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An Autumn near the Rhine; or Sketches of courts, society, scenery, &c. in some of the German states bordering on the Rhine

Dodd, Charles Edward

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Letter XXIV.

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LETTER XXIV.

I CANNOT say that I have found the German Theatre a resource totally devoid of heaviness and *ennui* : but to go three times a week is necessary to avoid being set down for a Goth without taste or feeling. The Theatre at Frankfort is the largest I visited ; those of Stutgard and Manheim the handsomest : but a splendid Theatre has little advantage over a homely one, for both are involved in a dreary twilight, which half conceals the living as well as the inanimate ornaments. With the exception of those on the stage, a dim shabby *chandelier* of lamps descending from the roof is the only source of illumination in the house. This is not the result of neglect, but of system. It is said to heighten the contrast, and, by giving an undivided attraction to the brilliant stage, to render illusion more complete. The Germans prefer this advantage to the gay

spectacle of a crowded and glittering audience. But surely it is dull imagination and cold feeling which require the most helps; and the Germans who must sit in the dark in order to admire the light, a good deal resemble children who blow out the candles when they play at snap-dragon, in order to make more downright real witches of the party.

The Opera is generally the main attraction in a German Theatre. At the little Courts an order for a favourite Opera is issued in compliment to a distinguished visitor; and a person who omits attending that on a Sunday evening is considered, by the little fashionable circles, as a being beyond all accounting for. These entertainments sometimes unquestionably afford a high treat. The instrumental music is carried to a high pitch of excellence: the orchestra picked, assorted, trained to perfection by laborious practisings, and led by musicians of profound skill and science. When the Grand Duke of Hesse's admirable band, in their simple uniform, struck up the overture of Tancred, (a modern piece of

great beauty,) on the *jour de Saint Louis*, the effect was like one full instrument of varied power and tone; the sounds came forth with an electrical rapidity—and the grand passages burst from the orchestra as if they would rend the little building. The whole representation, for its exquisite music, the scenery, the costume, the taste and splendour of every accessory, was a delightful little piece of perfection. But the true German connoisseurs, have often a passion for grand compositions, — gorgeous displays of the mechanism of the art — in which one is stunned with the noisy triumphs of the orchestra, and uninteresting masterings of difficulties, only to show how far the professor's skill, and his pupils' accuracy can go. This suits the Germans better than us. They are quite as much, or rather more learned connoisseurs than warm admirers: we are simply the last. If an air is pretty or touching — no matter who composed it, or whether it is easy or difficult, ignorant or scientific — it becomes an *encored* favourite, and is served up in half a dozen

shapes. But a German Theatre is half composed of musicians, whose gratification depends on the difficulty of the music, and the correctness of the execution — to whom it is a pleasure of the ear, rather than of the feelings. I never heard a German audience touched and electrified by a passionate tone, or a melting air: but I have heard half a Theatre shudder with one accord, as if their teeth were set on edge, at the slip of a note in a difficult passage. It is, perhaps, owing to the same difference of their feeling for music that they never *encore* what pleases them. The pleasure of the connoisseur is cold and regulated: that which centres in warm feelings will occasionally overflow with boisterous testimonials not to be restrained. When I asked the reason of this custom, I was told, that to *encore* would derange the orchestra and perplex the singer. It would, in fact, be contrary to that *order* which pervades every thing in Germany — matrimony and the universities ever excepted.

I have been surprised to see the classical pieces of Schiller, Goëthe, and Lessing, so rarely on the stage. In the north, where

literature is more cultivated, I understand they are oftener represented: but the complaint in Germany is the same as in England — the old veterans are driven off by sparkling modern melo-dramatists. Iffland, who died recently, was the last celebrated tragedian; and he has left no worthy successor. Spectacles and irregular pieces, are growing the favourite food of the public; and you see how deep they have gone in the system of extraordinary stimulants to curiosity from the equestrian piece at Manheim. The sentimental dramas of that sort which faithful translators, and scarcely less faithful wags, have introduced to our notice in England, form the staple ware on the intermediate nights of the Opera. Kotzebue's is considered, I believe, the best manufacture. The comic pieces are broad and noisy, often without wit or vivacity — Some of Kotzebue's, however, are full of real humour and amusing caricature.

