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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

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London, 1818

Letter XXI.

[urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120472](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120472)

LETTER XXI.

Nothing can be imagined more striking than the contrast between an English and a German University. In the former, the Gothic buildings, the magnificent colleges, the noble libraries, the chapels, the retired walks, the scholastic grace of the costume, are all so many interesting indications of the antiquity, the munificence, and the dignity of the institution. The University of Heidelberg is one of the most distinguished in Germany—but the constitution of a German University has necessarily no monument of architecture, no appendage of dignity, scarcely any decent building connected with it. The *Universität Gebäude*, or public building, containing the library and the lecture rooms of the Professors, barely comes under this last description. An Englishman might pass the town a dozen times without remarking any traces of its

institutions, unless he happened to encounter a string of swaggering mustachioed youths, their hair flowing on their shoulders, without cravats, with pipes in their mouths, parading the streets with a rude impudence. These are the students—who resemble each other in all the Universities, in main points, both of costume and character. It is hardly necessary to say this is not an academical costume. A German Student would disdain—as a pert young gentleman of this number told me—to wear a dress not of his own free choice; and his choice, under the influence of a luminous patriotism, takes the direction of reviving the *alt Deutsche kleidung*, or the old costume of the worthy Germans three centuries ago. “*They* were sturdy patriots and right good Germans, and stuck up for our liberties against the Emperor Charles and the princes. *We* want some of this spirit in our days—therefore we will begin by copying them in their dress, and thus we shall introduce it.” This is the reasoning of the independent philosophers from fourteen to five and twenty, who attend lectures, if they please, when they please,

and on what they please, in the Professors' rooms at the Universities.

The Universities are, with slight variations, constructed upon the same plan. They are not, as in England, composed of Colleges where the students are obliged to reside, forming large households under the controul of a Head; and submitting to wholesome regulations, both as to conduct and study. A German University is little more than a place where there is a good library and a collection of Professors who read lectures to those who choose to attend them. They afford bare opportunities for study — with few facilities, no compulsion, no discipline, no subordination. The Professor reads his lecture, the student pays him for it — If he attends it, which he does or not as he likes, he walks off at the conclusion as independent of the Professor as a man of his drawing-master at the end of the hour's lesson. There are, besides, private tutors who can be engaged for assistance, at leisure hours.

At Heidelberg, the University is divided into four faculties — Divinity, Jurisprudence,

Medicine, and Philosophy. Each department has several Professors, and a Pro-Rector, chosen annually among them, is the actual head of the University. The Grand Duke of Baden, in whose territory Heidelberg is comprised, is the nominal head under the title of Rector. There are a smaller and greater Senate chosen from the Professors, the former of which meets every fourteen days for transacting the business of the University — and four *Ephori*, who are said to superintend the industry and morals of the students, to correspond with their parents, &c. But these last have an office of little efficacy. Their admonition is without authority; for, short of the power of the police in criminal offences, the students are subject to no power whatever of punishment or controul. They can, consequently, neglect all study and push their excesses to the verge of a breach of the law in defiance of Rector, Ephori, and Professors. Offences which overstep this bound are liable to punishment by the University Police; for the University is not subject to the ordinary police of the country — a University *Amtmann* (Bailiff) and

Beadles, supplying the place to the University of the ordinary provincial Bailiff and *Gens d'arme*. The consequence is, the broken windows, riots, and disturbances, with which the students annoy the citizens, are visited very lightly by the University Magistrates, who often observe them with a secret satisfaction as symptoms of a spirit of independence which they hope may be one day turned to better purposes. With such licence it is not to be wondered that the students find the authorities of the law nearly as much employment as our students give to the gentler advice and correction of the Heads of Houses, Proctors, &c. In some Universities the students are almost as much the terror and nuisance of the neighbourhood, as the worthy associates of Robin Hood or Rob Roy, were to the inhabitants of the scenes of their exploits. In an inn where I slept at Manheim, it was discovered, one morning, that one of these young gentlemen had decamped by his bed-room window, taking with him the sheets of his bed. At Heidelberg, where there are many of noble and respectable families, they are rather better

behaved than usual — and a lady, of the town, told me she found them “tolerably quiet considering.”

