GERVINUS GEORG GOTTFRIED

THE ART OF DRINKING

Georg Gervinus

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Georg Gottfried Gervinus
The Art of Drinking / A Historical Sketch

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

G. G. Gervinus (1805-1871) is recognized as one of the foremost historians of Germany. He was a man of marvelous erudition. His fame rests not only upon a great number of profoundly learned works, but also upon his brilliant advocacy of the constitutional rights of the people, as against the reactionary tendency of the German princes during Metternich's despotic rule. He was one of the seven celebrated professors of the University of Göttingen who boldly protested against the violation of the Constitution by the King of Hanover. His best-known works are "History of the Poetical Literature of the Germans," "History of the Nineteenth Century," and a voluminous commentary on Shakspeare, "made popular in England" – as the Encyclopædia Britannica states – "by an excellent translation."

The following sketch was designed by Gervinus as an outline of what a history of potology would be, if conceived and executed by a philosophical mind.

An English translation of this sketch needs no justification in our time.

A sketch of the art of drinking might seem to announce a subject unworthy of a man whose energies have been devoted to earnest purposes and serious aims in life. But it is not my intention to make the sketch a mere treasure-box of all sorts of curiosities, nor to gratify thereby the curiosity of idle readers. When it is approached from a scientific standpoint, the dignity of science must necessarily exclude all frivolous treatment, as well as all shallow and superficial purpose. Many would be satisfied if an insignificant sketch of this kind simply bore some pathetic motto, as these words of Seneca's: Animum aliquando debemus relaxare et quibusdam oblectamentis reficere; sed ipsa oblectamenta opera sint. I, however, would scorn a justification of this kind, for I hold that recreation ought to be recreation, and not work, and should consider it far better if our labors were pleasures, rather than our pleasures, labors.

I wish in this sketch to point out the importance and serious significance of a work of this sort, and shall have, above all, to prove that the apparently somewhat jocular subject has a very serious side, and may be contemplated from a grave standpoint.

If I succeed from the very first in inducing the reader to adopt the same historical view of the matter that I take myself, I shall have gained a great point, for he will then lay aside all prejudice and preconceived opinion. The real historian must be a stranger to all prejudice and preconceived opinion; he cannot treat of any subject separately, but is attracted by everything in a certain order and connection. He must not choose any subject from personal inclination, but according to the needs and demands of his time and of human society; nor must he treat the chosen subject with that pathological interest and sympathy so common among the writers of the New World. He must understand and know, from historical experience, that in times like ours, which have outgrown the activity of imagination – that is to say, *Art*– and, on the other hand, are not yet ripe for speculation – that is to say, *Philosophy*, – universal observation, which includes all departments of human activity, is the only thing that in these very times and for this generation can furnish positive information and prove a certain gain. The real historian, whose profession it is to be equally interested in everything, thus becomes an image of impartiality. The impartial observer is attracted by all phenomena, and to him nothing appears small, insignificant or unimportant, as soon as he begins to draw conclusions from his observations and to discover laws in the physical as well as the moral world. In the world of reason there exists nothing small, accidental or unimportant. If the same laws of chemical combination govern immense masses of matter as well as the smallest atom, if the march and development of

mankind are the same as those of the most insignificant individual, the observation of the smallest as well as the greatest is of equal importance, and man may well feel comfort in the fact that each hair upon his head is, indeed, numbered. This alone might refute any serious objection to my theme.

