THE ROMANTIC SONNET
AND ITS PLACE IN GERMAN LITERATURE.

By Paul F. Voelker.
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Altho beauty is an entity of purely subjective formation, the existence or non-existence of which can be explained but not demonstrated, it is nevertheless possible to formulate a concept of the conditions of beauty in any type of artistic creation, and to use this concept as the basis of judgment for any creation that falls within this type. This concept is the consensus of opinion of those who have had most to do with this form of creation. There is a concept of what constitutes an ideal sonnet, and with this we shall compare the sonnets of the Romantic school of Germany. And if we were to put our thesis in the form of a syllogism, it would read thus: Major premise, The ideal sonnet has a fixed form, expresses lofty thought, and awakens depth of mood: Minor premise, The Romantic sonnet has beauty of form, rises sometimes to high altitudes of thought, but fails to quicken the heart with the glow of mood; Conclusion, The Romantic sonnet falls short of the ideal. In our discussion we shall endeavor to set forth, first, what the ideal sonnet is; second, what the Romantic sonnet is; and third, the place of the Romantic sonnet in German literature.

Sharp lines of definition can usually not be drawn between the various forms of literary composition. But this is not true of the sonnet. The ear-marks of the sonnet distinguish it from all other forms. It belongs first of all to
poetry, as distinguished from prose, since it is the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional language. As such, it must come from the heart. Its author must for the time being have reached a state of exaltation that lies above the plane of mediocre mental activity, a state of freedom from self-consciousness. He must become an inspired child, writing for himself with such sincerity that his passages of pathos can draw no tears so deep or so sweet as those that fall from his own eyes as he writes. Hence we may expect that the best sonnets have not been written by mediocre poets.

Among the divisions of poetry, the sonnet may be grouped with lyric, or song poetry, expressive of the individual emotions of the poet, rather than to epic, or narrative poetry, intended to depict a series of actions tending toward some striking result. The sonnet is lyric in its origin. As the word sonnet implies, a small sound or composition, the sonnet was originally sung with a musical accompaniment in common with all lyric poetry, and had reference to the composers own feelings and thoughts. Its greatest master considered it lyrical, for Petrarch's outpourings are personal to himself; the immortal sonnets to Laura speak the language of his own heart. The sonnet is lyrical because it does not stand for an absolute dramatic vision, unconditioned by the lyrical impulses of the poet, which is the imaginative force of all pure lyric poetry, such as the song, the elegy, the idyl, and the sonnet. And lastly it is lyrical because of its very purpose and structure; for the pure lyrist sings one tune,
the epic poet sings several tunes, and the true dramatist
sings all tunes. And this one rule has always been obeyed
among sonnet writers, that it should express a single, simple
emotion; or, as Tomlinson puts it, the sonnet must consist of
one leading idea, or thought, or feeling. But the essentially
lyric nature of the sonnet, with its one tune, is partly covered
up by the echo from the surrounding world. It is a mark of
skill with the sonneteer to associate the emotions of the
mind with the aspects of the external world, thus avoiding the
naked exposure of an intense subjective state. This gives it
an objective element. Without being coldly artificial, the
sonnet is yet so artistic in structure, its form so universally
known, recognized and adopted as being artistic, that the
too fervid spontaneity and reality of the poet's emotion may
be in a certain degree veiled, and the poet can whisper, as
from behind a mask, those deepest secrets of the heart which
could otherwise only find expression in pure dramatic forms.
The very restraint of the sonnet, its sonority, its metrical
counterpoint, gives its personal expression a dignity not
found in any other lyric. In the sonnets of Petrarch, we find
his deepest personal feelings hidden in Nature's visible
forms, and with him it was doubtless true that the love of
Laura made Nature herself look more beautiful; and when she
died, the splendor of the sun died also. Why else should he
sing,

"I feel the well-known breeze, and, yonder see
The hills beloved, the source of that sweet light
Which, as heaven willed, was now my eyes' delight,
And now the cause of tears and misery."
Dante goes even farther in this respect, and much of the personal element is concealed. He does not remind us of himself, but gives his sonnets a breadth of treatment which enlists the sympathy of all humanity. Wordsworth's sonnets, which are considered by many as the finest in English literature, have their lyrical tone modified in the same way. All of his sonnets, with the exception of the Ecclesiastical series, bear witness to the principle that the Muse is to be the servant and interpreter of Nature. He does not search his mind for subjects. He goes forth into the world and they present themselves. His mind lies open to Nature with an ever-wakeful susceptibility and an impulse from without will send it far into the region of thought; but it seldom goes to work upon itself. It is not celibate, but

"Wedded to this goodly universe, in love and holy passion"-

of which union poetry is the legitimate offspring.