The German language appears to me by no means well calculated for fine declamation. If the French is monotonous it has at least a smartness and a grace which give a sort of refined stiffness to its declamation. But the

German is at once monotonous and vulgar; its elevation is a painful effort; there is no nobleness in its passion; its force is rough, coarse, and unmanageable. The gamut of sounds is scanty, and seems to contain nothing but *flats*; and in the mouths of the best actors in heroic parts I have never heard the poet's lines divested of a muddy murmuring harshness, from which the actor appeared to be heaving himself as if by an intestine steam engine into a region of pomp, which he could not attain. When the actor is earnest, instead of the clear racy result, you hear all the *machinery* of enunciation — the rumbling guttural efforts at emphasis, which remind one of the rattle of a mill wheel rather than the sound of a fine instrument. There is in fact a *prosaic meanness* in the sound of the language. It seems mainly adapted to matter-of-fact purposes; and the only approach to any thing like a poetical grace which I have been struck with in it, is the sort of comfortable though homely softness which it acquires in the mouths of the women of all orders. It is the voice of hu-

mility and kind goodness themselves. A strapping peasant's wife, without shoes or stockings, and with the strength of a horse, salutes you as she passes with a *guten abend* (good evening,) with the softness of a pastoral heroine. But when raised above the level of conversation, the language becomes turgid and the want of clear strength and dignity is remedied by a laborious inflation of manner. The inverted construction gives also a monotony to the accents, which fall with a *bump* on every verb or participle, which clenches the straggling meaning and gives the declaimer a *rebound*, to send him forward to the next *point d'appui*. This gives one the disagreeable idea of weakness thrust above its level and only to be kept up by staggering struggles. It is like a shuttlecock which does not fly, but is kept in the air by repeated blows.

The character of a language forms the style of acting — and that of a German actor appears to me without the even dignity or the chaste energy which are the perfection of heroic delineation. There is as good an understanding between the author

and the actor as if they had drunk their bottle together before the play. The wild fantastic style of the one is depicted in the inveterate heavings, foamings, and rantings, the extravagant gestures and abrupt contrasts of the other. There is equally little selection in the means used by both. Tremendous, terrible, effect, no matter how extravagantly produced, is their object. Their pictures of passion are daubs fit for sign posts. The German actor makes every passion invariably either grim, grinning, and inveterate or languid, puling, and awkwardly sweet. He is generally much more terrible than nature, as the showman's painted monster over the door is ordinarily a more formidable being than its prototype in the cage within. Ranting, lungs-cracking-ranting, is of course one means of this storming of the sensibilities; and the actors whom I have sometimes heard at the little courts seem to be actuated by the ambition of *Bottom*, "I will roar that I will make the *Duke* say — let him roar again, let him roar again." But the straight-forward rant is too simple a means to answer the ambitious ends of the German actor. He is obliged to resort to

broad contrast, sudden relaxations, abrupt declensions, and all the antitheses of manner. The triumph however of expression which generally gives the *coup de grace* to all other efforts is the irony of choking and grinning passion, represented with a hideous force that makes some persons shiver and others laugh — so nearly do extremes approach. The actor rarely gives passion free vent — he prefers letting it curdle. He seldom uses his powers — but strains them without reason till they sink under him, sure of being truly German and impressive in a final concentration of savage impotence, which rarely escapes being ludicrous.

When Kemble represented the Stranger with a scholastic grace and a desolate dignity, nothing could be more sublime — more unlike a German actor. Kotzebue would not have known his hero again, and a German audience would, I am inclined to think, have found the misanthrope insupportably tame and rational. His dignity would have gone for nothing — his grace would have been weakness — they would only have been considered to neutralize that sheer down-

right force with which it is necessary to strike the blow in order to cicatrize obtuse German sensibilities.

The behaviour and manners of a German audience are not calculated to enliven the general gloomy character of the house. — An unruffled stillness pervades all quarters — no one seems above half occupied, and not quite sure whether they are amused. — The applauses are feeble and rare — and I never witnessed the indecorum of a hiss. Madame de Stael mentions that they reserved their applauses expressly for the end (I have not generally observed this) — and that Schroder, a great actor, thought this silence the greatest compliment that could be paid him. The compliment appears to me very equivocal, and quite as likely to result from cold appreciation as from the eagerness of attentive admiration.

