

THOMAS PAINE IN GERMANY.

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BOOKS have been written to prove that Shakespeare visited Italy, that Jesus journeyed through India, and that Doctor Cook reached the North Pole. It is not my intention to present any proofs, real or imaginary, tending to show that Thomas Paine ever walked Unter den Linden, or got an LL. D. at Heidelberg, or emptied a *Masskrug* in the Hofbräuhaus at Munich. Thomas Paine in the body never visited the Fatherland, but Thomas Paine in the spirit has been there for centuries, even raising his voice in the lecture-halls of theological seminaries, even wearing the priestly vesture and preaching his doctrine from many pulpits, even scattering it broadcast throughout the land in the volumes of classic writers like Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller.

In another sense also Paine has been in Germany, and still is there, though most of those that know him best would not recognize him in this avatar. Few students of Paine are aware that he appears as one of the characters in a famous drama written by a brother of Ludwig Büchner, known the world over as the author of *Force and Matter*, the most persuasive popular presentation of the philosophy of materialism.

While through the works and words of many writers and speakers the real Paine has saturated German thought during three or four centuries, this dramatic figure of Paine is made to preach a philosophy quite at variance with Paine's own system, which was deism—a philosophy that such thinkers as Hume and Voltaire found satisfactory—a philosophy that was the most easily defended and the most plausible in the days before Laplace had told Napoleon, in answer to an inquiry about God, that he "had no need of that hypothesis"; in the days before Charles Darwin, turning teleology inside out, showed how organisms adapt themselves to their environment

instead of having a suitable environment created for them by a benevolent infinite paternalism.

Before we make the acquaintance of this fanciful Paine, who walks and talks through one scene of Georg Büchner's tragedy, *Danton's Death* (1835), it may be well to take a look at the Büchner family, in which the revolutionary spirit that was Paine's found four human incarnations. The father of the Büchners was a physician—a Hessian of Darmstadt—a near neighbor, therefore, of great Goethe himself, who was born in Frankfurt.

Georg Büchner, the eldest son and the most brilliant member of the family, was born in the year 1813, and died at the age of twenty-three. His tragedy, *Danton's Death*, was written about two years before his own end, so that it must be counted among those prodigies of genius that include Shelley's *Queen Mab* and Bryant's *Thanatopsis*. The drama was written in less than five weeks, as the author wrote to Karl Gutzkow.

Young Georg Büchner, in the brief span of his life, manifested much of that spirit of Thomas Paine which stalked through Germany during centuries, which has thrust into the flesh of theology the thorn of higher criticism, which gave to the world the economic leaven of socialism through Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Büchner for a time edited a paper—*Der hessische Bote*—which had for its motto, "Peace to the Huts and War to the Palaces," the well-known slogan of Revolutionary days with which Thomas Paine would have been in heartiest accord.

After the writing of *Danton's Death*, Büchner fled to Zurich, where he spent the brief remainder of his days. Aside from the drama that has been mentioned, he wrote a witty comedy entitled *Leonce and Lena*, and a fragment entitled *Wozzek*, which is truly volcanic in its action and diction. Few other authors who have written so little and passed away so soon, have left so definite an impress on thought and literature as this elder brother of the Büchner family.

He had a sister, Luise Büchner, born when he was eight years old, who was one of the pioneers of the emancipation of woman in Germany. Women in the Middle Ages, especially in the Free Cities, had played a considerable and highly respected role. One of the first of German writers was the nun Hroswitha, who about 950, A. D., wrote Latin plays in imitation of Terence, and from whom Anatole France borrowed the germ of *Thais*. German women like Anna Maria von Schurman of Cologne did heroic service for enlightenment like Hypatia, without encountering her

martyrdom. But the severe trials of the Thirty Years' War and the Napoleonic period had relegated women somewhat to the rear, so far as the intellectual life of the nation was concerned. Woman had been too busy in fulfilling the feminine functions of cook and nurse to devote much time to enlightening the world. Luise Büchner, through many books, one of which, *Woman and Her Vocation* (1855), reached many editions, paved the way for writers and thinkers of the present age like Ricarda Huch and Baroness von Suttner.

The third distinguished member of the Büchner family was Ludwig—whose full name was Friedrich Karl Christian Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899). His philosophic and scientific writings entitle him to a foremost place in the gallery of great men who have led the human race out of the bondhouse of superstition to the promised land of reason. He was one of the earliest apostles of Darwinism, and it should be remembered that *Force and Matter* appeared in the year 1855, while Darwin's *Origin of Species* did not appear until 1859. So it will be seen that, by a kind of intuition, almost prophetic, Ludwig Büchner had built the edifice even before Darwin laid down the foundation. He was ever after busily engaged in adding to the knowledge and thought of evolutionary philosophy. While the world outside of Germany knows chiefly this one work—a popular presentation written for *Die Gartenlaube* but never published by it, for the same reason that our *Ladies' Home Journal* would probably decline to print such a work to-day—Büchner wrote numerous other books, on *The Soul of Animals*, on *Man's Place in Nature*, on *The Idea of God*, on *The Influence of Heredity*, etc., besides translating into German Lyell's revolutionary work on *The Antiquity of Man*. Perhaps no other German thinker has been animated by the spirit of Thomas Paine to so great a degree as the author of *Force and Matter*.

