

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Salzburg, July 1920.

IN Germany there is always a book which everyone is supposed to have read. This says almost nothing, of course, as to its merit. It even happens now and again to good books. Often, too, a writer toils for years in vain with works of growing importance to gain a success which, when he has at last despaired of it, some indifferent book throws into his lap. So it happened lately to Gustav Meyrink, a very remarkable writer, who oscillated between the style of Stevenson and the style of Conan Doyle. He seemed to laugh at the public, and, therefore, was not taken seriously by the public until he wrote *Golem*, a rough caricature of his own manner. During the war the book which everyone was supposed to have read was political—an attempt on the part of the Deputy Friedrich Naumann to please everyone, to mediate between the old Germany of music and philosophy and the new Germany of war and business, to dream of a German world-supremacy which was to rely chiefly on the spirit, and was only on occasion to avail itself of the help of force. It was, therefore, because it was as ambiguous as the opinions of the *petite bourgeoisie* that the book won the approval of all the members of that class. Immediately after the war, however, two books of a quite different kind came into notice. Two deeply-considered books which made the highest demands on the seriousness, the spiritual discipline, and also on the patience of the reader had such a rapidly-spreading success as is usually accorded with us only to works of fiction of the blandishing sort.

One of them is called *The Downfall of the West*, by Oswald Spengler. This title of itself fell in with public opinion, for if downfall is to be the fate of all the peoples of Europe, we shall be able to bear it more easily. Spengler is a professor; and his book is nothing if not the work of a German professor. It is professorial in its profound learning; it is professorial in the sureness with which the author makes use of and arranges the riches of his knowledge, imposes calm on the unruly mass of detail, and gives it order and shape. It is professorial in the solidity, strength, and strictness of its frankly Hegelian architecture. But it is professorial also in the audacity with which it stakes everything on a single card, on a single theory, on a single unproved and even unprovable thesis. And, finally, it is most professorial of all in this, against which Goethe could not too often warn the scholars of his time, that it elevates a fertile theory to the rank of a dogma. Goethe had much sympathy for any theory which allowed itself to be used as an aid towards the organisation of our knowledge. Science changes without intermission: new arrangements of our knowledge are always becoming necessary. Whoever puts up a new picture in his room is obliged to redistribute all the pictures he has, even perhaps to rearrange all his furniture. Every acquisition alters the aspect of the whole field. For such a reorganisation of knowledge, when the old order can no longer bear the pressure of new experiences, from time to time a new theory is needed, what Goethe was accustomed to call a fruitful *aperçu*. An *aperçu* is fruitful when it allows us to arrange what we know tidily, quickly, and conveniently. It has no more to do than to enable us to sort out the components of our knowledge, as we catalogue flowers according to the number of their stamens or letters under the names of their writers. But one should not attempt to make a picture of the world in strict accordance with one's *aperçu*; one ought not to think that the alphabetically-arranged letters are, on account of the arrangement, mystically related to one another. This error is one into which professors are apt to fall; and Spengler's book tends to lead the reader in this direction. If a reader takes it with scepticism, saying to himself simply, "Here is a very opportune and useful *aperçu*, if we employ