The theatre, which forms part of the household of a little court, is naturally the scene of a decorum doubly grave and impenetrable. The royal box and the guards jointly keep strict order. The pit and boxes are obliged to suspend their admiration, in order not to anticipate the

signal of applause from the Royal Critics. "That would hang every mother's son of them." The flirting belles of the court, in the side boxes, steal glances at the royal party to take care that their violations of silence may not attract a royal look; and all the *beau monde* observe with an anxious attention the exits and entries of the illustrious party, between the acts, not to omit rising each time, and a profound obeisance when they finally retire. In case the spirit of courtiership should not be equally potent among the less elevated part of the audience, they are taught the duties of silence and respect in a style better adapted to their capacities — by tall grenadiers, with fixed bayonets, stationed in all parts of the house. The only movement at all resembling a burst of popular expression which I witnessed in Germany, was on the Grand Duke of Hesse's entry to the theatre on St. Louis's Day. The house rose and welcomed him with a pretty cordial clapping, for nearly a minute, which moderate as it was would have possessed more value if nine-tenths of those from whom it proceeded had not been de-

pendent, almost for their bread, on his Royal Highness's pleasure. I could not help contrasting these tame applauses with the shouts of hearty good-will which greet an English Prince or Hero, from individuals as independent of him as he of them.

I will conclude this epistle with an account of a traveller's *rencontre*, not unconnected with the subject of the drama.

Chance gave me an opportunity of procuring, for a party of German friends, the gratification of some English recitations by one of the first ornaments of our stage whom I accidentally fell in with on his travels. The Hereditary Princess of Hesse who would have enjoyed the opportunity was unfortunately absent, and the Grand Duchess, who had no small curiosity to see a man with whose name she was familiar, was prevented by some court etiquettes which in Germany are insurmountable. The hero of our scene was, however, received with a flattering cordiality by a large circle of the noblesse; amongst whom, his knowledge of French and German soon placed him at ease. Several individuals, hav-

ing some knowledge of the language, he good-naturedly complied with a general wish to witness some specimens of his talents. We selected a scene from Shylock, the soliloquy in Hamlet, and the scene between Hamlet and his mother; the two last of which were familiar to some in English, and to many in the German translation. The gratification was novel to the whole party; and their astonishment and admiration surpassed my expectations. Those whose knowledge of the language enabled them to follow the reciter, were charmed with the vigour and melody of his voice, the beauty of his enunciation, and the variation and justness of his emphasis; while all admired his changing expression of face, his noble figure, and the graceful ease of the little action with which he embellished his delivery. The scene in the closet, from Hamlet, produced particular effect. The actor grew warmer as he proceeded with the pathetic dialogue between Hamlet and his mother — the tears came into his eyes — his voice faltered out the reproaches of Hamlet — he gave

the comparison of the pictures with a beautiful effect — and when he came to Hamlet's discovery of the ghost, and started up from the sofa on which he sat, with his hands raised and his eyes fixed, a stir of astonished gratification ran through the room. The instant the recitation was finished, the Prince and those who had best understood it, thronged round him to express their admiration and thanks. Many assured me they had not conceived it possible to be interested and even touched by a recitation in a language they understood so imperfectly. No one had ever heard it so clearly enunciated, or comprehended it so easily before. The excessive naturalness of his manner most surprised them — coupled as it was with a dignity perfectly easy and habitual. When he took up the book and went on with a few level sentences, with the same ease with which he had just been talking, the unintended compliment paid him was: — “Why he reads just as if he was conversing.” Declamation without stilts, and effect produced with ease, were in fact something quite new to the party. The occasional playfulness of our

Roscius much struck them. When he made use of a jocular familiarity, in the famous scene in Shylock, a lively French Countess, who did not understand a syllable, said to me, "*Il rit avec tant de bon coeur qu'il me fait rire aussi malgré moi.*"—The warmest admirer could not have paid him a happier compliment.