The fourth member of the family, three years younger than Ludwig, was not a scientist, but a literary man. Alexander Büchner, while a professor at Zurich and Caen, wrote a history of English poetry, a life of Thomas Chatterton, and a number of works in French upon German literature, especially about Jean Paul. That the revolutionary and pioneer spirit of the other members of the family also glowed in Alexander is evident from the fact that in 1864 he produced a book on Richard Wagner, whose "Tristan and Isolde" was not put forth until 1865, and whose theater at Bayreuth was not founded until 1872.

When we remember that Friedrich Nietzsche, who is usually

considered the first apostle of Wagner, did not write his initial work until during the war of 1870-71, we realize that Alexander Büchner was a pioneer and revolutionist like the three elder members of his family, that in them all the spirit of Thomas Paine was mighty, even though the eldest brother, Georg, had utterly misrepresented the philosophy of Paine in his drama.

Danton's Death is, in many respects, a very remarkable performance, considering its author's youth and the haste with which he had worked. So far as I know, it is the only work of literature in which Thomas Paine appears as a character of any importance. Some years ago Hallie Erminie Rives expressed to me an intention of making Paine the hero of an historical novel, but that intention has never been carried out.

How Büchner came to utilize Paine in his play is not quite clear, as he does not seem to have had any definite conception of Paine's ideas, does not appear to have read *The Age of Reason*, nor any other of his theological works. This much he knew—that Paine was a religious radical as well as a social revolutionary, and this apparently sufficed Büchner. We may pardon his ignorance of Paine's philosophy, even his spelling of Paine's name with a "y," when we remember that the French Convention, which made Paine an honorary citizen of the new-baked republic, also conferred that distinction upon the German poet Schiller, and spelled his name "Gillé." It is credit enough, in such times, to have heard of such men, even though their contemporaries heard wrongly.

The mention of Schiller brings to mind the fact that Büchner's tragedy, *Danton's Death*, resembles Schiller's earliest work, *The Robbers*, in many respects besides that of youthful fire and idealism. Both are crude in construction, violent in utterance, abound in frenzied philosophy, savage cynicism, and more or less immature manifestations of genius. But, then, Goethe's first work, *Götz von Berlichingen*, was exactly the same kind of explosive and frothy literary production. Noise and revolt were in the air at that time. Authors kicked the unities and patted themselves on the back for heroism in having done it. Picturesque cuss-words were considered the highest proof of poetic inspiration. Red-shirted cutthroats, spattered with gore, paraded about as if they were the sublimest creations of poetry. The Germans have a word for that school of writers—they call them *Kraftgenies* (lit. "geniuses of force") which aptly sums up the whole history of the movement in a single descriptive phrase. Georg Büchner was one of these ex-

plosive geniuses, and *Danton's Death* was one of these explosions of genius.

But we are concerned with the play not as a play, not as a picture of Revolutionary France in the days between the death of Hébert and that of Danton and Desmoulins, but rather as a presentation of Thomas Paine. The scene in which Paine appears is laid in the prison of the Luxembourg. Among those present, as the Society Editor would say, were Chaumette, Mercier, and Héault de Séchelles, while later Danton, Lacroix, Desmoulins, and Philippeau join the debating society.

It appears, from the drama, that the principal diversion of the prisoners, while awaiting their turn to ascend the guillotine, was to discuss God and immortality. Chaumette starts the debate by some remark aimed at Paine, and Paine at once reels off the following, which must appear somewhat painful to those who know Paine's actual thought and style:

"Come, my philosopher Anaxagoras, let me put you through your catechism! There is no God, and this is the reason. Either God created the world, or he did not create it. If he did not create it, then the world contains its cause in itself, and there can be no God, for God becomes God only because of having in himself the cause of all things. But it is certain that God cannot have created the world, since creation is either eternal like God or must have had a beginning. If the latter is the case, then God must have created the world at some prior time or epoch; in other words, after resting for an eternity, God must have suddenly become awake and active—he must, therefore, have undergone a change himself which would force us to measure his existence by time, both of which ideas are contrary to all conceptions of God's nature. Therefore God cannot have created the world. Since, however, we know very clearly that the world is here, or at least that our ego is here, and since both the world and our ego, according to the foregoing reasoning, must owe their existence to themselves, or to something that is not God, there can be no God. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*"

Without wincing at these subtle metaphysics, Mercier throws in the query, "What if creation is eternal?" That does not perplex Büchner's Paine, who at once answers:

"Then creation is no longer creation, being one with God or an attribute of God, as Spinoza says: for then God is in everything—in you, my dear fellow, in our philosopher Anaxagoras, and in me. That would not be so bad, but you must concede that it would not

accord with divine majesty if our *bon Dieu* would suffer from the toothache every time we had it, might contract leprosy in some of us, might be buried alive, or at any rate might have very unpleasant impressions of such experiences."

