

Minnesang (Love Poems) and its Origin

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The formation of society has always been a two-way process – man formulated groups and then gave it a frame work of a certain form and ascribed it with a certain scale of references – which we call the moral and ethical rules; man formulated this for his security and protection, but then this same society has exploited time and time again these very restraints to control human action; man for society and society for man has been the process which we call ‘socialization’. Man has used many modes to ‘shape’ public opinion and through that society – for example art, music, literature. Each of them depicts a certain mood of the society and has been a faithful mirror of its time, the physical and intellectual environment has honed him and given him a certain direction. But then it is equally true that there have been certain ‘rebels’ and revolutionaries in each epoch, they have successfully broken away from the ‘accepted’ frame work of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ in order to let a window in the fortress of accepted thought be wide opened, so that new vistas may open out and reveal themselves and bring the air of new thoughts and possibilities incorporating change into the accepted pattern of social and intellectual thought.

Each period of human existence has produced its poets and artists, they have either earned the whole hearted sanction of the society or then total censure, in any case they have brought about change. Neither Martin Luther nor Protestantism were accepted tamely but their presence has been earth shaking. By the patronization of certain royal or intellectual groups, certain changes have been legitimized – like the new literary epochs that succeeded one another; on the one hand they brought about new way of thought into jaded and stagnant way of life and on the other hand by faithful mirroring of their social and intellectual environment, not only were representatives of their times but won also the acclaim of their peers thus legitimizing the wave of new thought that they represented. So on the one hand the poet or artist is demolishing an old order, on the other hand shows his contemporary how things stand. Here we shall try to examine literature, specially a particular form of it – poetry – and how and why it could have changed, briefly. How religious poem of the early German era gradually changed over in a period of 3 to 4 centuries.

Literature has often portrayed the positive and the normative forces – the aesthetics being the third aspect – sometimes what is and what ought to be may be diametrically opposite each other – as one may find in religious, metaphysical poetry of the old German era. Thus reality and imagination are the two sides of the same coin of human existence. Every literary reaction and counter-reaction has complimented this existence. Literature is at once general-voicing the opinions and picturing the majority – and individualistic and

revolutionary, portraying the dynamic process of change. These rebels in the sea of literary arrangements stand out like rocks – of course here we are not talking about the ‘ivory tower’ kind of literature which is neither realistic nor dynamic, it could be brilliant or scholastic but merely rhetorical.

Christianity has been at once a great political force as well as a sort of container in which to let out the stream of religious fervor. Christianity came to the Goths in the east much before (Ulfi and his *Couds Argenteus*) it came to Central Europe – possibly because the Goths who were ‘settled’ folk and hence civilised and more ‘amenable’ to newer trends of thoughts than the warring central European tribes – geographically too the Goths were closer to the middle east where Christianity originated. So Christianity not only was a great religious force but also a great political force when the kings accepted it and took the responsibility of proselatising it – in general it was the greatest unifying force of that time. This unity of political alliances, social stability and religious unity arrived in Central Europe with the advent of Christianity. The pagan gods of the warring tribes who had seen them hitherto through thick and thin began occupying lower places of honour and gradually fell back altogether. The chiefs and kings began solidifying their kingdoms by aligning themselves with the religious powers at Rome and acquiring their sanction. The Church at Rome was very powerful and is it a wonder then that religious fervor of new converts should pervade all spheres of literature? Except for the now extinct ‘Heldenlieder’ (Heroic songs collected and written down during Charlemagne’s time since before this these were a part of oral tradition) the ‘Edda’ and the “*Volksbuch*” nothing of that era of pre-Christian days remains. The two aspects of social life, i.e. the secular and the sacred were no two separate entities all that existed was sacred.

The new converts were very fervent and zealous, like all new converts are, and we see that their early literary arrangements were essentially religious, these were in poetry form and highly latinized – a more formal German linguistic form was lacking and the religious and formal language prescribed by Rome was Latin and hence this phenomenon. In a highly formal society with strong religious strictures, the passion and fervor of human mind finds its outlet in religious poetry. This particular character dominates this period; the powerful Church and Clergy tuned the early medieval society to this tune. There is only one woman who was glorified – of course in more personalised poems, since a bulk of poetry at that time was of a metaphysical and introspective nature – *Memento Mori* etc. – that was the virgin Mary, – we see ardent and worshipful praises addressed to her through *Mariendichtung Marienleben* by Priester Wernher (Augsburg 1172 A.D.) – and *Munchener Morgensegen* are both such kind of poetic arrangements. It is very interesting to see how this mood of worshipful ecstasy changed gradually with the passing of time – it, of course, did not strip the holy mother of her ‘worshipful’ dignity but elevated; the common woman to a place of honour and respect as a symbol of chastity and purity – all within 200 years!

