

# **THE LITERATURE OF GERMANY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649287680

The literature of Germany by J. G. Robertson

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# THE LITERATURE OF GERMANY

BY

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NEW YORK  
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY  
LONDON  
WILLIAMS AND NORGATE

PT99  
R54L

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## INTRODUCTION

It is not perhaps for the literary vendor to praise the wares he has to lay before his readers, even when, as in the present case, these wares are a literature to which he only undertakes to act as a guide; but a word might be said here in plea for a better understanding of the subject to which the following pages are intended to provide an introduction. There is a certain feeling abroad in modern England—a feeling which was, however, not shared by older generations—that the literature of Germany is of subordinate value, that it is less worthy of study than other modern literatures; that it possesses a more limited range of immortal works essential to the general culture of mankind. This is noticeable in the small output of books dealing with German poetry in England, in the inferiority of our English translations from the German compared with those from the French, Italian and Spanish; in the consequent neglect of even the masterpieces of this literature in

our many collections of universal literature for popular consumption, and in our general ignorance of what the Germans are thinking and doing in the world of letters.

Comparisons between one literature and another are difficult and not always desirable ; we do not propose to infringe on the province of individual or national taste by trying to institute any such here. Nor do we wish to dispute the fact that German literary history presents a record of broken and often unrealised endeavour ; that its development is irregular as that of no other modern literature in Europe ; that its appeal in even its best works is frankly a national one rather than a cosmopolitan one. But there is one claim we would make for this literature, a claim which this little book will try to justify, namely, that German literature is an essentially modern literature ; by which we mean that, in its entire range, from early mediæval times onwards, it is in peculiarly close touch with the thinking and feeling of to-day. The reason for this quality is to be sought in the overweening, even one-sided, individualism of German poetic art ; it deals more persistently and constantly with the individual human soul than with the external world ;