But the sonnet is further distinguished from other forms of the lyric by its content. It falls roughly with the songs of sentiment, rather than with the reflexional songs, such as the Kirchenlied, set to stately Cathedral music, and the heroic songs, such as the ballad, set to music of the dance. For the end of the sonnet is properly that a single wave of emotion, when emotion is too deeply charged with thought, or too much adulterated with fancy, to pass spontaneously into pure lyric, shall be embodied in a single metrical flow and return. In other words, the narrow limits of the sonnet forbid the showing of details that are necessary in reflectional poetry, and its rigid texture prevents its use in the expression of
sudden changes of passion as are found in the so-called heroic
lyric. Its oneness of aim almost entirely excludes action.
But meditation is not absolutely excluded. In fact, its
meditative-emotional tone, raising it out of the realm of the
sensuous, gives it its sentimental character. But again,
there are many varieties of sentimental songs. Among these
varieties, from the Rig-Veda of the Indians and the Scop of
the Saxons to the songs of the Norman troubadours and the
English minstrels, the sonnet is sharply set off by its form,
its dignity of content, and its mood. Each of these charac-
teristics will now be viewed in detail.

The form of the sonnet is as inflexible as the laws of
the Medes and the Persians. It consists of 14 lines, each
containing 10 or 11 syllables. Lines of 11 syllables are
preferable, because this gives a feminine rhyme, which is
more musical than the masculine rhyme, and which at the same
time gives a touch of lightness to a form whose superior
dignity inclines towards stiffness. The first 8 lines consti-
tute the octave, the purpose of which is similar to that of
the dependent clauses in a periodic sentence, of dissonance
in music, or of the pre-tragic events in a drama; namely, it
arouses interest, it stimulates expectation, it gives a riddle,
as it were. The last 6 lines constitute the sestet, whose
purpose it is to solve the riddle, to satisfy the curiosity,
to calm the excitement. These 2 main divisions must rise and
sink like the flow and ebb of a wave. The octave is divided
into 2 quatrains, or bases, the first of which states the
sentiment, mood, or idea of the sonnet, the second explains,
illustrates, or proves it. The sestet consists of 2 tercets
or turnings, the first of which confirms the idea, the second concludes it. A full stop or colon is made at the end of each division, the cadences falling in the middle of the octave and in the middle of the sestet, as well as at the close of each. The first and last lines of the first quatrain are made to rhyme with each other and with the first and last lines of the second quatrain, thus enclosing lines 3 and 4, 6 and 7, which also rhyme with each other. The rhymes of the sestet are more irregular, but the most successful usage seems to demand that the lines of the first tercet rhyme in regular order with the lines of the second. The rhymes of the regular sonnet may therefore be symbolized as follows: abba abba cde cde. This arrangement has the advantage of combining the excellencies of rhyme and blank verse. The monotony of rhyme is avoided by an ingenious placing of the cadences, and the rapid carelessness of blank verse is controlled by the use of corresponding terminations. But it is based on a deeper reason than that. The sharp separation of the various functional parts from each other is in this way made possible. The most direct and fundamental effect of rhyme is to combine and to separate verses. Rhyming lines are combined, non-rhyming lines are separated. The combining form precedes in the sonnet, because the energy of the poem is best served through this arrangement. The groups abba, abba, constitute 2 rhyme masses, separated from each other, and yet leaning on each other for completion. The combining function of the rhyme is now satisfied. If 4 more lines were added, they would form an octave with the 4 that precede them, leaving the first 4 in the cold. Thus 8 lines, arranged in the form of 2 quatrains,
form a cohering unity. But our unity so far displays only pairing power, and we have seen that rhyme has also the capacity of separating. Now as 2 is the basic number of combination, so 3 is the basic number of separation. A unit cannot separate, since separation is perceptible only through contrast with pairing. The 3 lines of the first tercet therefore make it appear to the ear that the poem will be without rhyme, and we have the effect of separation. But this does not become poetry until the last tercet is added. Now the dissonance is solved into harmony. The quatrains and the tercets are respectively symmetrical, but face each other in sharp antithesis. Here then we have a musical unit, combining unconscious power with unconscious grace. Here is richness and fullness of rhyme, with no word out of place, with no straining after effect, with mechanical coherence, with part answering part, with expectation and realization moving in increasing interest to an effective climax. None of the constituent parts have their full meaning independently. Quatrain complements quatrain, sestet supplements octave, and the final tercet, like the golden keystone of an arch, holds the entire structure together. The lyric unity both of thought and design, which is the essential quality of the sonnet, depends upon the proper coordination of its parts. The quatrains must not have more than 2 rhymes, the tercets not more than 3. The rhymes must be sufficiently varied and contrasted, and yet should never appear forced. No word or line should suggest that it is introduced for the sake of rhyme. Contrasted rhymes should not play upon the same vowel. In languages having both masculine and feminine rhymes, the latter should
be exclusively used, since it allows the "Gleichlaut" of the accented syllable to die out gradually in the non-accented. The feminine is also more musical. The masculine rhyme is harsh. The Italians call it the broken-off rhyme. Verses of 11 feet are preferred because they do not tend to break into Alexandrines as readily as verses of 10 feet, which put the sonnet out of fashion in France, and prevented its development in Germany for 50 years. To conclude with a couplet is as foreign to the structure of the sonnet as to use the Alexandrine verse. For the couplet separates itself from the remainder of the sestet, thus disturbing the uniformity of the structure. Besides, the rhyme cde, cde excites intense suspense, which brings to the forefront of attention the last tercet, where the climax occurs and the curiosity is satisfied. For the same reason, an epigram should not conclude the poem, but rather a striking thought or expression, not decidedly simple, but of sufficient elaboration and grace to make a fitting conclusion. The sentiment which constitutes the elementary substance of the sonnet must crystallize under the cooling influence of reflection, and the roughness of the crystal must be cut to exactness and properly polished before it discovers its lustre. But when it is finished, each quatrain and tercet reflecting its proper color, each line distinctly sparkling in the light of beauty, when all the parts blend into unity and conform to these simple yet necessary laws of structure, the sonnet surpasses all other forms of poetry, and has been truly styled, "the most exquisite jewel of the muses."

