

HEINRICH ARMIN RATTERMANN:
 GERMAN-AMERICAN POET,
 1832-1923

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On October 14, 1832 one of the finest citizens in German-American circles was born as the son of a carpenter in Ankum, near Osnabrueck, in the northern part of Germany. When Heinrich Armin was eighty years old and reminiscing, he wrote:

O fondest place where I was given birth,
 From which the fates coerced my early going:
 Yet, Ankum, my faith in thee keeps flowing,
 E'en in this so strange and distant earth.

(Translated by Fred Karl Scheibe)

When Heinrich was fourteen years old he left the village school. To his teacher Moellenbrock, who was a great inspiration to young Heinrich, he set a fine poetic monument which ends with the line, "Dir, Heinrich Moellenbrock, hab' ich's zu danken!"

In 1845 the Rattermann family (formerly Rathermann) emigrated to America. It took two long months on the "Hermitage" to cross the Atlantic. On October 14th they landed in Baltimore with the other 128 passengers. The family went directly to Cincinnati, queen of the West. Heinrich could not continue his studies because his father, a very practical German, said that the boy should help earn his keep. He was fortunate enough to meet the wife of his employer who took the bright boy under her wing and taught him to read and write English. In America he worked as a butcher, laborer in a brickyard, and waiter. Heinrich preferred his job as a waiter in Louisville since it enabled him to make fruitful acquaintances with educated Germans.

An aunt of his discovered his talent for drawing and promptly sent him to art school. When his father heard of this he strongly disapproved and Heinrich had to discontinue his art studies. Soon thereafter, however, his father died and Heinrich, being the eldest of three children, had to provide for them. He had learned to work with hammer and plane and had no difficulty in obtaining a good job as a carpenter. While providing for his charges he put a small amount of his wages into savings and when he had accumulated enough money, he registered at a business college where he studied accounting and related subjects. A few years later, after having worked successfully as an accountant and business advisor, he became the founder and director of the "German Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Cincinnati", a position he held for the remainder of his life. He also studied law and

conducted a legal practice for several years.

As editor of the monthly magazine *Der deutsche Pionier*¹ Rattermann came into personal contact with well-known German-American poets. Among these were Theodor Kirchhoff, Kaspar Butz, Conrad Krez, Ernst A. Zuendt and Gustav Bruehl. Heinrich Armin also made friends with physicians, naturalists, statesmen, and artists. Because of his fondness for music he became one of the founders of the *North-American Saengerbund* and organized many great music festivals.

When Johann Bernhard Stallo, Cincinnati philosopher, lawyer, and statesman accepted the post of ambassador to Italy, Rattermann lost his best friend and advisor. It was Stallo who had taught him how to collect and organize historic material. Heinrich made long trips to gather historical data, writings, and letters pertaining to German immigration. A. B. Faust and a host of others have used Rattermann's historic collections as a basis for much of their research. It is interesting to note that Rattermann considered himself a collector of historic materials and not a historian since he felt he did not possess the ability to organize the collected materials into a meaningful presentation. Nevertheless, Rattermann's investigations were vital and we thank him today for his important efforts. Among the noted historians who have recognized Rattermann as a leading researcher in the field of German-American studies are Otto Lohr and A. E. Zucker.²

Rattermann was a passionate fighter for the use of the German language in Cincinnati's public schools. The German element at that time was so strong in this city that anyone who spoke against the "Zweisprachensystem", i.e., that English and German were to be taught on equal terms, would have had little chance to be elected to public office.

It seems to be somewhat presumptuous on the part of certain literary critics to describe the poetry of Heinrich Armin Rattermann as dead, sentimental, and unfeeling. Of course, if one approaches his poetry purely from the standpoint of a modernist, we may well come to accept these conclusions.³ It is important to study a poet from within the period in which he lives and consider the influences to which he was exposed. Time and space are very important here. Rattermann was born when the literary movement known by the name of "Junges Deutschland" made its appearance and with it began the epoch of journalism. Romanticism which, in its narrower sense, had come upon the German scene with the publication of the literary journal "Athenaeum" in 1798 was coming to a close and a new generation projected a different Zeitgeist. This development, however, took time. Several literary movements ran parallel to one another. Grillparzer, Kleist, and Hebbel could not entirely break away from the influence of the classic poets, mainly Goethe and Schiller. Nevertheless, a new dawn

had risen and revolutionary literary movements in the latter part of the past century made their disturbing and challenging appearance.

These movements which dealt with heredity, poverty, insanity, revolt against authority, sex, and many other themes were but little understood by the German immigrant groups in America. Even great writers such as Zola, Strindberg, Ibsen, Hauptmann, Wedekind and many others were not accepted, nor were they understood by the Rattermann immigrant generation. Even in Germany, for example, one critic called a play (*Familie Selicke*) by the Naturalists, Holz and Schlaf a comedy of animal sounds. Had Rattermann lived thirty years or so longer and had he viewed Gerhart Hauptmann's plays from *Vor Sonnenaufgang* to *Der Bogen des Odysseus*, I believe that he would have revised his judgment of some of the leading modern poets. In Rattermann's epic "Vater Rhein", sonnet No. 50, he writes:

A doll should never be a wedded wife
Of a German man, for whom he's pining;
It is the equal partner whom he's alining,
Who shares with him the joys and grief of life.