When one looks at this basic change, one feels that certain historical occurrence might have been responsible for it. First of all with the death of Charlemagne and the slow

disintegration of his Empire, the strict religious tone of the society in general had begun to slacken somewhat. Charlemagne had been a highly religious man who not only worked in accord with the Pope, but named his Empire too as “Holy Roman Empire”, sent his favoured religious order missionaries – the Benedictines, who incidentally also happened to be the most scholarly besides being very determined – abroad, to spread the Gospel. He germanised Latin prayers to bring them to the common man, thus binding him too closely to mother Church. Religious strictures were strict during his reign. After his death, with the Otto Kings and the Hohenstaufen dynasties ruling, the strictness of the moral and religious code changed. It allowed a “chink in its armour”.

Secondly the literatures from other European countries in France and England had begun to infiltrate the German Cultural and literary scene. The Arthurian Romances of *Chretien de Troves* were sneaking in. They promoted the virtues of moral purity, loyalty piety and righteousness – they were akin to Christian virtues and were eagerly accepted, but then along with them crept in another factor, love of man for a woman which was also accepted by the society. Beautiful ladies and valiant knights heroes of the Crusades which has already begun, began to populate the literary scene. Worship and adulation also was by now offered to these beautiful women. The commencement of the crusades and the formulation of knightly orders might have been responsible for the tremendous popularity of these chivalrous Romances. “Romantic love” began to be accepted as a part and parcel of this chivalrous culture. Each crusader was a hero and to sing to his glory was the privilege of the society. Behind each hero, spurring him on, on his noble cause was a beautiful and gracious lady – a real or imaginary – from here began the elevation of woman – mortal and of flesh and blood – to this pedestal of glory, of adulation and worship. The holy land and the first holy Church was considered the Bride of Christ and the vindication of her honour the duty of each Believer. Since in this cause, a woman was the inspiration of ‘her man’, she too was ascribed with the same sacred value and the vindication of the honour of each woman the bounden duty of each knight. This worship on platonic basis gave rise to what is known as *Minnesang*. *Minne* was one of the seven virtues of a true knight, it was the quality to possess love, divine and platonic, *Sans Korper* for a gracious lady and one’s readiness to die for the sake of this *Minne*. The *Minnesang* comes to us basically from the Troubadour (minstrel), culture of France (Province). It greatly influenced the German social, cultural and literary life. Literarily, socially, politically, culturally and intellectually this ‘Chivalrous Era’ seems to be the high water mark of Germany. East, with the trade routes established for Europe, seemed to come closer and the world seemed to Shrink. Alexanderlied (song) Ronaldlied (song) etc., made their appearance on the literary horizon, above all Veldeke’s *Eneit*. The years between 1190-1220 boast of a truly glorious German literature. The three main arrangements were the recapitulation of past events in the *volksepic*, then the *Hofischepic* (courtlyepic) and the *Minnesang*.

The German literary language metamorphosed into a refined medium of expression at the hands of the masters of *Minne*. Every paradox and every nuance, of

solemnity and ludicrousness, mockery and anger to laughter were present. *Minnesang* was divided into two basic parts – *hohe Minne* (high-pure love) and *Niedere Minne* (lower non platonic love). *Minneklage* – lament of love, has also been added to *Minnesang*. The fourth and the last sub-variety of *Minnesang* and far from platonic is *Tagelied* which can be termed as *Abschiedslied* since it describes the despair at lovers' parting. We shall examine an example of each one of them below.

The first to subscribe for *Hohe Minne* was Friedrich von Hausen. Love and lament were the two aspects of his *Minnesang*. The poems that we shall examine here are of Dietmar von Eist, Heinrich von Morungen and Walther von der Vogelweide.

Reinmar von Hagenau took the art of *Minnesang* right upto Austria and Vienna, he prefers to imagine the subject and events of his writing rather than choosing them from life's Canvass.

Uf der linden obene dā sanc ein Kleinez vogellin – writes Dietmar von Eist –
'Upon the Linden tree Sang a little bird, the forest was lovely and once again my lonely condition (loneliness) seems to be clear (ly apparent) to me. The blooming Rose reminds me of a woman. *Es dunket mich wol tūsent jār das ich an liebes arme lac* – It seems to be a thousand years since I lay in the arms of my beloved. I have been left alone for a long time for no fault of mine. At such moments I see neither the blooming rose nor hear the bird song any more – *Sit was mir mīn frōide kurs und ouch der jāmer alzelanc* – Then my joy is so short and my misery so prolonged.

This is a typical example of a love-lorn unfortunate. The poem is introduced on the note of perfect harmony of nature, bird song in the otherwise hushed woods. It is spring since we see the blooming rose and the bird song both representing spring – the surroundings bring to life a deep and passionate longing in his heart for his beloved's presence and her embrace which he has not experienced – he counts her absence in thousands of years – for a long time. Once he begins to miss her the surrounding beauty the heady bird music hardly makes any impact on him. He only laments that his sorrows drown his short lived joy. She is not physically there but only in memory and thought. It can be termed as *Minneklage*.