What must be the thought content of a structure so delicately wrought? Evidently it must harmonize. The diamond
is capable of high polish because of the compactness of its substance. A piece of glass may be cut to resemble a diamond, and its facets may imitate the sparkle of the genuine jewel, but only the truly valuable will remain a joy forever. The sonnet cannot possess any of the attractions that are demanded by the lovers of moving accidents and of tales that freeze the blood. It must appeal to an entirely different order of intellects. Like the landscape that is sought out of the beaten path, it possesses a charm of its own. In a genuine sonnet, the energy of a life may be congealed into one heart throb, and an eternity lived out in a moment. The sonnet does not concern itself with the trivial; it is filled with truth distilled. A ton of carbon, under heat and pressure, yields up one precious gem. The sonnet consists of something more than "Kling-klang" or even symmetry of form. It contains elevated thought, moving forward in majestic dignity. And the thought and form must blend into a unity, for the content and form of poetry are as inseparable as soul and body. The idea is not to squeeze a lofty thought into a certain form, thereby maiming or straining it, but to make the form the organ of thought. And as the form has a basis in reality, so the thought must be based on eternal truth. Mere vision is not adequate. It must be founded in reality. If this reality has a subjective and an objective basis, and applies to concrete conditions of the poet's life and time, it is most apt to find a response in the universal heart of man.

But the emotional appeal is the most important condition of the ideal sonnet. This is its crucial test. For a poem may be styled a sonnet if it have the form of a sonnet; it may
even keep a permanent place in literature, if it add lofty thought to perfection of form. But it cannot be ranked with the really great productions of literature unless it appeals to the heart. It must have the power to transport one out of the condition of swaying emotion to that of definite mood. Many unsuccessful attempts have been made to describe the effect a good sonnet has upon the mind. One writes: "Being in the presence of a great and abiding grief, the various notes of sorrow poured out by Plutarch became grateful to me." Another: "The entire, unique, harmonious, dignified sonnet—that little poem big with one fine sentiment, richly adorned and delicately wrought, never flagging, now bursts forth with an organlike peal, and proceeds in a sustained and majestic march until the soft and melodious close sweetly and gently winds up the whole." Still another: "When a silver voice takes its course through a fine sonnet we listen to it as to an oracle. When the sonnet ceases, we feel as if a revelation had been made, and the very silence becomes musical." No poem leaves the mind in a finer mood than the grand and solemn sonnet. We feel as if a vision of a loved one had returned from a loftier world and spoken words of pregnant meaning.

The emotion which pulsates in the verses of a sonnet must have a moral or an esthetic base. Mere egotistical emotion may give vigor and picturesqueness, but it needs a broader, nobler feeling to give it power and reach. Embodied selfishness is not artistic in the sense of being elevating. Moral emotion may express itself in enthusiasm for what is noble, or in indignation at what is ignoble. Esthetic emotion is excited by a perception of the loveliness and majesty of
the world, and is based on the affinity of the soul for beauty. Where either the moral or the esthetic emotions are lacking, we may have finished verse, but not poetry. When the emotions are petty, we have mere rant. The artist who descends to make a personal invective fails to produce anything great. For the inciting cause of his wrath is an individual who represents nothing to us. But if his indignation is stirred by the violation of a principle, as Milton's was when he cried,

"Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,"

our sympathy with his emotion is at once aroused, for the principle is immortal, and is of as much interest to us as it was to him. The sentiment of the sonnet must correspond to general truth. It must be related to the noble, the beautiful, the universal, and the divine. There is no higher poetic mood than that which contemplates the universal in the concrete. What can be more universally true among lovers than the experience of Petrarch:

"He vainly seeks on charms divine to gaze,
Who never gazed upon those lovely eyes,
How their sweet turning every soul & beguiles;
He knows not how love heals, nor how love slays,
Who knows not how she sweetly, sweetly sighs,
And how she sweetly speaks and sweetly smiles."