it to assist us in arranging the facts of world-history again in a quite new perspective. By means of it we can learn to see many things that before were hidden from us, just as in different lights we see differently either a landscape or a woman"—to such a reader this book will teach much; it will give him the highest intellectual pleasure. But it has had such a fatal success that for the most part the German reader takes it literally, in the belief that here he can read our future as in a horoscope, on the unsupported word of the author that "in this book an attempt is made for the first time to determine the future course of history." All history has then, above everything else, always the same theme that is always played by a new people. A young people always goes the eternal way from innocence to culture, and from culture to civilisation, which is the "ineluctable fate" of culture—its culmination, but also necessarily its end. Civilisation is always a sign that a certain way of life has been exhausted, and that it is time for history to look round for a new, unused way of life. Every way of life must express itself, realise its inner possibilities, establish itself in the world. In the moment in which this is accomplished culture becomes civilisation, is ossified, is turned into stone, and may in this condition continue in existence for hundreds of years, but is no longer alive. So may we also perhaps continue to exist for hundreds of years, but only in a state of petrification. For that we Europeans are no longer alive seems to the author to be proved, since he sees in imperialism a "typical symbol of the end." And thus he reaches the individual and very remarkable contribution of his book to our thought, to his entirely original conception of "contemporaneity," a conception which is most productive for the study of history and which, when one uses it, becomes most fascinating. In his sense of the word two things are "contemporary" when they express identical cultural situations. He adduces by way of example the manner in which the development of mathematics in the ancient world corresponds with the development of mathematics in modern Europe, and thus, for him, Pythagoras and Descartes, Plato and Laplace, Archimedes and Gauss are "contemporaneous." And so also to him in their art seem Polygnotus and Rembrandt, and so, again, Polykleites and Bach. In the same way he calls the Peace of Antalkidas in the year 386 before Christ and the Peace of Paris of 1763 "contemporaneous." In the advance towards culture and beyond it to civilisation there appear again at the same point of time the same forms of religion, art, politics, society, economics, and science which fulfil themselves in the same way, are extinguished in the same way and always bring forth men of the same kind. The Protestantism of the "Abendland" corresponds to the dionysiac religion of the ancient world, English Puritanism is in Europe the counterpart of Islam in the Arabic world. Spengler even dares to make the bold pronouncement that "the fourth century, beginning with Alcibiades—who has in him much of the imperial ambition of Mirabeau, Napoleon, and Byron—and ending with Alexander, is the exact representative of the period from 1750 to 1850, in which with profound logic the *Contrat Social*, Robespierre, Napoleon, the people in arms and Socialism succeed one another; while, in the background, Rome and Prussia prepare themselves for their parts in world-history. For it is also one of Spengler's dogmas that in the downfall of the *Abendland* Prussia (or Socialism, which is for him exactly the same thing) plays the same historical part as Rome in the downfall of the ancient world. It is precisely this unwavering adherence to the most radical scepticism that makes the chief attraction of his book. He doubts everything, for to him everything shows the characteristic marks of its period. From this judgment he exempts neither mathematics nor mechanics, not even logic. He says that what has hitherto seemed the self-evidently valid constancy of manifestations of mind is an illusion. But that this does not arise from an imperfection of human intellect, from the incompleteness of a process which will be completed, but is a fatal historical necessity—this is a discovery. Thus the reader begins to lose all consciousness of his own existence. And only one belief is left to him:

the belief in the dogma propounded by this book. And that is, perhaps, the principal reason of its otherwise well-deserved success.

The other German book, which at this moment everyone is supposed to have read, *The Travel-Diary of a Philosopher*, by Hermann Keyserling, is not at all professorial, not at all sceptical, not at all dogmatic. It is nothing but the expression of a soul. The blue eyes of a beautiful soul open here on the Oriental world, on the world of India, China, and Japan. This book is at times a monologue, at times a prayer, at times a fairy-story, and always the expression of a deep, introspective, and pure personality. For many years no book of so German a character has appeared, German in the old manner, in the manner of Goethe; and for many years no book so cosmopolitan has appeared. It rises above earthly things in a region in which the distinctions of races are silent, and only the simple rule of the good, the beautiful, and the true is valid.