(Translated by Fred K. Scheibe)

It should be obvious that Rattermann was familiar with Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in which the right of a woman to be the equal partner of her husband is defended, and Rattermann believed in the integrity of that right. Indeed he was modern in his political and social reasoning.

True, Rattermann wrote in the style of the middle of the 19th century, but, then, this would be quite normal for a German immigrant in America. Heinrich believes in the classical form of poetry. He writes:

Jedoch Gedanken
in Formenschränken
Zusammen ranken...
(Vol. 4, page 126)

In other words, one's thoughts should harmonize and be cast within the limits of rhyme and meter. His greatest and perhaps most beautiful work is his epic "Vater Rhein" which is written in 130 sonnets. Some of these are very beautiful and contain true poetic feeling and expression. Thirty-eight years of Rattermann's life were devoted to this work of love; of course, with lengthy interruptions. "Vater Rhein" relates the history of this great stream. Poetic unity is achieved by "Vater Rhein" himself who presents us with a kaleidoscopic picture of its varied history. In the fifth sonnet the poet refers to Walther von der Vogelweide's poem "Under der linden an der heide":

Away, my wanderlust won't let me stay
 Through mountain ranges eagerly departing,
 From rocky cliffs the bearded pines are smarting
 As if they knew that I was on the way.

Here Vaduz anchored on a palisade
 Where courage bold and sweetest love were searching,
 Encourage castle-maiden's coy emerging:
 With loving heart knight Ulbricht wooed the maid.

From far away we hear the rumors flying
 In Bozen land we hear a bridal cooing:
 "Under the linden tree upon the meadows".

Her reddened cheeks with pious shame are vying
 When "Frauenlob" seeks death in raptured wooing,
 Dame Venus plots to lure him in the shadows.

(Translated by Fred Karl Scheibe)

In the fourth volume of Rattermann's works which contains his aphorisms, we find his contemplations on reason and knowledge, literature, poetry, history, art and aesthetics, love and justice, statecraft and politics, as well as citizenship and its responsibilities.⁴ There is enough material here for someone to write a series of enlightening articles.

It is most unfortunate that volumes 13, 14, and 15 have remained unpublished. Rattermann tried to obtain financial assistance from German-Americans as well as the German government, but to no avail. Rattermann in his old age could be called a tragic character, although this did not deter him from striking out against fate and doing whatever he could to finish as much of his collected works as possible. It was at this difficult time when his eyesight was failing him and his hearing caused him difficulties. He had the plates for the above mentioned volumes melted down in order to finish printing at least twelve of the planned fifteen volumes. The loss to our generation is great.

Rattermann reminds one of Hans Sachs, the Nuremberg shoemaker, meistersinger, and poet. He was despised, laughed at and quite forgotten until Goethe honored him by writing a fine article on him and employing his "Knittelvers" (with some variations) in his "Urfaust." The great German-American bard sings no more, nevertheless, every decade that passes will add to his fame.

FOOTNOTES

1. In 1868 Rattermann and several of his colleagues founded the *Deutscher Pionier Verein*. In 1879 the first issue of *Der deutsche Pionier* appeared. Rattermann edited it from 1874 to 1885. The magazine comprised 500 to 600 pages annually and ran for eighteen years. In it appeared historical essays, biographies, original poetry, literary criticism, sketches, discussions on music, politics and social events as well as editorials.

2. In his illuminating article, "Heinrich Armin Rattermann--German-American Poet and Historian" (*The American German Review*, Oct. 1939, 13-15) Zucker compares Rattermann's work to that of the great historians Justus Moeser and Leopold von Ranke.

3. See H. Willen's stark criticism in his doctoral dissertation, *H. A. Rattermann's Life and Poetical Work*, (University of Pennsylvania, 1939). Sister Mary Spanheimer qualifies Rattermann as one of the most talented of the German-American poets. See her doctoral dissertation, *Heinrich Rattermann, German-American Author, Poet and Historian, 1832-1923* (The Catholic Univ. of America, 1937).

4. Rattermann's collected works are: Volumes I and II: *Oden, Balladen und vermischte Gedichte*; Vols. IIIa and IIIb: "*Spaetherbst-Garben*". *Denksprueche und Raetsel in Prosa und Versen*; Vols. VI and VII: "*Bluethen und Stachelfruechte*". *Epigrammatische und Satyrische Dichtungen*; Vol. VIII: *Denkreden und Vortraege* (Contains "Shakspeareana", "Musiker-und Kuenstler Biographien"); Vol. IX: *Denkreden und Vortraege aus der deutschen Literaturgeschichte von Opitz bis Geibel*; Vols. X-XII: *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Biographikon und Dichter-Album der ersten Haelfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*; Vol. XVI: *Abhandlungen, Vortraege und Reden*. An extra volume was also published under the title: *Nord-Amerikanische Voegel in Liedern*.

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