Here is a concrete Laura, but every Jack sees in her his Gill. How subtile is the universality suggested. How sincere is the feeling. How independent of mere intelligence is this poetry. How closely welded are form and matter. How divine
the enthusiasm which sees nothing but the object it adores
and thus makes it the expression of what is noblest in himself.
It is the part of us that feels that is immortal, and the
art product inspired by feeling partakes of the immortality
of its source.

It is to the credit of the members of the German Romantic
school that they tried to write sonnets, for their efforts
have had influence in planting permanently this beautiful
Italian product upon German soil. It is to their credit that
they closely adhered to its original form as given it by
Petrarch, rather than to imitate it loosely and inaccurately
as many of our English sonnet writers have done. It is further
to their credit that they considered it worthy of their best
thought, and that they so stoutly defended it. A small mind
cannot appreciate a sonnet, nor a small poet write a good one.
It is interesting to note, moreover, that the sonnet is the
only form of literature defended by this school that has sur-
vived, and for a long time it was as odious to literary men and
the public in general, as was the mystic school of Hallucina-
tion which propagated it. Proud names of the Romantic
school have worshipped at the shrine of the little sonnet,
and two & three of them, in spite of some faults which may
be discovered when measured by the touchstone we have set up,
still serve as models for the young aspiring sonneteer of
the present day.

A brief review of the general difficulties which confront-
ed the would-be literary genius during the most characteristic
period of German poetry, from 1725 to 1848, may lead us to
anticipate the partial failure of the German sonnet. During that
time the most common complaint of men of genius was the want of
great central ideas of action to form a basis of national
art. Poetical bricks cannot be made without straws. Germany
has no continuous traditions of rude art out of which her
artists might develop more perfect forms. Thus the German
epic fuses the historical and the poetic in an inarticulate
way and betrays a lack of truly national character. The
German drama, even at its best, breathes something of the
spirit of sculpture. The German lyric alone excels. This is
because it is based on German life, and at the same time ex-
presses the universal longings of the human heart. The folk
lore of Germany is far richer and wilder than that of England;
in proportion as it has kept clear of the stream of Hellenic
civilization, it is better adapted by the simple domesticity
of its imagery to touch the universal Gothic heart of modern
Europe. This folk lore breathes the spirit of a spiritual
elf-region. Goethe seized upon this and produced Faust,
which is essentially a lyric. Mueller felt it and Uhland saw
it. These names are most highly representative of German
literature, for they have taken the distinctively German rough
diamonds of suggestion from the Volkslied and polished them
into gems of art. But when the Romantic period begins, Germany
had as yet developed no great lyric "Kunst" poetry, and these
truths were not felt, as they are perhaps not thoroughly felt
by the German writers even today. For the Germans, in common
with others that might be mentioned, are not always capable
of judging their own work critically. But this is not all.
For the critic may be present, as he was during the life of
the Romantic school, to pull poems to pieces: who shall put
them together unless a genius be present? The great fault
with most of the sonnets of Germany is that they were written
by men who could not write good poetry of any kind. In the
German national literature, prose had developed long before
poetry. In the beginning of the literary and artistic awaken-
ing there was no living connecting link between the old
Nibelungen and the spirit of the times. The very language
was based upon prose--Luther's prose. When German poetry does
at last begin, it either builds upon a foreign art or upon its
own folks-dichtungen. If built upon a foreign art, it was
ungermanic and inadequate; if built upon the folks-dichtung,
the attempt only led to greater anarchy of form.

The sonnet furnished special difficulties in addition to
the general difficulties that confronted all literary men in
common. First of all, the sonnet is a highly specialized
form of literature. Such a rare flower can grow only when its
branch has struck its roots deep. Again, there was no "Stütz-
punkt" of related poetry in Germany as there was in Spain,
Portugal, and France, or an ordered condition of prose as there
was in England, to further its introduction. The difficulty
of introducing the form made the development highly sporadic.
And of friendly soil there was but little. Germany did not
become friendly to the sonnet until there was a revolution in
the poetic and literary attitude of the times, to which rev-
olution the Romanticists had to contribute, no small part. And
last but not least among the difficulties, was the quality of
the language. The German language is crude, and harsh in
comparison with the rich vocal-musical language of Italy, and
Spain, where the sonnet has been most fortunate in its develop-
ment.
All other difficulties must be sought in the make-up of the Romanticists. The fundamental failure of this school is that it conceives poetry in a one-sided Germanic way; namely, esthetic-metaphysically, and not empiric-historically. Poetry should have nothing to do with abstractions; it is a concrete representation. It is concerned with all of life, and not merely with its subjective experiences. The second fundamental failure of the Romanticists was that most of them lacked character and manliness. They had no definite convictions. They did not know what they wanted. Yes and no were of equal consequence. Mysticism is opposed to clearness, the lack of character is opposed to emotional sincerity, and the metaphysical viewpoint is opposed to the concrete. Hence the German Romanticist never thoroughly entered into the spirit of the sonnet. Metaphysical mysticism, subjective hallucination, and womanish yearnings after the indefinable, are too unreal and tasteless to be distilled into this most highly flavored and potent draught.

