

Jacob Grimm's: De Desiderio Patriae

Translated by J. J. Schlicher, University of Wisconsin

The well-worn saying which we hear so often, that where we are well off there is our fatherland, has always appeared to me to express a shallow and mischievous sentiment. For who would think it possible to change his fatherland as he would a garment and putting off the old, put on another, new and more beautiful? Just as within the family circle we love our wives, parents and children and hold them dear, not only when they appeal to us by their charm or dignity or when they have good health, but also when their bodies are perhaps deformed or marked by blemishes or by disease, just so in the case of the fatherland our affection for it is too great to be diminished by thinking of hard experiences which we have had in it or of ills that may yet come; yes, strangely, it is made even greater by these and acquires new strength from them. Truly, in the words of Cicero, all the bonds of our affection are contained in the one great love for our native land. It is a blessing bestowed on us by birth and deeply fixed in our minds and hearts, that the spot where we first saw the light and first drew nourishment from our mother's breast smiles on us like no other spot on earth; and if ever we are forced to leave it and to dwell in a foreign land, our hearts burn with a longing that cannot be satisfied. This longing will at times turn into a serious malady, which will torture the sick heart of man so long as he is kept apart and shut out from the land of his birth. We recognize the strength of this feeling in our language, which so often puts a deeper meaning into its words, when we call this longing for our native land "Heimweh." And a word which we use at present with less depth of meaning, the word "Elend" - in its origin it was "alilanti" - as we judge from its derivation and composition, meant simply absence from our country; and from this fact we may conclude that no evil seems harder to bear, no punishment more bitter, than

the lot of him who must live away from his native land. I cannot help quoting to you a passage from an ancient German poet¹ in which he complains of the hardship and misery of exile, bursting forth into words like these:

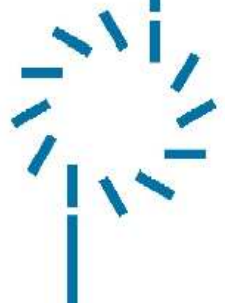
wolaga elienti
harto bistu herti
thu bist harto filu suâr
tha3 sagen ih thir in alawâr!
mit arabeitin werbent
thie heiminges tharbent
ih haben i3 funtan in mir
ni fand ih liobes wiht in thir
lovely;
ni fand in thir ih andar guat
good
suntar rô3aga3 muat,
sêraga3 herza,
joh managfalta smerza.

Alas, foreign land,
hard (very) art thou hard;
thou art very much heavy:
that I say to thee in all truth!
With difficulties struggle
who lack the fatherland.
I have found this so for myself:
I have found in thee nothing
I have found in thee no other
than a sorrowful spirit,
a heart full of care,
and manifold pain.²

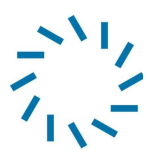
Since nothing then is more lovely, or binds us more closely than our native country, I trust that this little address will find some favor with you, for in it I wish to inquire somewhat more particularly into the sources from which this longing springs and the thoughts by which it is kept alive. I shall begin with the feeling of security, which cannot be greater anywhere than in one's own country. For we are said to be safe and secure when we have put our trust in a place or a people and fear nothing from them. But in what land on earth can we have a fuller confidence than in that where we grew up, on whose highways and by ways we have walked since childhood, in which we spent our youth - that sweetest time of

¹ The quotation is from the ninth-century cleric Otrifrid von Weissenburg [SPIN note]

² tr. W.F. Twaddell.



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life, which for its memories no other time can even remotely approach? There it is that hills and mountains seem to look at us with eyes, rivers and streams speak to us like intimate friends - things which the foreigner and stranger can never know. And what human beings can we feel so safe in trusting as those who have begotten us and brought us up, of whose tender love we have such clear evidences all about us? Is it not from those closely related to us that we can feel sure of help at all times when we are in danger or in trouble? Yea, from the graves of our fathers and mothers, whose bones lie buried in our native earth, come words of admonition, calling us to high endeavor. For we have a great possession in the memory of our ancestors, in our common worship, our common dead.

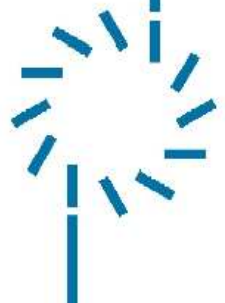
And from this feeling of security which we have mentioned is born an aptitude for doing all things that need to be done. Everyone observes the native vigor in Mother Earth, so kindly and generous in supporting us and making us strong. It was out of this observation that the imagination of the ancients produced that famous story of the Giants, to whom new strength came from their contact with the earth, out of which they had been born, and who, till they were withdrawn from this contact, could neither be conquered nor killed. Just so our native land and the deeds of our fathers sustain us and give us strength for all we plan to do, far more than we can say. There is no need to speak of epic poetry, which, unless it wells up out of its native soil is ever a poor thing and without savor, for even the history of other peoples gives us little true enjoyment except when that of our own people is interwoven with it. From this we can understand why it is that when we lose touch with our own homeland, all our efforts grow slack and have no issue, and why the lot of those is so sad who have been lured on by a vain hope to exchange their old land for a new one, or have been forced by necessity to leave the home where they were born, and from whose hearts while they sought a new dwelling place all memory of their native land has perished.

