Modern

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis

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Contents

About this Title .................................................................................................................. 4
Translator's Note .............................................................................................................. 4
Modern ............................................................................................................................ 5
Notes ............................................................................................................................... 9
About this Title

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Translated by William Ashton Ellis

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[42]

Translator's Note

The article "Modern" originally appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter* for March 1878.
IN a pamphlet lately sent to me an "important Jewish voice" is cited, its words being given as follows:—

"The modern world must gain the victory, since it wields incomparably better weapons than the old world of orthodoxy. The power of the pen has become the world-power, without which one can hold one's ground on no domain; and of that power you orthodox are almost wholly bare. Your men of learning write finely, intellectually, it's true, but simply for their fellows; whereas the Popular is the shibboleth of our time. Modern journalism and romance have been captured entire by the free-thinking Jew-and-Christian world. I say, the free-thinking Jewish world—for it is the fact that German Judaism now works so forcibly, so giant-like and so untiredly at the new culture and science, that the greater part of Christendom is led by the spirit of modern Judaism either consciously or unconsciously. To-day, for example, there is scarcely a newspaper or magazine that is not directly or indirectly conducted by Jews."—

Too true!—A thing like that I had never read before, and thought our Jewish fellow-citizens were none too pleased to hear such matters talked of. But now that we are met with such plain-speaking, we perhaps may insert an equally candid word ourselves without the instant fear of being variously maltreated as ridiculous and yet most hateful persecutors of the Jews, and tumultuously hissed upon occasion. Perchance we may even be allowed to make clear a few fundamental terms to our Culture-purveyors—whose world-power we don't for a moment question; certain terms they may not employ in quite the proper sense, and upon whose explanation, if they really mean honestly by us, their "gigantic exertions" might have a good result for all.

To begin with "the modern world."—If this does not simply mean the world of to-day, the time in which we live—the "now-time," as it is so euphoniously styled in modern German—our latest culture-mongers must be thinking of a world such as never existed before: a "modern" world, unknown to the world at any previous epoch—: an entirely novel world in fact, which has nothing at all to do with the worlds preceding it, and therefore shapes itself by its own judgment to its good pleasure. In truth this world must now appear a wholly new, unprecedented world to the Jews, who—as a national body—still stood remote from all our cultural efforts just half a century ago; this world on which they entered so suddenly, and have appropriated with such increasing force. Correctly speaking, they should consider themselves the only novelty in this old world: avowal of that, however, they seem only too keen to avoid, and to want to make themselves believe that this old world of ours has suddenly become brand-new through their mere entry on it. To us this seems an error, which they really ought to diligently rectify,—always assuming that they mean honourably by us, and truly wish to help us in our decay, merely used and aggravated by them hitherto. Let us assume this unconditionally.—

Taken strictly, then, our world was new to the Jews; and all they undertook, to set them straight therein, consisted in the appropriation of our ancient heritage. This applies before all to our language—for it would be rude to refer to our money. Never yet has it happened to me, to hear Jews employing their pristine tongue among themselves; on the contrary, it has been a perpetual surprise to me to find in every land of Europe that the Jews understood German, though alas! they mostly spoke it in a jargon manufactured by themselves. I fancy this crude and illegitimate acquaintance with the German tongue—which some inexplicable destiny must have brought to them—may have been a peculiar obstacle to their proper understanding and true adoption of the German world upon their legitimation therein. The
French Protestants who settled in Germany after being driven from their home, in their descendants have become completely German; nay, Chamisso, who came to Germany as a boy speaking nothing but French, grew up to a master of German speech and thought. It is astonishing, how difficult this appears to be to the Jews. One might believe they went too hastily to work in the adoption of the wholly-alien, betrayed by just that unripe knowledge of our speech, their jargon. It belongs to another inquiry, to clear up the character of that falsification of speech which we owe to the commingling of the "modern" in our cultural evolution, particularly under the form of Jewish journalism; for to-day's theme we have merely to point to the many trials our language long had suffered, and how the brightest instincts of our great poets and sages had only just succeeded in restoring it to its productive individuality, when—in conjunction with the remarkable process of linguistic and literary development above denoted—it occurred to the flippancy of a consciously unproductive set of Epigones to cast adrift the irksome earnestness of their forerunners, and proclaim themselves as "Moderns."

Awaiting the original creations of our new Jewish fellow-citizens, we must protest that even the "Modern" is not their own invention. They found it as a weed upon the field of German literature. I myself beheld the early flowering of the plant. At that time it called itself "Young Germany." Its cultivators began with a war against all literary "Orthodoxy," by which was meant the belief in our great poets and sages of the previous century; attacked the so-called "Romanticism" that followed these (not to be confounded with the "journalism and romance"—!—of the "important Jewish voice" adduced above); went to Paris, studied Scribe and E. Sue, rendered them into a slipshod-showy German, and ended in part as [46] Theatre-directors, in part as journalists for the popular fireside.

That was a good commencement, and on such a groundwork, if only well supported by the power of the purse, with little trouble and no further ingenuity the "Modern" might be trimmed into a "modern world," to be victoriously set against an "old world of orthodoxy."