A history of oinology or potology would be able to show that man, in satisfying a partly physical and partly intellectual desire, is bound by the same laws that govern him in the satisfaction of the highest needs of his striving mind. And if this be the case, the theme might be considered worthy of being chosen by the most severe scientific moralist; and matters of this kind are apt to be overlooked only because other things appear comparatively more important. There is a history of wine and wine-drinking (for of these alone I speak), because it is connected with our spiritual development. Wine itself shows a certain element of development and perfectibility – a relation to organic life in its fermentation, and a sympathetic feeling, as it were, in its movement during the period of the blooming of the vine, while in the plant itself it shows an inner development. I have just called wine-drinking a partly physical, partly intellectual enjoyment, and it is almost impossible to call up the image of any social gathering or entertainment without it. And since all human culture proceeds from the manners and forms of society and social intercourse, we would plainly see in such a history – what has often been divined and pointed out, but also frequently smiled at – that wine is most closely connected with the civilization of States and with the development of free human culture, and that the art of drinking at all times keeps step with this culture and development, and sinks or rises with them. For not at all times have men practiced this art with equal wisdom, nor yet even practiced it in like manner; and there is spiritual progress from the blood-thirsty revels of Ægisthe to those of the philosophers with Plato; from the cup-bearer Hephæstos to Hebe and Ganymede; from the heavy, dull metal cup to the transparent, rounded crystal glass, in Lucian's time, or our own, which shows the color, retains the perfume and promotes sound. *As the culture of the grape is only found where a higher human civilization has begun to develop, it also shows itself at once where a new civilization appears; it may be even in regions unfavorable to it, where it is only cultivated till wine has become so great a want that it can no longer be dispensed with, despite the lack of sufficient native production.* The first cultivators of the vine, history praises as benefactors of mankind and propagators of civilization. Noah was the elect of God, in spite of the improprieties produced by his wine; old Dionysos, for all the ravings of his service, a kindly god; and Urban, of the Middle Ages, a saint, although he committed the greatest misdeeds under the influence of wine. And wherever, on the other hand, in more enlightened history, a man took an active part in the development of human civilization, he did so also instinctively, it would seem, for that of wine – be it a Heracles Ipoctonos among the Erythræans; or an Alexander, who, with his Greek culture, brought the grape-vine back to hot Babylon; or a Charles IV., who, with his Italian education, wished to force it upon cold Bohemia. We shall see that wherever hierarchical constitutions deprived the people of the advantages of education, the wisdom of the priests was subtle enough to forbid wine too, and the course of the Mohammedan hierarchy will show us most plainly how the art of drinking brought with it bold reformatory deviations from the laws. We shall observe, even with Christian nations, how, among certain races where the use of wine was confined to the Communion table, civilization also came to a stand-still. We can then point to a patriarchal and heroic period of the art of drinking, where wine, as was formerly done by the Gauls, and even by our own Suabian ancestors, was despised, and afterwards, by all sorts of artificial means, made more substantial than it is by nature – more like mead or beer, which is at such periods the natural drink of the people. At an aristocratic and knightly epoch, in which society is unnaturally sublimated, it is sought to increase and make more spiritual still the effect of wine also, by the addition of spicy herbs. With the first civil development of nations they return to simple nature; a number of corporations and brotherhoods make it their business to watch over the art of drinking, over the purity of the wine itself, and its lawful use; from king to beggar, all cultivate the cheering art, just as all are anxious, also, for spiritual enlightenment. We see, then, in the last centuries the pedantic return to tea and coffee, and among those nations who have shared but in very small measure in the intellectual progress of

Europe, we find that the coffee-house (café) – an institution which is scarcely a century and a half old – almost crowded out the wine-saloons.