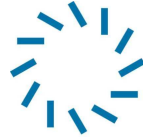
Surely, in nothing do we see more clearly how strong and close are the bonds of our native land than in our common

language, and though I am aware that in bringing up this well-known argument I can say nothing original or new which has not already been discovered by the industry of others, yet I like to occupy myself with it, because it is so closely connected with my own studies. And so, to say briefly and clearly what I think, it is my firm conviction that no race which neglects its mother tongue can ever be great, nor can a language ever attain excellence in a people which has lost its liberty. On the other hand, in the division of a language into dialects, or, to speak more truly, in the merging of dialects, we observe the historical evidence of a close and almost visible bond which holds the different tribes of a people together and makes them a nation.

In this we cannot but marvel at the guiding hand of Providence. For in the beginning we see a large number of tribes spreading over the land and a countless wealth of dialects in every part of the earth, not rude and undeveloped, but each in its own peculiar virtues, excellent.

We all know that the notion has long ago been exploded which saw in the speech of primitive times only the crude materials for a language and a shapeless confusion of harsh sounds. We now recognize two elements present in language, the one having to do with the objects of sense, the other with things spiritual, and also a twofold manner of development in speech, each with its own virtues and deficiencies. The earlier stage of growth in a language is characterized by the perfecting of supple inflections, it is rich in root forms which fittingly express those things and experiences which fall within the sphere of our external senses, and is, besides, well supplied with full and pleasing sounds. Later, when the inflections have become worn, many of the roots perish or fade, and the full vowels become thinner and less distinct and individual. Yet in this very shrinking of the body of the language, so to speak, its inner meaning and use seems to increase, and the number of particles and combinations, which formerly were not so needful, seems to





grow and increase constantly for the expression of subtler thoughts.

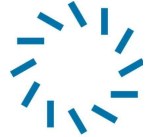
Now, indeed, the dialects, which had formerly grown apart, be it those of one and the same language or of different languages, tend to draw more closely together; and a number of them combine and unite to produce a single greater and stronger language. When this takes place, in the clashing of the dialects many features characteristic of the individual tribes disappear, and we may regret that the pristine purity of their speech is lost; but if we weigh the matter more carefully, we shall have to admit that the union of which we have spoken was necessary and good for the nation as a whole. So in France we see that the southern or Provençal dialect yielded to that of the north. This did much to help abolish the various small sovereignties which had established themselves within the country and to give France a predominating influence in nearly all the affairs of Europe. In a similar manner the English dialect prevailed over the Scotch in Britain and thereby added much strength to the union when the two kingdoms became one. And though in Spain Castilian triumphed over Catalan and Aragonese, it cannot be denied that it was an element of weakness, which often meant defeat, when Portuguese continued as a separate language.

But let us turn from these foreign countries to our own. Every people which is destined to play a leading role and to rise above other nations must not only grow into the full possession of the lands which justly belong to it, but must also unite in one family the individual tribes which compose it. And in this respect we see that Germany has not yet fulfilled her destiny. For though under the Saxon and Swabian kings our country might have developed a true national feeling and a close-knit union of its members, later in the long period of our weakness it suffered great loss from the fact that during the last four centuries the throne was occupied by the house of Austria. For this house, being outside of the center of German life and almost on its border, with more subjects of Slavic, Hungarian, and Italian than of German stock, as a rule paid little heed to the needs of our state, if

indeed it understood them. So it came about that the healthy, growing literature and language which had sprung up in our native soil during the thirteenth century gradually withered and died, and the Swabian tongue which had with such happy prospects spread over a very large part of Germany, became adulterated, and with it all our language lost its vigor and effect. In this slough of despond we remained sunk until the sixteenth century, when that divinely inspired man, Luther, whose piety was matched by the power of his eloquence and the charm of his speech, won back for us the heritage of our fathers and not only restored to us the simplicity and purity of the Gospel, but again set free the speech which had fallen silent upon our lips. For from that time on the High German dialect which he employed so honestly and conscientiously in the translation of the Scriptures became firmly established in its dominion, a thing to us more useful and more valuable than the conquest of many lands. And I do not think that any one will mourn the loss of the North German dialect if he has understanding and a true love for his country. For all the other dialects, falling short of the power and dignity of Luther's version, confined since then to the fireside and the common affairs of life, lack its sublimity of utterance and its true nobility.