The students live in lodgings, at the houses of the shopkeepers in the town; a system which if their superiors possessed any controul over their conduct would almost entirely frustrate it. They dine at the Tables d’Hôte of the Inns, to which they are good customers.—I dined with an acquaintance of their number, at a table filled with them. Their manners were, in general, as coarse and as rude as their appearance; they had all the air of low mechanics or persons much less civilized. Some of them were young nobles — others had the ribbons of orders in their button-holes; and they often wear the cockade of their country in their caps or hats, which is sometimes the symbol of a provincial patriotism, much of a-kin to the national one indicated by their clothes. Since the flame of national feeling has been kindled by late events, the distinctions of country are however *professedly* abandoned. The separate associations of the students from different states are done away; and they now

loudly assert that they form but one body of *Germans*. But it is easier to assume the title than to suppress national prejudices or neutralize distinctions of character. The light subtle Prussian is little formed to harmonise with the fat phlegmatic Bavarian or Austrian; and if the students of different states mix in amusements pretty indiscriminately, a quarrel (an event of the commonest occurrence) draws out their provincial prepossessions, and ranges the parties accordingly.

The number of students at Heidelberg, for the last spring *semestre*, or course of lectures, was above 400—Goettingen sometimes musters 1200. The Professors at Heidelberg are now in high repute; and on their attraction depends the fullness of the University.—When a favourite professor departs, sometimes nearly half a University follow him. The students generally enter very young—many at sixteen or seventeen; for as every young man, intended for the civil service of any prince, must spend two years, by way of qualification, at a University, the object of parents is to qualify them for office as early as possible. Raw

children from the Gymnasium are consequently sent to the University, rather to get over these two years than for the purpose of study. Finding themselves here, all at once, their own masters, and exposed to every temptation, they naturally follow the stream, assuming the vices and caricaturing the consequence of full-grown men. The necessary two years are often spent in drinking, gaming, rioting, and insulting others, more from the intoxication of liberty than from vicious inclination. The pride of premature manhood makes them jealous of their little dignities, and ape the punctilios of false honour. Perpetual duels are the consequence, which have all the ill effect of brutalising the feelings without the questionable advantage of exercising courage—for their execution is, in general, ludicrously devoided of danger. The breasts, and faces of the doughty combatants are cased in pasteboard, in the security of which panoply, they chivalrously engage with small rapiers till incensed honour is satisfied, sometimes by the first sprinkling of blood, at others, by nothing less than a wound of a certain length and depth, to be

ascertained by measurement of the seconds. New comers are beset, on their matriculation, with incitements to quarrel, till they put their valour beyond dispute, in one of these combats. Sometimes bodies of disputants (often of different countries) settle their differences by a combat *en masse*. These fights generally terminate in slight wounds — but more fatal consequences are by no means unfrequent. In spite, however, of constant disturbances, and now and then a death occasioned by them, they are still freely permitted, like all other excesses, from the fear of checking the exuberant fervour of youth.

All titles and distinctions of rank are dropped among the students for the common appellation of *Bursch* (Fellow); and when on giving some particulars of our universities to a student, I mentioned the distinction of costume, &c. given to noblemen, this spark of liberty exclaimed — “that would not be suffered among us — we are all equal — we have no distinctions.” I could not help smiling when I reflected that after his two years swing of lawlessness and equality this young man was destined for a

pastor's cure or some petty office under a despotic government, where he would find himself pinned down in the third rate circles, and encompassed by the barriers of rank on all sides.

Theatres are wisely prohibited at Heidelberg, and I believe generally in the German Universities; they would merely be rallying-places for the riotous dispositions of the students, which they often indulge freely when they meet at the theatres of other towns. Troops are now removed to avoid broils between them and the students, which were sometimes attended with serious consequences.

The spirit of patriotism and political follies of the students are the natural consequence of the same unbounded licence which often corrupts their morals. Most of them have been inoculated with this spirit by the patriotic games and songs of the gymnasium, where they already ape the dress and manners of the university. Or if they come fresh from their father's abode in the Residence, the transfer from a scene of cringing servility to power, to one of boundless independence, is equally likely to intoxicate young

heads. Finding themselves here distinguished by large privileges from their fellow-citizens in a despotic state, they become insolent, and set about reforming their country with well meant but childish extravagance. The professors seldom check, and often partake the spirit though not all the follies of the students. In spite of their academical privileges the professors have a sense of belonging to the excluded classes: they are not received at court or in the circles of the noblesse — where the few who can appreciate talents would deem their presence a decided acquisition. It is a mistake to suppose that learned men despise these little distinctions — they often feel them more cuttingly than others; and the professors of Germany have the character of being at once discontented and haughty. Two of those of Heidelberg were sometime since arrested by the Grand Duke of Baden, for their bold language on the subject of the restoration of the States: but the students demanded their liberation so vehemently that the Grand Duke who is a weak man did not long detain them.

