be more or less than an inch thick; whether or not his book have every other leaf unstitched; whether his neighbour's conversation be more or less of a shout; whether he pronounce *b* or *p*, *t* or *d*; whether or not his adored one's teeth be few and far between. He has the same sort of insensibility to gradations in time. A German comedy is like a German sentence: you see no reason in its structure why it should ever come to an end, and you accept the conclusion as an arrangement of Providence rather than of the author. We have heard Germans use the word *Langeweile*, the equivalent for ennui, and we have secretly wondered what it can be that produces ennui in a German. Not the longest of long tragedies, for we have known him to pronounce that *hochst fesselnd* [(so enchaining!);][11] not the heaviest of heavy books, for he delights in that as grundlich [(deep, Sir, deep!);] not the slowest of journeys in a *Post-wagen*, for the slower the horses, the more cigars he can smoke before he reaches his journey's end. German ennui must be something as superlative as Barclay's treble X, which, we suppose, implies an extremely unknown quantity of stupefaction.

It is easy to see that this national deficiency in nicety of perception must have its effect on the national appreciation and exhibition of Humour. You find in Germany ardent admirers of Shakspeare, who tell you that what they think most admirable in him is his Wortspiel, his verbal quibbles; [and one of these, a man of no slight culture and refinement, once cited to a friend of ours Proteus's joke in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona'-'Nod, I? why that's Noddy', as a transcendent specimen of Shakspearian wit. German facetiousness is seldom comic to foreigners, and an Englishman with a swelled cheek might take up Kladderadatsch, the German Punch, without any danger of agitating his facial muscles. Indeed ,][12] it is a remarkable fact that, among the five great races concerned in modern civilization, the German race is the only one which, up to the present century, had contributed nothing classic to the common stock of European wit and humour; [for Reineke Fuchs cannot be regarded][13] as a peculiarly Teutonic product. Italy was the

birth-place of Pantomime and the immortal Pulcinello; Spain had produced Cervantes; France had produced Rabelais and Moliere, and classic wits innumerable; England had yielded Shakespeare and a host of humorists. But Germany had borne no great comic dramatist, no great satirist, and she has not yet repaired the omission; she had not even produced any humorist of a high order. Among her great writers, Lessing is the one who is the most specifically witty. We feel the implicit influence of wit-the 'flavour of mind'-throughout his writings; and it is often concentrated into pungent satire, as every reader of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* remembers. Still, Lessing's name has not become European through his wit, and his charming comedy, 'Minna von Barnhelm', has won no place on a foreign stage. Of course, we do not pretend to an exhaustive acquaintance with German literature; we not only admit-we are sure, that it includes much comic writing of which we know nothing. We simply state the fact, that no German production of that kind, before the present century, ranked as European; a fact which does not, indeed, determine the amount of the national facetiousness, but which is quite decisive as to its quality. Whatever may be the stock of fun which Germany yields for home consumption, she has provided little for the palate of other lands.-All honour to her for the still greater things she has done for us! She has fought the hardest fight for freedom of thought, has produced the grandest inventions, has made magnificent contributions to science, has given us some of the divinest poetry, and quite the divinest music, in the world. [No one reveres and treasures the products of the German mind more than we do.][14] To say that that mind is not fertile in wit, is only like saying that excellent wheat land is not rich pasture; to say that we do not enjoy German facetiousness, is no more than to say, that though the horse is the finest of quadrupeds, we do not like him to lay his hoof playfully on our shoulder. Still, as we have noticed that the pointless puns and stupid jocularity of the boy may ultimately be developed into the epigrammatic brilliancy and polished playfulness of the man; as we believe that racy wit and chastened delicate humour are inevitably the results of invigorated and refined mental activity; we can also believe that Germany will, one day, yield a crop of wits and humorists.