But if we consider everything with care, we should not omit to mention a second reason why national feeling was so long at a low ebb among us. In bringing up this matter I am afraid that my views may perhaps be displeasing to you and may be understood in a way that I do not intend. So I shall at once freely say that the use of the Latin language by our ancestors long held back the growth of patriotic feeling, and, if I may so express myself, covered it with a thick skin. Now, it is characteristic of human affairs that just as no evil thoughts can be entertained without some good being contained in them, so our good and beneficial experiences are qualified and reduced in value by some admixture of what is bad and harmful. And while the introduction of this foreign language cannot be considered apart from an experience which greatly promoted



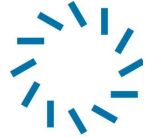


our welfare, we shall nevertheless regret that from the very beginning of our conversion to the true faith our own native tongue was not used in the services of the church, and even denied any share in them. For since the functionaries of the church and those others who were employed in the service of the State had from boyhood been educated in the church schools, it became customary to write not only chronicles and histories in Latin, but even new laws were always written in that language, with complete disregard of our own tongue, so that all doors were wide open for the gradual introduction of Roman law as well. What a great and almost irreparable damage was in this way done to our native language and to our national character and institutions during nearly the whole of the Middle Ages is too evident to require mention. And into this condition, serious as it was, no relief came from any quarter. For the Latin of that time was not drawn from a clear and perennial spring, but dripped grudgingly from the standing pools of ecclesiastical writings which offered very little to stimulate and form the mind. This condition of things was changed and much improved when, in the revival of learning, barbarism and ignorance were superceded by an acquaintance with the culture and learning of antiquity. And yet, while innumerable errors were thus banished, and a cure provided for many ailments, the whole of our unfortunate condition was so far from being remedied that in a way it was even confirmed and extended. For the scholars who day and night pored over their Latin volumes, were all but completely captivated by the charm and elegance of that foreign tongue and, despising their own, preferred to write Latin rather than German. While all those who were by disposition at all inclined to submit to this state of things preferred the Latin language so much that they wrote their books and composed their songs in it, how could our own language be developed and perfected, I will not say to the point of eloquence, but even for private use? And I am sure that they, who were thus venting their rage upon themselves, had little thought for their fame with posterity. For even now their prose and poetry alike are for-gotten while contemporary books written in the vernacular

though crude and unpolished in style and composition, still continue to hold their readers. The reason why those books are not more widely read is obvious. When we speak or write our purpose is to give free and full expression to that which we feel in our hearts and ponder in our minds. And this can be done only when all our words closely correspond to our thoughts and feelings and come spontaneously to our lips. If, in addition to this, we employ a foreign language, which no longer lives and breathes, innumerable words in it will needs be so many obstacles, since they will at best imperfectly express our thoughts in all their subtle variation and interlacing, and our speech will appear as if bound with chains. For those writers were imitators, they were not their own masters, and, without wishing it or even being aware of it, were in their speech only following the procession, and almost never said anything simply and naturally. In all their speaking and writing, so long as it was not in the vernacular, there was no warmth and no genuine life.

Let us therefore recognize with gratitude the services of those who by their genius and immortal works have now raised our native speech to that place of honor which is its due. We may now rejoice to stand upon the heights which the French and English have long before us reached. And we need not fear that with the use of Latin confined to its proper limits the studies which we call the humanities will suffer loss. If any one should entertain this fear I am ready with an answer. Certainly the Greek language, which is no less necessary for our studies is so warmly cherished by our people that we not only bestow much keen thought upon the investigation of its nature and quality, but also, through the continual study of its authors, share in the rich harvest which is stored in them, though we do not use the language at all in speaking or writing. And as for the study of Latin, I am confident that it will never disappear from our land, but rather that it will grow, if we devote more labor to its grammar and history, both of them fields still awaiting the clarification of generous study.





Source: Ernst Voss and J. J. Schlicher, *Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht* 27.5 (May 1935): 177-183

But our own language, which is the surest foundation upon which our state can rest, we must cultivate and perfect, and not doubt that the limits of its life and power will also be the boundaries of Germany itself. For in this time of turmoil and change through which there is forshadowed for us, whether we are aware of it or not, the passage from our traditional ways into a new order, we must hold fast the pure and holy love of our country, for while that love lasts we may even yet be saved, unless the anger of Heaven itself should be against us. Let us then be united in the common purpose to guard like men the honor and liberty to which we are born, with eyes afire and hearts beating high whenever we hear spoken the beloved name of our native land.



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