

The Decline of the German Language: How Can We Save Our Classic Writers? (1897)

Abstract

In Imperial Germany, the decline of the German language abroad was regularly invoked. This lament reflected the desire to continue to define German cultural identity in the diaspora over generations. Yet the outrage over the loss of the German language showed above all that Germans were integrating into their new environments.

Source

“How Can We Save Our Classic Writers? A Word of Warning to Schiller’s Heirs in America,” by “Flamingo”

Heartrending is the lament heard from German-American school “men” about their charges’ aversion to the German language and German literature.

The good gentlemen—who, with refreshing humor, call themselves youth educators—would most certainly be able to counter this aversion if they focused their energies on the machinations of the Moderns, who, led astray of course by the wicked Frenchman Zola, dare sprinkle their vile poison onto all that is sacred: on marriage, property, and—hard to believe—even on the paternal system of government. Unfortunately, however, the armies of little boys and girls who can derive pure pleasure only from dime novels have even turned away from the great writers, who, though long decayed, have been expressly recognized by the authorities—even if somewhat reluctantly from time to time—as classical poets; poets who have given the upstanding German people the honorary title of being a people of poets and thinkers for all time, something that no Socialist Law, no police informer trials, no Brüsewitz can take away from them.

The proud hope of being able to create a particular German-American line of poets, as rich in talent as in character, and of being able to evoke the local patriotic enthusiasm of the younger generation—who, if not maturing, then at least are growing—seems to have but slim chances of being realized. Despite their classical endeavors, neither the upright rhyme-smith Kastelhuhn, with his poetic warning to Wilhelm Busch’s ripest creations:

“Midst the anarchistic crew,
Count me not, I beg of you,”

nor Chicago’s corpulent bard of the roast, Alexander Seebaum, with his noble efforts to collect the traditional jokes of forefathers in a sham paper that caters to corny humor, can completely replace the old classical poets. The question as to how we can save our classical poets remains open, as does the incomparably more important one: how can we save the German-American schoolmaster, who, even if not as successful as his glorified, pure-German colleague who won the Battle of Königgrätz with Moltke’s kind support, has nevertheless—to borrow from the delightful language of Berlin liberalism—engaged all his inestimable energies, just like the victor in the dear fatherland, in trying to sow respect for these original roots of divine cosmic order in receptive hearts on the other side of the sea.

In the midst of this quandary—it sounds fantastic, but it’s true just the same—a pious servant of the “Lord,”

bearing the unpretentious name of Zimmermann,^[1] has pointed out the only possible path to salvation. We, the people of Chicago, should feel special pride in being able to watch this multifaceted champion of God; for he is ours as much as the man with the splendid lackey's head, the fearless Wash. Hesing,^[2] who cannot be frightened by anything, not even the certain prospect of immortal ridicule.

The Reverend Zimmermann, his cheerful judgment wholly unclouded by expertise, has written a little book on literature in a German that cannot but evoke the purest delight in all children of German parents who, through a happy accident of birth, first glimpsed the gloomy light of day on American's sacred shores.

Thoroughly undaunted, Mr. Zimmermann ignores the lamentable rules of our pedantic language. He blithely bestows literary citizenship on expressions derived from a wondrous mixture of English and German—expressions like those that spice up the talk in Randolph Street beer halls—thus making his somewhat monotonous fare more palatable for readers accustomed to a diet of candy and whiskey.

Why not follow this example? Why not adapt the German classical poets to the mentality and visions of young German-Americans? Why not Americanize our great poets?

When the youthful offspring of German parents in America opens up—I nearly wrote “his”—Schiller, and finds Hector's moving farewell poem to Andromache on the first page, there is no question that he'll shrug his shoulders and close the book again.

What should he, whose heart swells for the only valid ideal in the land of the brave and the home of the free—the God of Gods, Mammon—what should he do with the “old Greek guys”? Why should Jay Gould's roguish admirer care about Hector's dumb but honest bravery or about Achilles' grim fury, which has no application in business?!

How different the effect on him would be if he were to read something like this:

Hermann's Farewell

Antonie:

Will Hermann really leave me for that land,
Where the wild Indian with unwashed hands
Swings his club and brandishes his spear?
When into that dark wood you disappear,
Who will be there to pour my wine,
Buy me ribs^[3] and bouquets so fine?

Hermann:

I implore you, dearest heart, your bloody tears to stay!
As for New York, I shall set forth this very day.
Tis they, my creditors, those vicious hoards,
Who drive me from your side, my native shores,
First as a millionaire, with funds to burn,
May I to Panke's^[4] verdant shores return.

Antonie:

Ne'er again shall we two meet on Panke's shore,
Your coat shall hang here limp forever more.

Your top hat shall lose slowly its proud form,
You go where Mormons honor treat with scorn,
Where not a word of German is e'er spoken,
Your love will die and I be left heart-broken.

Hermann:

In Yankee-land I plan much to forget,
All my dumb shenanigans and debts,
But my Toni shall remain within my heart.
The conductor shouts—the train will soon depart.
Hand me the bag and pray you, do not cry,
Hermann's love for you will not soon die.

Thus adapted and—why not say it right out loud—improved, Schiller would certainly find his way into the hearts of German-Americans.

So go to it, you in the United States of sun and fun, passion and fashion, aching and quaking, thieves and reprieves, rhyme like crazy by the sweat of your brows! Throw yourselves into the German classical poets, revise them, make them useful for today's youth! To the extent that my work on "The Decline of Intelligence, with Special Emphasis on Feature Articles in the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*" affords me the free time—a work which would actually demand the energy of a lifetime—I, too, am going to work in this direction; and indeed, I plan to shine as a local patriot: Indeed, given the bankruptcies we've seen in the past few months and the achievements of Chicago's city administration, I have chosen one of Schiller's early dramas: "Die Räuber."

Flamingo

NOTES

[1] Dr. G. A. Zimmermann was pastor at St. John's Lutheran Parish and superintendent of German instruction in the Chicago schools.

[2] Washington Hesing was the editor of the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*.

[3] A favorite food of Berlin café-goers

[4] Lovely (?) smelling little river (?) near Berlin

Source: *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 20. February 1897; reprinted in Hartmut Keil, ed., with the assistance of John B. Jentz, *Deutsche Arbeiterkultur in Chicago von 1850 bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Eine Anthologie*. Ostfildern: Scripta Mercaturae, 1984, pp.

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