But to explain what this "modern" really means, is not so easy as the Moderns imagine; unless they will admit that it stands for a very shady thing, most perilous to us Germans in particular. That we will not suppose, however, as we are assuming that our Jewish fellow-citizens mean well by us. On the same assumption, are we then to conclude that they have no idea of what they say, and merely drivel? We deem it useless here to trace the history of the concept "Modern," a term originally allotted to the plastic arts in Italy to distinguish them from the Antique; enough, that we have learnt the influence of "Mode" in development of the French nation's spirit. The Frenchman can call himself "modern" with a peculiar pride, for he makes the Mode, and thereby rules the whole world's exterior. Should the Jews push their "gigantic exertions in common with liberal Christendom" to the length of likewise making a Mode for us, then—may the god of their fathers reward them for conferring such a boon on us poor German slaves of French fashions! Meanwhile the outlook is altogether different: for, spite of all their power, they have no approach to Originality, especially in the application of that force they vaunt as irresistible, the "power of the quill." With foreign plumes one may *decorate* oneself, as much as with the exquisite names under which our new Jewish fellow-citizens now present themselves no less to our astonishment than our delight, whilst we poor old burgher and peasant families have to content us with a paltry "Smith" or "Miller," "Weaver," "Wainwright" etc., for all futurity. (01) Foreign names, however, do not much matter; but our feathers must have [47] grown from our own skin if we do not merely want to deck ourselves, but to write from our heart with them, and so to write as thereby to gain the victory over a whole world—which had not occurred to any Papageno before. But this old world—or rather, this German world has still its originals, whose feathers yet grow without aid from cantharides; and our "important voice" itself admits that our learned men write "finely and intellectually," though it is to be feared that they soon will unlearn all their
little fine writing, under the perpetual contagion of Jewish journalism; already they speak and hold silence "self-talkingly," (02) just like that modern "pen-power." "Liberal Judaism" has nevertheless a "giant's work" before it, ere all the original parts of its German co-citizens shall have been entirely ruined, ere the plumes that have grown on our skin shall write nothing but plays on un-understood words, falsely rendered "bons mots" and the like, or even ere all our musicians acquire the strange art of composing without inspiration.

It is possible the Jews' originality will then reveal itself upon the field of German intellectual life to us as well, namely when no man understands his own words more. Among the lower classes, our peasants for instance, the care of giant-working Liberal Judaism has already brought things almost so far that the erewhile most intelligent can no longer utter a sensible word, "self-talkingly," and thinks he understands the purest nonsense.

Candidly, it would be difficult to anticipate much help for ourselves from the modern Jew-world's victory. I have become acquainted with earnest and gifted individuals of Jewish descent who, in the endeavour to draw closer to their German fellow-citizens, have really devoted much labour to thoroughly understanding us Germans, our speech and history; but these have turned entirely away from the modern world-conquerings of their former co-religionists, nay, have even made quite serious friends with myself for example. These few are thus excepted [48] from the "Moderns," with whom the journalist and essayist alone find full acclamation.

What reality may lurk behind that "orthodoxy" which the "important voice" expects to vanquish under convoy of the "Moderns," is not so easy to discover: I suspect that this word as well, so plumped upon our extant world of mind, is somewhat dimly understood, and used at random. If applied to Judaic orthodoxy, one perhaps might take it to mean the teachings of the Talmud, departure from which might not seem inadvisable to our Jewish fellow-citizens; for, as much as we know thereof, observance of those teachings must make a hearty companionship with us uncommonly hard to them. But it would not profoundly concern the German Folk, which liberal Judaism wants to help; and that sort of thing, well, the Jews must arrange with themselves. Christian orthodoxy, on the other hand, can really be no business of the liberal Jews,—provided their excess of Liberalism has not had them baptised in an hour of weakness. So they probably mean more the orthodoxy of the German Spirit in general,—a kind of right-belief in our stock of German science, art and philosophy. But this right-belief, again, is hard of comprehension, and certainly not easy to define. Some folk believe, while others doubt; even without the Jews a deal is criticised, disputed, and, broadly speaking, nothing right produced. The German, too, has his love and joy: he rejoices at the harm of others, and "loves to blacken the shining." We are not perfect. Let us therefore treat this as a fateful theme, which we had better leave untouched to-day; the same with "Popularity," which the "important voice" upholds as Shibboleth of our time. Indeed I pass this by with the greater pleasure, as "Shibboleth" inspires me with terror: for upon closer investigation of the meaning of this word I have learnt that, of no particular importance in itself, it was employed by the ancient Jews in a certain battle as means of detecting the tribesmen of a race they proposed, as usual, to root quite out; who pronounced the "Sch" without a hiss, as a soft "S," was [49] slaughtered. A decidedly fatal "mot d'ordre" in the fight for Popularity, especially with us Germans, to whom the lack of Semitic sibilants might be most disastrous if it ever came to an actual battle delivered by the Liberal-modern Jews.

Even for a minuter illustration of the "modern," these few remarks may prove sufficient. For the possible enlivenment of any member of our Patronat-Verein who reads these lines, I will therefore close them with a facetious rhyme that once occurred to me. It ran:

"In prudence let the old go moulder; (03)
superior persons all are modern."
Notes

Note 01 on page 6


Note 02 on page 7

"Selhstredend" for "self-evidently."—Tr.

Note 03 on page 7

"Modern," as a true German verb, means "to rot."—Tr.