I have alluded to wine-drinking as a partly intellectual and partly physical enjoyment. Among material enjoyments, it is one of the most spiritual; among spiritual ones, one of the most material, keeping about the right middle course. A history of the art of drinking would prove this. Everywhere in the history of nations we shall come upon times where amid a fulness of physical power, the desire for more refinement in outward life, as well as a striving for greater inner perfection, began to manifest itself. In Germany, the time of the Reformation was such a period. And at such times, when outer and inner powers begin to stir with wonderful energy – times as yet divided between old roughness and new humanity; between the coarse, ordinary fare of every day for mind and imagination, and the new hope of some finer nourishment – at such times the genial enjoyment of wine, and the delights of regular social pleasures, have always struck deepest root and had freest play. Such images as those, this history would most willingly depict; nor would it be superfluous to present them in our day, when society seems more and more to forget that its aim is to be simply pleasure and recreation. The future seems to offer nothing that could take the place of the great simplicity of past manners; of those feasts of youth which asked nothing but uncontrolled enjoyment; of those evening entertainments of the citizens, which were devoted to their immediate surroundings in house or community; of the frank and manly rectitude of that race which seemed, indeed, to find truth and constancy in wine, and its best pleasures in an afternoon spent in the "wine-garden," surrounded by wife and children, relatives and friends. All public pleasure has disappeared from among us, and we arrange parties and receptions that only tire ourselves and others. Ceremonious etiquette gives us work and trouble when we should find recreation, and fatigues our minds when imagination should have free play. Only where men, here and there, permit themselves to meet about the bottle, according to the good old custom, and where no committee is necessary to approve of the toasts, pure, genuine pleasure revives once more, together with the pure, genuine art of drinking. For there is no intellectual power that is so directly quickened and strengthened by any nourishment as imagination is by wine. Tea keeps conversation within the bounds of pedantic propriety, and beer soothes but checks quick repartee; but wine sharpens the sting of wit, stimulates spirited conversation, and brightens the whole social atmosphere. The poet, who lives in imagination, and turns his back upon reality, was always a lover of wine – the beverage which intensifies reality, and, at the same time, lifts him above it. The drinking-song, from Anacreon down to all his imitators in Germany, occupies a special and very prominent place in literature. To wine are dedicated the first productions of the tragic art; and to it has been assigned a particular dithyrambic measure, which a poet who should set water above wine could never soar high enough to make his own. And whosoever has any cause to turn away from the real world, and longs for the freedom of living in an ideal one, is fond of wine. If I wished to spoil my idyllic picture by satire, I should here name the converts and the monks; but I should rather call up the wandering beggar, whom want and hardship have made weary of the world. Sleep has been praised as the friend of poverty; but there were times when wine also was called its friend, which, even in waking hours, calls up dreams that charm away the burden of a miserable existence. For wine tempts even the beggar to extravagance, that vice which has often been set down to the account of wine; although, if there be such a thing as degrees in vice, it may be called one of the nobler ones. And this genial pleasure in spending helps the poor man in his misery; consoles him for his destitution; offers him who is homeless a spot where he may feel comfortable, and teaches him to forget all that oppresses him. Wine makes man liberal and generous; the offered cup was formerly the symbol of hospitality granted, and even the miser is more ready to share tobacco and wine than any of his other possessions. For it makes us communicative and confidential in social intercourse; it founds friendships, and is still the symbol of brotherhood. If it sometimes stirs up heat and dissension, it also smooths the way to union again; and, formerly, no reconciliation could take place without having a seal set upon it by a common cup of wine. At your cup you find the freest and most enlightened spot in the world, where

you may not only think what you please, and say what you think, but where your thoughts themselves take the highest flight man is capable of. I do not know whether it is due to jealous gods that the excessive enjoyment of wine proves its own penalty. Without this depressing fire in the wine itself, it seems to me heaven and its secrets would be far more endangered by the spiritual flight of the drinker than by the towering rocks of the Titans. Thus, wherever despots and hierarchs intended to keep nations in drowsy stupidity, they forbade wine. Only at times, when liberty and enlightenment were common property, when no castes possessed an exclusive monoply of wisdom, right or might, was it possible to introduce political discussion at the cup. For only at such times of universal public spirit and feeling could one take counsel of the imagination in practical affairs and matters of State, and hope for such results of the evening discussion at the cup as would bear the test of the sober next day's light. For only such heroic conditions as are represented by the Germans and Persians of ancient times can really show the virtues of truth and faithfulness, and in the most public concerns could hear the voice that always speaks in wine; and, in those days, no one needed to fear that wine would impel him to speak truth too freely. Only nations of really active nature, who called manliness and war-power by the name of virtue, could do full honor to wine, and it could only be a Greek who asked, as did Aristophanes: —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.