The Keyserlings are an old Baltic family. One can read in Carlyle about Dietrich Keyserling, the friend of Frederick the Great, Voltaire's Cæsarion. In the house of another Keyserling Kant wrote one of his works. Alexander Keyserling was the dearest friend of Bismarck's youth. Edward Keyserling was a tender poet of the most intimate sort. And this Count Hermann Keyserling has from his great-grandmother, a Muravioff, also a share of Mongol blood. He grew up at Rayküll, studied chemistry at Dorpat and geology and biology at Heidelberg, entered by means of Henry Thode the Wahnfried circle, came in Vienna under the influence of Chamberlain and of the Indian scholar Leopold von Schröder, became doctor of philosophy, went to Paris, and later to London, wavering without decision for a long time between philosophical and scientific leanings, between pleasure in the enjoyments of social culture and a never quite suppressed longing for the solitudes of nature, so that he seemed destined to become a *dilettante* in the strict sense, in the sense in which Walter Pater was a *dilettante*. In 1911 he began a tour round the world, from Genoa to Ceylon, India, China, Japan, and back across America to lonely Rayküll, where he stayed four years, while round him the world was at war, writing his *Travel-Diary*. In 1919 he married the granddaughter of Bismarck, the daughter of Prince Herbert.

This *Travel-Diary* is a single long monologue. A man with an overwhelming desire for knowledge, for whom the force of his own personality, his own demands, his own feelings does not suffice to procure the whole truth, he strains out of himself, he will not see with only his own eyes or hear with his own ears, he will not live only his own life. He wishes to live the lives of others, to go through a whole series of other existences. Such a wandering of the soul in the living body is the desire and the meaning of his voyage round the world. And it is the indefinable charm of his diary not that here a European describes the life and thoughts of Indians, Chinese, and Japanese, but that he himself lives these lives, learns himself to think and feel as do the Indians, Chinese, and Japanese, even puts away the European in him and becomes fully in succession an Indian, a Chinese, and a Japanese. This to such a degree that at last all "Western civilisation" fades almost from his sight and the type of the modern Westerner becomes unreal to him. India teaches him "how little by necessity doing and being are connected in their origins." The lofty conception of the *Vollendeten* becomes clear to him, and he learns to know that all eternal values are connected with being and not with performance, and that performance has significance only as a sign of being. China leads him even deeper, and unveils for him the ultimate secret that out of true being, once it is attained, right action flows of itself; that he who is in harmony with himself, who is himself a just man, need trouble himself no more about action, since then performance will come of itself; in just men, because they are just, right action manifests itself. Thus the external world is overcome; thus is our whole life turned inward; thus a higher form of humanity is reached above the two poles of Western life, above the enquirer searching only for knowledge, the "Professor," and above the "man of action," struggling to make himself felt externally,

to overcome the world. This higher form is the "Sage" who has only a single goal—self-realisation. This is what Keyserling brought home with him from his voyage round the world; this is the profit he has derived from it. "I can hold no longer," he says himself, "a definite philosophy such as I once sought for. I can no longer take quite seriously any definite system. My spiritual goal lies in the consciousness of that deepest principle of existence which is in the inmost of every external system. My ethical goal lies in the penetration of appearances by means of their deepest significances."

After this *Travel-Diary of a Philosopher*, Keyserling published a little pamphlet on *Germany's Political Mission*. It begins from the axiom that "we have a right only to that which we really are." But, for him, the Germans are really "the unpolitical people of Europe." He sees in this, however, no weakness, but rather the strength of Germany, especially in an age whose tendency he indicates as being towards the point when "politics shall become superfluous." But he is not content merely to state all this. The agreement which his sketch of a "Sage" has evoked has encouraged him to try himself in practice as the teacher of "Wisdom." Ernst Ludwig, formerly Grand Duke of Hesse, has given him assistance. They desire together to found in Darmstadt a "School of Wisdom," such as once the German universities might have become if they had not been led away more and more into the service of the State. Ernst Ludwig was the last German prince to maintain the great tradition—the tradition of Goethe. Himself by nature an artist, in 1900 he bade the gifted young Olbrich form the artists' colony at Darmstadt. Later, he offered a home to Duncan's School of Dancing. Darmstadt, under his rule, lay always rather aside from contemporary Germany, half in our classical past, half in a much desired future. Now that he is dethroned this prince shows that he also preserves his faith in the German spirit. All our secret hopes look now to the quiet town and its school of wisdom.

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