A. W. Schlegel is the first great apostle of the Romantic sonnet. He made a close study of the Italian models, established a fixed form for the German sonnet, and stated its laws in the concisest language. He perfected its rhyme and its rhythm. He banished the masculine rhymes as well as the Alexandrine and trochaic verses, and gave the sonnet its distinctive lyrical-didactic character which it maintains throughout the Romantic school.

And here we come upon his weakness. The old Italian sonnet was philosophical poetry; the Romantic sonnet became versified philosophy. The emotional element becomes a second-
ary consideration. The poem fails in producing a delicate mood effect. Is the German emotion too gushing to be compressed into a dignified sonnet? Or is the German mind too philosophical to linger upon an idea with emotional suggestiveness? Or does the German mind with its sanity lack the emotional fervor and intensity of the nations to the South? Whatever the cause, the light from Schlegel’s brilliantly polished productions is a hard, garish light. It glitters, but does not shine. We see the mental imagery, in his descriptions we invariably get his view-point. The understanding is appealed to. But the heart is not touched. Since he excels in character-descriptions, we will give as an example, his

Don Quixote de la Mancha.

"Auf einem Pegasus, dem magern Rappen,
Reit‘t in die Ritterpoesie Quixote
Und haelt ammuthiglich, in Glueck und Nothe,
Gespraech mit der Prosa seines Knappen.

Erst wie sie blind nach Abenteuern tappen,
Trifft sie der Weltlauf mit gar harter Pfote;
Dann kommt der Scherz als Huldigender Bote
Und schuettelt schelmisch ihre Schellenkappen.

Und Liebe webt drein rührende Geschichten;
Verstand der Menschen Sitten, Tracht, Geberden;
Es gaukelt Phantasie in farb’ger Glorie.

Ich schwoer’ es, und Urgande selbst soll richten:
Was auch hinfuero mag ersonnen werden,
Dies bleibt die unvergleichlichste Historie"

A mere comparison of this sonnet with one of Wordsworth’s descriptive sonnets, will convince the reader of the emotional
To Toussaint L’ouverture.

"Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!

Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
Pillowed in some deep dungeon’s earless den;—
O miserable Chieftain! Where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Tho fallen thyself, never to rise again,
Live and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth and skies;
There’s not a breathing of the common mind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man’s unconquerable mind."

In many of Schlegel’s sonnets he presents his philosophic views. These are dry, to say the least, and many of them are not even clear. His love sonnets are clear, but are sometimes characterized by a coarse sensuousness which contrasts sharply with the fine spiritual qualities of Petrarch’s famous love sonnets. This appears clearly in the first quatrains of the sonnet, "Auf die Arme der Geliebten."

"Wie reiche Schoene ward euch schoenen Armen.
Nur muesst ihr euch mit anmuthvollem Regen
Nicht bloss zur Rede, selbst beredt, bewegen:
Die arme sind gemacht, um zu umarmen."

Among the immediate followers of A. W. Schlegel may be mentioned his brother Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis and Tieck. The sonnets of Novalis equal Schlegel’s, which he
imitated, in form, and Tieck's in melody, and surpass them both in depth and truth of emotion. They are to be classed with the more important sonnets of the German language. Unfortunately, however, only four sonnets of the mature Novalis are extant, and we pass him with the remark that England has a long array of sonneteers that easily surpass him at his best.

Tho Tieck is superior to Schlegel in most respects, he fails to equal him as a sonnet writer. His best sonnets are occasional poems to his friends. In form they do not compare with Schlegel's, being built too loosely. As a consequence, they lack the poise that is the result of finely finished form. I will quote one of his humorous sonnets which has become famous, not only because it reveals his skill in using the sonnet as a lash of ridicule, but also because it shows his contempt for the innumerable host of petty sonnet writers, who, like the grasshoppers of Egypt, were overrunning the whole land at this time, producing silly, jingling rhymes. It is the fourth of the series, entitled, "Kunst der Sonette". "Ein nett honett Sonnett so nett zu drechseln,
Ist nicht so leicht, ihr Kinderchen, das wett' ich.
Ihr nennt's Sonett, doch klingt es nicht sonnetig,
Statt Haber fuettet ihr den Gaul mit Hexeln.