Mercier comes back undaunted with a new question, "But there must be a cause for things?"

"Who denies that?" retorts Paine. "But who assures you that this cause is what we call God, and which we consider perfect? Do you consider the creation perfect?"

The complaisant Mercier admits that he does not.

"Then," continues Paine, "would you from an imperfect result infer a Perfect Cause? Voltaire did not wish to fall out with God any more than he wished to fall out with kings, and therefore he committed this philosophical error. But any one who is endowed with reason, and will not or dare not use that reason consistently, is a blundering amateur."

Mercier puts another leading question—as to whether a perfect cause could have a perfect result—and Büchner's Paine overflows in another philosophic torrent:

"Calm yourself, philosopher," he cries. "You are right, but if God must create something, and can create only something imperfect, he ought to let it alone altogether. Is it not thoroughly human to think of God only as creating something? Because we must always be moving about and shaking ourselves, in order to convince ourselves that we are in existence, must we impute to God the same pitiable necessity? Must we, when our spirit loses itself in the thought of harmonious self-sufficient eternal bliss—must we at once assume that such a state of being will of necessity put forth a hand across the table to knead petty human manikins out of dough, actuated by an effervescent divine love, as we mysteriously whisper to one another? Must we adopt this course merely to flatter ourselves that we are Sons of God? I will rest content with a less distinguished father; at any rate, I could not reproach such a one for having brought me up in a manner unworthy of my high descent, in a pigsty or on the galleys. You can prove the existence of God only by disproving all imperfection, as Spinoza has tried to do. You can deny the existence of evil, but not the existence of pain. Only reason can demonstrate whether a God exists; our feelings protest against such a belief. Mark it well, Anaxagoras; why do I suffer? There is the Rock of Atheism. The least pang of pain, though it be felt only in an atom, rends creation from top to bottom."

Mercier here feeds the loquacious philosopher another weighty question, "But what about morality?"

"First you adduce morality as a proof of God, and then cite God in support of morality," answers Büchner's Paine. "You reason in a beautiful circle, like a dog biting his own tail. What of your morality? I do not know whether there is anything evil or good in itself, but that does not oblige me to alter my course of action. I act in accordance with my nature. What is in harmony with my nature is good for me, and that I do. What is against my nature is evil for me; this I avoid, and ward myself against it when it comes my way. You may remain virtuous, as it is called, and ward yourself against so-called vice, yet you need not therefore despise your opponent, which must be sadly humiliating."

Chaumette, one of the listeners, thanks the debaters for the enlightenment they have given him, and Paine pronounces a kind of satirical benediction over his opponent, saying:

"He is still in doubt. When it comes to the end, he is going to ask for extreme unction, stretch his feet toward Mecca, and let himself be circumcised, so that he may not miss the road to Heaven."

These are Paine's last words in Büchner's play, except for an epigram about Danton, who has just come in. "His life and his death would be equally great misfortunes." With these words we lose sight of Paine as a figure in Büchner's drama.

Of course, to us this is not Thomas Paine. It is merely the spirit of inquiry, of denial, of revolt, that was then stalking about Germany, that had been stalking about Germany in all ages. It is the spirit out of which was born the Reformation; out of which was born, in our day, the titanic revolt of Nietzsche; out of which was born the higher criticism of the Tübingen school and the monism of Ernst Haeckel. The spirit of Paine—that is to say, the spirit of inquiry, of denial, of revolt—has its native hearth in the land of Luther, Riem, Bahrtdt, Strauss, Baur, Wellhausen, and all those men who from time to time have thrown firebrands into the established churches, battered down the Bastilles of thought, and flaunted their banner of human equality beneath the windows of palaces behind which, trembling, sat despotic power wrapped in the mantle of divine right.

So powerful has been this spirit in Germany that one great emperor and one even greater king, both named Frederick, are enrolled in the world's gallery of Freethinkers. So potent has been this influence in the economic domain, that a man like Bismarck

was glad to learn from a man like Ferdinand Lassalle, and so became one of the first practical socialists of modern times.

We do not know what the late war will yet bring forth in the way of philosophic and economic rejuvenation, but we do know that after every war the German spirit has risen to new heights. So we may feel sure that the spirit of Thomas Paine, which has been astir in Germany all these centuries, will again with its mighty breath vivify the thought and fructify the life of her people, that all the nations may be enriched still further by the precious heritage and golden treasury of her thought.