The proceedings at the Wartburg in

Saxony, of which you have perhaps read accounts in the journals, carried the academical patriotism into some more ambitious follies than usual. Six hundred students met, headed by several professors, at the invitation of the university of Jena. The meeting was to answer the threefold purpose of commemoration of the battle of Leipsic, and of the Reformation, and as a sort of congress or deliberative conference among the plenipotentiaries of the different universities. The youthful delegates were to frame general regulations for the universities, to legislate on duelling, and to establish a students' gazette for extending their principles and asserting their rights. They drank the health of the Grand Duke of Weimar, as the only German Prince worthy of reigning, and made a solemn *auto da fe* of the favourite military pig-tail of the Elector of Hesse Cassel, the pad which stuffs the breast of a Prussian soldier, and the corporal's cane much in use in the Austrian ranks. The flames were enlivened by some foreign manufactures, and some obnoxious works of Kotzebue, Ancillon, Dabelow, Schmaltz, &c. obsequious men

who had opposed the Tugenbund and other patriotic societies, and had shown themselves not undeserving the contempt of independent Germans.

The students had well chosen the scene of their solemnities ; for any where but in the duchy of Weimar, the police would have unquestionably been principal actors in the drama. The Grand Duke after investigation, in which it appeared that the professors were not concerned in the riotous part of the proceedings, probably did wisely to let it drop. As a political affray it was rather calculated to give hints to princes than to inspire them with immediate fears ; and jejune and ill-chosen as the means used by the young politicians of expressing their sentiments may be considered, every one admits that they objected to nothing but what was highly objectionable, and did nothing but what was well intended, and what might reasonably be expected from the systems of the Universities. Looking at these systems in a political point of view, a wisher of constitutional freedom to Germany could perhaps hardly desire to see liberty extinguished or

curtailed in the few isolated spots in which it flourishes in the nation. The extraordinary privileges which intoxicate young heads might, indeed, be diffused to advantage among the more sober part of the community: but in the mean time it is impossible to blame the Germans for being jealously tenacious of them where they exist. The plant of freedom is too scarce in the country not to deserve fostering and protection, even though the prurient soil where it blooms may sometimes make it run to seed, and expend its vigour in fruitless exuberances. Preserve the seed, and it may disseminate into more congenial soils. But, viewed with reference to the talents and the morals of the rising generation, I fear the unbounded licence of the University can only produce unqualified mischief. Two years in the most precious and susceptible period of life spent in a chaos of coarse riot and disorder must necessarily often unhinge the principles, corrupt the morals, and harden the feelings. Even the independent spirit which it is thought to impart is often too *outré* and extravagant to be stable;

and, as extremes always meet, this spirit not unfrequently slides into the basest servility when transplanted into the atmosphere of a despotic Court.

Be the advantages or disadvantages of the system, however, what they may, any reform is, on several accounts, very improbable. The Princes are too fond of the celebrity and the profit which flourishing Universities bring to their little States not to be afraid of interfering with their regulations. If the interest of the Princes had not been on their side, you may easily conceive the Universities would never have escaped unhurt in the late general wreck of constitutions and popular rights. Any reform which curtailed the licence of the students would, in fact, instantly raise a cry of violation of the old privileges of the Universities. Half the students (except those who are obliged to pass two years at the University of their own State) would instantly desert, and flock to the University of the neighbouring State, where licence still flourished. The little rival Sovereign would rejoice at the opportunity of aggrandising his own semi-

naries at the expence of those of his neighbour, and would consequently refrain from following the example of reform. In this as in other matters the clashings of interest among the princes prevent any movement that has for object the general good.

No place can be more delightfully situated as a retreat of study and science than Heidelberg, enclosed as it is between picturesque ranges of mountains; the majestic and placid Neckar in the valley; the castle ruins on the declivities above the town which are covered with the luxuriant hanging gardens of the castle, whose terraces, thickets, and umbrageous walks afford solemn and silent retreats for study, and prospects over the Rhine and the Neckar valley of the most ravishing and varied beauty. The castle is an immense mass of rambling ruins, of architecture of different centuries and descriptions, whose mouldering remains rear their ragged masses with a most striking effect, overhanging the Neckar, and embosomed in the wild shrubberies and woods which cover the slope of the mountain. The town is old, dark, and irregular, and presents few traces of the consequence it enjoyed till the early

part of the last century as the residence of the splendid court of the Electors Palatine. A few families of more consequence than wealth still reside here, some of whom we had the pleasure of meeting at the house of the hospitable Count —.

Handwritten signature: J. P. ...

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