Dergleichen Dinge muss'an nicht verwechseln;
Ein Unterschied ist zwischen einem Rettig
Und ritt' ich, rutsch' ich, rumpl' ich, oder rett' ich,
Auch Dichten, Duennen, Singen, Kraehen, Kraechzeln.

Drum liegt im Hafen stille doch ein Weilchen,
Und lasset hier das Kranke Schiff ausbessern,
Es zeigt mehr Leck' als Schiff in seiner Fläche:
Noch lecker wird es, ihr bezahlt die Zeche,
Doch duenkt uns lecker nicht ein einzig Zeilchen;
Nach lauem Wasser kann kein Mund je waessern.

Depth of mood cannot be awakened where contemplation
lacks seriousness. We are made to feel the ridiculousness of
the attempts of the petty writers whom the author wishes to
hold up to contempt, but our respect for sonnet writing par
excellence has not increased. In fact, when he has done, we
feel that it does not matter much, after all, what kind of
pieces one puts out. Tieck fails as a sonneteer, because he
constructs loosely. He fails as a poet, because he thinks
loosely, i.e., without being bound to a lofty conviction,
or without seeing definitely what he wants his readers to see.
But most of all does he fail to focus the emotional warmth
of the heart.

Friedrich Schlegel wrote a few fair sonnets, but his
handling of verses was usually so faulty, his language so
rough and unwieldy, his imagery so overloaded and tasteless,
and his thoughts so confused, that it is not surprising that
he gave up this mode of writing, and even argued in his later
days that it is impossible to acclimate a foreign form of
poetry.

The sonneteers of the second Romantic school are open to
the same criticisms as their predecessors, and have in addition
a few faults peculiar to themselves. Loeben's are so well
presented that the mediocrity of what he presents, is felt all
the more keenly. Eichendorff's love sonnets are not success-
ful, and his patriotic sonnets, altho they have an earnest, manly ring, and excel in form, are not sufficiently excellent to class him in the first rank of German Freiheits-saenger. He lacks what the Germans call "fortreissende Kraft". We quote the "Mahnung 1810" which is perhaps his best.

"Wohl mancher, dem die wirblichen Geschichten
Der Zeit das ehrlich deutsche Herz zerschlagen,
Mag, wie Prinz Hamlet, zu sich selber sagen:
Weh! dass zur Welt ich kam, sie einzurichten!
Weich, aufgelegt zu Lust und froelichem Dichten,
Moehnt' er so gern sich mit der Welt vertragen,
Doch, Rache fordernd, aus den leichten Tagen
Sieht er der Vaeter Geist sich stets aufrichten.
Ruhlos und toedlich ist die falsche Gabe:
Des Groszen Wink im tiefsten Marke spuern
Gedanken rastlos-ohne Kraft zum Werke.
Entschliesz dich, wie du kannst nun, doch das merke:
Wer in der Not nichts mag, als Lauten rusehren,
Dess Hand dereinst waehest mahnend aus dem Grabe."

That this poem was a failure needs no further demonstration than this: it was written with the purpose of arousing the nation to activity; it resulted merely in contemplation. It produces about the same effect as Patrick Henry's famous sentence would have produced if paraphrased thus: "It seems to me I ought to have liberty. It is in the nature of things that I should. If I don't get it by my own efforts, I shall some day lie in an ignominious grave." 62230

The sonnet was fast becoming a beautifully polished, but empty form, when the wars of liberation came, and infused
it with new life and vigor. From this time the sonnet has a place in the popular heart. Rueckert deserves the place of honor among the patriotic sonnet writers, surpassing Eichendorff and Koerner. His glowing enthusiasm is well expressed in the "Geharnischte Sonette". These have become truly popular. In form they are true to Schlegel's rules, and are especially distinguished on account of their clear "Gliederung". We find in them effective, witty strength, well adapted thought and imagery, and life that is almost dramatic in its igniting power. No less excellent are his sonnets to Agnes, his deceased love. They are as tender as the patriotic poems are brave. The love sonnets are the most complete as regards language and form, but the "Geharnischte Sonette" are more important in the history of German literature because of their originality. Rueckert was the first to make the sonnet beloved in Germany. One of his finest patriotic Sonnets is the 23rd of the "Geharnischte Sonette". Let us examine it.

"Wir schlüngen unsre Haend' in einen Knoten,
Zum Himmel heben wir die Blick' und schwoeren,
Ihr alle, die ihr lebet, sollt es hoeren,
Und wenn ihr wollt, so hoert auch ihr's, ihr Toten.

Wir schwoeren: Steh'n zu wollen den Geboten
Des Lands, des Mark wir tragen in den Roehren,
Und diese Schwerter, die wir hier empoeren,
Nicht eh'r zu senken, als vom Feind zerschroten.