The second poem by him is different in nature. It can be termed as a perfect *Tagelied* or *Abschiedslied*. He says that the little bird has warned us by waking us, that morning is here. He would rather bear all the pain and spare her it. His pain at their imminent parting is to be found in the last four lines of the poem – where he says :

'Lady (beloved) you begin to cry,
You ride away and leave me alone
When will you come back to me here,
for you lead away my joy with you
That he will never be happy again until and unless
she returns to him.

The poem by Heinrich von Morungen talks about the goodness of his lady love – he begins the poem by saying *Ich bin Keiser âne kröne – wor ir lîbe, diu mir sanfte tout*. ‘I am king without a crown and of no country’ – yet I am a king, ‘because she believes in me’. He thanks her for her sweetness and begs permission to always serve her. She is so good, he wishes that others would also find such noble ladies to serve. As one may notice, there is no mention of love, it is passionate gratitude on his part for the trust she has in him, and he only wishes for one favour, her permission to serve her. He pities those men who are not discerning enough and find even others not so noble worthy of serving.

The last stanza sort of makes a ‘volte face’ and starts talking about loves’ lament. He says that his heart is heavy within him due to unrequited love – he says ‘it comes through loves’ suffering’. He says that he can’t recognise himself any more. ‘I have become a stranger to him who was in my stead (myself as I was) before – Surely there must be a ground for this madness’. His choice of words (he who served for me (myself) he says) his lady love so far beyond his reach; he begs to be understood. But strangely behind his very passionate and human pleas there is a ‘religious’ fervor, religious, for it is the fervor expressed for his love’s goodness and virtue which are qualities divine and not for the beauty-physical or her graces – social, which are qualities human. It is the moral virtue in her that he adores and worships. His yearning is death-like in its totality – this yearning is typical of *Hohe Minne*.

Walther von der Vogelweide is quite a versatile poet, he writes on abstract philosophical topics like the virtues necessary to lead a happy life and he also writes some of the most tender love poems full of youth’s loving ecstasy and sweetness.

In the first poem, *ich saz ûf eine steine, und dahte bein mit beine* he tries to analyse the three virtues that make life good. Honour and goodness, covered with the grace of God are ideal he says but he is afraid that if one serves honour, goodness may be ignored and vice-versa, a golden medium – *mâze* – is hard to maintain. Though a most prized virtue of the knightly culture. He feels that striving for it is important because he feels that since disloyalty is the mood of the society and extortion rife on the pathways of life, all the three graces don’t find space in the human heart, but the warns against this dangerous trend and warns that ‘without all the three together, the remaining two will not make a happy union’.

His other poem given here is purely a Lovers’ poem, *under der linden, an der heide, dâ unser Zweier bette was*. He gives the vivid description of their flower bed on the Heath – ‘you will know where it was’ he says, ‘because the flowers and grasses are all trampled there’. *dâ mugt ihr vinden schöne beide, gebrochen bluomen unde gras*. With the presence of her love (since this is a poem through the mouth of a girl) and the nightingale, saying subtly that it was night time. She was ecstatic *Selic (selig)*, he makes the girl say.

'How red my lips are' she says, 'with the thousand kisses of my lover on them'. *Kuster mich? Wol tûsentstunt: seht wie rôit mir ist der munt*. She is thrilled by the bedsted of flowers that her lover has made. But she is not devoid of feminine modesty for she says how ashamed she would be if anyone were to come that way. Her passionate desire is that no one should know that they were there but the two of them and the little bird.

The purity, the healthy love and the joy of life and love together seems to pour out from every word-one involuntarily feels a smile of indulgence coming to one's lips.

Walther von der Vogelweide – his ladies are neither the unattainable ones of Morungen nor the unreal ones of Reinmar, he does not lament love like Fiedrich von Hausen nor plead like Dietmar von Eist for the love of his lady. He was the first to revolutionaries *Minne Sang* from the courtly platonic love to a personal and passionate love. He believed that *Minne ist sweier hersen wunne* (love is a wound of twin hearts). His *Minnesang* is a compromise between *Hohe Minne* (because of the purity of thought) and *niedere Minne* (because it is personalised and talks of human passions and love). It is balanced between *Liebe und Minne*. He freely talks about the rapture of love between man and woman.

Walther wrote also some political poems through his *Spruchdichtung* : He lived around 1170.

The 'Golden Period' between approximately 1190-1220 seemed to come rapidly to an end. The late medieval period saw the end of the crusades, the decline of the knightly order and the courtly Romance and the rise of *Burgerliche Kultur*. Unfortunately this stupendously prolific literary period changed over a new leaf too soon. German literature with the exception of Martin Luther – had to wait 500 years before Lessing's era and a new leaf of history in Golden letters could be written.

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