

The World's Great Poems v. Virgil.

“OMPARISONS,” as Mrs. Malaprop would say, “are odorous.” Moreover, they are misleading, which is a much more serious charge to bring against them. It is a case of: “worse than a crime—a blunder.” Comparisons, therefore, between Homer and Virgil, as to their respective merits, that is, are to be avoided, though they have been made in the past, with all the cocksureness that distinguishes the literary critic, wherein, indeed, he surpasses even Lord Macaulay, of whom it was said—by one of his enemies: “I wish I were as cocksure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything.”

German critics, one may note, with that curious “contrariness” —otherwise “cussedness”—which distinguishes them, long ago pronounced *ex cathedra*, on the superiority of Homer over Virgil. And English critics, during the first half of last century, with that fondness for opinions, theological or other, “made in Germany,” which has characterized John Bull since “gospel light first dawned in Bullen’s eyes,” made profession of a similar faith, and anathematized all and sundry who should dare to differ from them.

However, *nous avons changé tout cela*. “Hans Wurst,” thanks to Kruger telegrams, and other similar trifles, is no longer beloved of John Bull, who has transferred his ponderous affections from his “Teutonic kinsmen”—less than kin—to his “natural enemies,” who are disposed to be more than kind. And, as a result, we no longer take our critical opinions, ready made, from Germany. Even in matters theological, there are signs that the pace “is too good to last.”

The reaction, however, so far as Virgil is concerned, set in many years ago. A writer, in volume xxiv of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, published in 1888, having stated that “Virgil, in ancient times, enjoyed unquestioned supremacy among Roman poets,” passes on to shew how “the German mind has always been more in sympathy with the art and genius of Greece than of Rome or Italy.” He proceeds: “In the present day the effect of this reaction,” against German influence, that is, “shews itself only in a juster estimate of Virgil’s relative position among the poets of the world.” Comparisons, in fact, are ruled out. Each has his own place, his own