Wir schwoeren, dass kein Vater nach dem Sohne
Soll fragen, und nach seinem Weib kein Gatte,
Kein Krieger fragen soll nach seinem Lohne,
Noch Heimgeh'n, eh' der Krieg, der nimmersatte,
Ihn selbst entlaesst mit einer blut'gen Krone,
Dass man ihn heile, oder ihn bestatte."

There is a note of deep-breathing resolution in this sonnet that cannot but find a response in the hearts of all patriots, to whatever nationality they may belong. But outside of this, the poem fails as a work of art. The thought is clear enough, but we feel the lines march up to their respective places like so many ranks of soldiers. There is not sufficient ease and freedom of expression. The images do not suggest anything beyond what is expressed. It does not contain metrical words that set in motion an infinite train of thought, and feeling. But it fails principally in the thought contrast that ought to exist between the octave and sestet of a sonnet. Expectation is aroused in the first quatrain, but it is not sustained. The material in the second quatrain belongs properly to the sestet. The riddle is solved too soon. And so while the meter and the rhymes are well nigh perfect, the poem fails to produce the effect of which its sentiment is worthy, because the satisfying emotion that it carries is not reserved for the sestet.

Koerner wrote some excellent sonnets, foremost among which is his

Abschied vom Leben.

"Die wunde brennt,- die bleichen Lippen beben.-
Ich fuehl's an meines Herzen's mattrem Schlage:
Hier steh' ich an den Marken meiner Tage,-
Gott, wie du willst! dir hab' ich mich ergeben."
Viel goldne Bilder sah ich um mich schweben;
Das schoene Traumbild wird zur Totenklage,-
Mut! Mut! -Was ich so treu im Herzen trage,
Das muss ja doch dort ewig mit mir leben!-
Und was ich hier als Heiligtum erkannte,
Wohuer ich rasch und jugendlich erbrannte,
Ob ich's nun Freiheit, ob ich's Liebe nannte:
    Als lichten Seraph seh' ich's vor mir stehen;
Und wie die Sinne langsam mir vergehen,
Traegt mich ein Hauch zu morgenroten Hoehen."

We find considerable depth of emotion in this sonnet, as
in many of Koerner's other poems. But it is perhaps too
intensely subjective to find a universal response. The emo-
tion lies bare before the gaze of the beholder. There is
no attempt at suggestion. There is nothing conveyed but the
prosaic meaning of the lines. To be touching, the subjective
feeling should be objectified, the personal element should
be concealed. And there is another serious defect. The only
figure which is used, and which ought, by giving objective
expression to the emotion, to satisfy our artistic instinct,
tends only to weaken the feeling which the poem as a whole is
expected to convey. In other words, this sonnet lacks in-
tensity, because the author does not compel us to feel one
mood all the way through.

To show how far short this beautiful production falls
from fulfilling the possibilities of the sonnet, it is only
necessary to read one of Elizabeth Browning's:

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise;

I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! - And, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death."

While this poem is intensely lyrical, the subjective
states of its author are expressed by means of objective
realities, and the reader is lost in an emotion which becomes
universal in its appeal to the human heart. Every sentence
adds to the climax, and all ideas presented have a bearing on
the mood which is to be awakened in the mind of the reader.

Uhland devoted some of his talent to sonnet writing. His
sonnets are decidedly Romantic in style, clinging closely
to the correct form. His love sonnets are mystical and show
that the genuine lyric inspiration which gives him so high a
place among the lyrists of the world, was somewhat dampened by
the compressed form of the exacting sonnet. He wrote only
21 sonnets, thus showing that he felt his Muse better adapted
for other work. His mood is perhaps too "volkstumlich" to
allow him the exercise of that restraint which is necessary
to give dignity to the sonnet.

Wilhelm Mueller wrote so few sonnets that Welth in his
"History of the German Sonnet" does not even mention his name. His sonnets are characterized by great clearness and graphical portrayal. The language is sometimes of exquisite beauty. Of deep-moving feeling, however, there is none. The Muse seems to place a bandage about his mouth whenever he attempts to sing a sonnet. He himself confessed as much in "April", which is part of his "SonettenKranz" entitled "Die Monate", when he sings:

"Gern wohlt' ich dir noch vieles von mir sagen,
Doch drueckt mich des Sonettes enges Band,
Das mir die Muse um den Mund geschlagen."