Perhaps there is already an earnest of that future crop in the existence of HEINRICH HEINE, a German born with the present century, who, to Teutonic imagination, sensibility, and humour, adds an amount of esprit that would make him brilliant among the most brilliant of Frenchmen. True, this unique German wit is half a Hebrew; but he and his ancestors spent their youth in German air, and were reared on Wurst and Sauerkraut, so that he is as much a German as a pheasant is an English bird, or a potato an Irish vegetable. But whatever else he may be, Heine is one of the most remarkable men of this age: no echo, but a real voice, and therefore, like all genuine things in this world, worth studying; a surpassing lyric poet, who has uttered our feelings for us in delicious song; a humorist, who touches leaden folly with the magic wand of his fancy, and transmutes it into the fine gold of art -who sheds his sunny smile on human tears, and makes them a beauteous rainbow on the cloudy background of life; a wit, who holds in his mighty hand the most scorching lightnings of satire; an artist in prose literature, who has shown even more completely than Goethe the possibilities of German prose; and-in spite of all charges against him, true as well as false-a lover of freedom, who has spoken wise and brave words on behalf of his fellow-men. He is, moreover, a suffering man, who, with all the highly-wrought sensibility of genius, has to endure terrible physical ills; and as such he calls forth more than an intellectual interest. It is true, alas! that there is a heavy weight in the other scale-that Heine's magnificent powers have often served only to give electric force to the expression of debased feeling, so that his works are no Phidian statue of gold, and ivory, and gems, but have not a little brass, and iron, and miry clay mingled with the precious metal. The audacity of his occasional coarseness and personality is unparalleled in contemporary literature, and has hardly been

exceeded by the licence of former days. Hence, before his volumes are put within the reach of immature minds, there is need of a friendly penknife to exercise a strict censorship. Yet, when all coarseness, all scurrility, all Mephistophelean contempt for the reverent feelings of other men, is removed, there will be a plenteous remainder of exquisite poetry, of wit, humour, and just thought. It is apparently too often a congenial task to write severe words about the transgressions committed by men of genius, especially when the censor has the advantage of being himself a man of no genius, so that those transgressions seem to him quite gratuitous; he, forsooth, never lacerated any one by his wit, or gave irresistible piquancy to a coarse allusion, and his indignation is not mitigated by any knowledge of the temptation that lies in transcendent power. We are also apt to measure what a gifted man has done by our arbitrary conception of what he might have done, rather than by a comparison of his actual doings with our own or those of other ordinary men. We make ourselves over-zealous agents of heaven, and demand that our brother should bring usurious interest for his five Talents, forgetting that it is less easy to manage five Talents than two. Whatever benefit there may be in denouncing the evil, it is after all more edifying, and certainly more cheering, to appreciate the good. Hence, in endeavouring to give our readers some account of Heine and his works, we shall not dwell lengthily on his failings; we shall not hold the candle up to dusty, vermin-haunted corners, but let the light fall as much as possible on the nobler and more attractive details.

Notes

3 Die Wahlverwandschaften, Part II, Ch. 4: 'Aus Ottiliens Tagebuche.'
4 "mankind', 1884.
5 Omitted, 1884, causing the omission of 'these' in the next sentence.
6 Sebastian Roch Nicolas Chamfort (1741-1794), French wit and man of letters, celebrated for his conversation.
7 'It was their lot to live seriously through stages which to later generations . . .', 1884.
8 'doubtless took seriously', 1884. Richard Owen (1804-1892), naturalist, Hunterian Professor of Comparative Anatomy, directed 'the restorations of the megatherium and other extinct animals in the geological section of the grounds of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham'. (Richard Owen, The Life of Richard Owen, 2 vols. [New York, 1894], I,
9 'better and more beautiful', 1884. The revision is an amusingly fastidious instance of George Eliot's meliorism.
10 Cf. As You Like It, II, vii, 30.
11 This and the following parenthesis omitted, 1884.
12 Omitted, 1884. The illustration is from George Eliot's stay in Berlin, where one evening she heard the Graf York praise Shakespeare's 'Wortspiel'. ' "For example," he said, "I nod-noddy! Das ist vortrefflich."' (Journal, miscellaneous notes on Weimar and Berlin.)
13 'unless "Reineke Fuchs" can be fairly claimed . . .', 1884.
14 'We revere and treasure the products of the German mind', 1884.