Platen spoke the last deciding word for the maintenance of the sonnet upon German soil. He has become the leader of all subsequent sonneteers. His style is that of Schlegel, following the strictest forms. He does not really belong to the Romantic school, altho in his sonnet writing he leans heavily on Schlegel. Frequently he shows the influence of Goethe, as in his "Sonett an Goethe". The largeness of the composition, its placid dignity, and its perfection of form, appealed to his poetical spirit; and the adaptation of his thought, in sublime language, in a style at once pure and smooth, to the perfect form of the sonnet, makes him one of the most remarkable of German sonneteers. But his very dignity makes him a trifle chilly, and when he is tender, as in his love sonnets, we cannot but feel that his desire to possess is stronger than the emotional ecstasy which his contemplation of the object of beauty produces in him. How far beneath the spiritual love of Petrarch is Platen when he sings:
'O waer ich schon an deiner Brust geborgen,  
Wo ich mich sammle, wenn ich mich zerstreue!  
O waere schon bezwungen diese Scheue,  
Die unsern Bund vertagt von Heut' auf Morgen!  

Beim ersten Zeichen deiner kuenft'gen Neigung  
Wird eine bangen Wonne mich erfassen,  
Wie einem Fuersten bei der Thronbesteigung."  
A real American girl would tear his sonnet to pieces if in it  
he spoke of forming a "Bund" with her even before she has  
displayed the least bit of "Neigung". But I think that this is  
the common fault of German love. It is too much a matter of  
business. It does not hover long in ecstatic veneration  
before its object, but wishes to hasten the affair to a con-  
summation.  

How different the song of Petrarch:  
"Her walk was not the step of mortal thing,  
But of angelic form; her accents clear  
Had in their music more than human soul."

And how much more exalted is the atmosphere of Milton in the  
sonnet "On the Religious Memory of Mrs. Catherine Thomson,  
My Christian Friend."

"When Faith and Love, which parted from thee never,  
Had ripened thy just soul to dwell with God,  
Weekly thou didst resign this earthly load  
Of death, called life, which us from life doth sever.  
Thy works and alms and all thy good endeavor  
Stayed not behind, nor in the grave are trod;
But, as Faith pointed with her golden rod,
Followed thee up to joy and bless forever.
Love led them on, and faith, who knew them best,
Thy handmaids, clad them o'er with purple beams
And azure wings, that up they flew so drest,
And spake the truth of thee with glorious themes
Before the Judge; who henceforth bid thee rest,
And drink thy fill of pure immortal streams."

When we consider that the German language is at least
as well adapted to the sonnet as the English, that the German
Romanticists show far greater skill or willingness to adapt
the form of their verses to the original Italian form, and
that the Germans are the greatest lyric singers of all time,
we are disappointed in the German Romantic sonnet. In every
one of the examples studied we find that emotional intensity
is lacking. In Schlegel, this was because of his attempt to
versify philosophy, in the other early romanticists, because
of a lack of sincerity, in the "Freiheitsaenger", because of
a lazy contemplation when compelling passion ought to,
the mood; in the later writers, because of a certain cold, stiffness
that suggests the attitude of a man who is wearing a new suit
for the first time. The German heart does not freely pour out
its feelings through a veiled lyric. Its nature is too direct.
When the poet adapts himself to the constraint of the sonnet,
his song loses its spontaneity. Hence the German sonnet does
not touch us.

The English sonnet, even when it violates nearly all the
rules, produces finer effects. Shakespeare's sonnets were so
irregular in comparison with the Italian form, that he set up a new type. His sonnets are often so heavily laden with meaning, so double-shot with thought and penetrated with repressed passion, that they lack in clearness, and must be studied before they reveal to us all their treasures. But somehow, they touch the heart. What Shakespeare's sonnets would have been, had he conformed to the rules of Petrarch, is difficult to conjecture. But doubtless they would have surpassed even Petrarch. Many of Wordsworth's sonnets are not sonnets at all, according to the Italian definition. But it must also be added that when he submits to that definition, and has respect to the harmony of form, the thought becomes more sharply defined and elaborately stated, and the result is not only Wordsworth's best sonnet, but an English sonnet deserving the name. An example is his sonnet to Haydon. It is built up of the following rhyme: abba abba cde cde. The 2nd quatrains terminates in a full point, and the tercets in alternate rhymes lead happily to a noble conclusion. The German sonnet is far superior to the English in its form. Its thought content is as weighty. But whether the liberty-loving German never can lose himself within the narrow limits of this little gem of poetry, whether he lacks the capacity to reveal his emotions through the medium of nature, using images which are at once perfect in expression and which yet suggest something beyond what is expressed, whether he must reveal his feelings, if at all, directly, instead of thru a veil as the Englishman does, and can therefore not aspire to excel in any line of fine art except Music and lyrical poetry, this much is true: his sonnets fail to satisfy our artistic sense.
They fail to produce the mood that is the distinguishing characteristic of the Italian, the Spanish, the Portuguese and the English sonnets. And the story of the German Romantic sonneteer will go down in the history of literature, as tragic as that of the Master who had possessed himself of the body of a beautiful being, but who found, alas, that her soul had eluded his pursuit, and was safe in the presence of the angels.