

# A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Salzburg, August 1921

IN times of severe trouble all peoples look back involuntarily and seek in their own past, comfort, security, and new faith for the future. So the German, thrown down, cast out, turned back on himself alone, now looks back on old times and remembers that once before Germany seemed to be at an end—in 1806, after the battle of Jena. There the last German power collapsed, the state of Frederick the Great went under. There was no more Germany; it seemed impossible that there should ever be a Germany again. Yet, as if by a miracle, Germany remained alive; and this miracle was worked by the strength of the German intellect. A quite small group of men, a handful of professors and poets, succeeded by the power of their belief in the future, by the power of words and of writing alone, in raising up a broken-down and lacerated people. In the history of literature this is called the German Romantic Movement. Not without pride did we learn at school that it was the poets who saved Prussia and Austria, and when, as schoolboys, we sat enthusiastically writing our first secret verses we were still more fired in our ambition by the mighty recollection that Napoleon himself was only conquered by German poets. It is a good thing for boys to be encouraged by so remarkable an example of the power of the intellect. But it is not a good thing for a nation if it promises itself too much from the loftiness of its thought and learns not to value the meaning of reality. It is understandable that just now we should willingly think of that time after Jena, when the rebirth of our almost annihilated nation was accomplished by means of an invincible belief in its mission. But it is not without danger when the German, to whom nature has given already a considerable leaning this way, is strengthened in the opinion that history transacts itself in a romantic manner. The Germans have without this a preference for unreality, they are the people of music and of metaphysics. And if we hear that the greatest episode of our modern history was "romantic," our young men are hardly to be blamed if they conclude from that that now again we can provide for the future simply by writing poetry. And the fact that that mighty movement of intellect was called romantic leads us all the more to misunderstand it. One can even say that with every new book on the German Romantic Movement its meaning was more and more lost to us. And so it seems almost providential that just at this moment when the German in his trouble is looking yearningly about for any promise of better things a book has appeared which, for the first time, reaches the core of the German Romantic Movement, shows its origin and uncovers the roots of its power. This is *The German Romantic Movement, 1800-1814*, by Josef Nadler (Erich Reiss).

Josef Nadler, an Austrian by birth and a pupil in Prague of the German scholar, August Sauer, is a professor at the University of Freiburg in Switzerland. As an Austrian and a Catholic he was, as a matter of course, despised by the official German scholars, who at that time very unwillingly confessed that German literature existed for a long time before the beginning of Prussian history. It is a peculiar thing about us what a remarkable power we have at times simply to forget whole centuries of our intellectual development. Never has the German spirit had a finer blooming than in the mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and their splendour may be compared to a certain degree with that of the Bavarian and Austrian Baroque theatre in the seventeenth century. But when the spiritual leadership of Germany was taken over in the eighteenth century by the Protestant bourgeoisie, both disappeared from the memory of the German, so that even Goethe knew nothing of them, not even their names. The discovery of the Bavarian and Austrian Baroque theatre is chiefly to be credited to Josef Nadler in his *History of the Literature of the*

*German Races and Provinces* (T. Habbel, Regensburg; three volumes, the first of which appeared in 1912; the final volume is still to come); for the first time the Baroque drama appeared to us in all its magnificence, equal in living strength to the Baroque architecture. We learnt to understand it as the highest expression of a mighty way of life, in which the emperor and his court, and the peasant and the townsman, and even the beggar, took part. Especially we learnt for the first time to understand the German of the seventeenth century, and an epoch which up till then had been considered a pause in German history became suddenly full of movement, value, and splendour. But this was not the only thing: this book gave for the first time to our whole literature an inherent connection. A German proverb says, "Great masters do not fall from Heaven." But in the history of literature as it was practised before Nadler great masters always did fall from heaven—they suddenly appeared, sometimes in groups, often quite alone, no one knew how. For Nadler no poet is merely an accident; it is rather the spirit of the race which reveals itself in the poets. For the poet is the mouthpiece of a race; and what each of the individual German races has to say is spoken for it, when its turn comes, by the poets. Thus the history of literature becomes with Nadler an intellectual and spiritual history of the German races.

German history, from the wandering of the peoples to the battle of Jena, is a perpetual war of brothers among the German races. The feeling that they are nevertheless brothers was first forced on them by the poets. However paradoxical it may sound, we can say in the fullest sense that German unity is a poetical creation. It certainly would not have been possible if these German races, perpetually at feud with one another, had not had from the beginning, in addition to their community of blood, a second community, that of their way of life. This came about because all the German races passed together through one decisive experience. For all of them the encounter with the Greek, the Latin, and Christian culture was decisive. When they became Christian they received at the same time the extra inheritance of ancient learning. And now imagine what it must have been for these wild tribes, as they are painted for us by Tacitus, to feel suddenly the breath of Rome and of the Greeks of the sacred East. It was a rebirth.

What is surprising about Nadler's new book is that in it he shows us the Berlin Romantic Movement as another renaissance, as the last of many German renaissances, as the renaissance in which the East, which up to then had been silent, took up the word for the first time, in which a new people, growing late in quietude, took part for the first time in the culture of the old races, in which "the colony" entered into the spiritual life of the Motherland. What the West and South Germans had experienced a thousand years before was now, in the Romantic Movement, experienced by the East Germans. And this new formula explains at one blow that indescribable charm which emanates from the romanticism of Berlin. The older Germany, which said its best say through Goethe, a Frank from the Rhine, and the Alemann Schiller, sees in the Romantic Movement the return of its own youth.

Nadler lays the strongest emphasis on this distinction between Motherland and colony. The Motherland is Germany west of the Elbe and the Saale—the Germany of those tribes who, on the Rhine and on the Danube, grew up in immediate contact with the Roman culture, the tribes whose own culture developed near the Roman frontiers, and whose unity with Rome, lasting from the beginning of the Christian era and culminating in the Baroque, had a fresh blooming in the classicism of Weimar. This Motherland was already permeated by Roman culture about the year 800. It had then already taken a political form, and it ripened so quickly by the help of the antique civilisation that about the year 1000 it had not only its own Latin culture but also already the beginning of a German culture; moreover, it had a durable possession in the shape of a body of religious lyrics, and, above all, a definite and ruling caste of educated men in whom lived the ancient spirit, who spoke and wrote Latin as though

it had been their own tongue, in whom the idea of their native way of life developed side by side with the Greek and Latin and Christian tradition. At such times when a civilisation becomes stationary, when it, so to speak, sits down at home and grows immovable, it always happens that its new slowness becomes unpleasing to impatient spirits. Then the old desire to wander rises again, and adventurers appear who find life too narrow for them at home. Driven by such a primitive nomadic instinct, about the year 1000 bored spirits began to leave the old home and to move eastward over the Elbe and the Saale, over the borders of the Germans into the land of the Slavs. This land remained Slavonic up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, well into the eighteenth century the mass of the population still spoke a Slavonic language, and only then was the state founded which so welded the old Slavonic inhabitants with these new German colonists that thence a new people arose. This new people took its speech and spirit and manners from the colonists, and rapidly overtook the cultural movement of the Motherland, because, as always happens in such cases, it began at the end.

The Berlin Romantic Movement is thus at the bottom only one of the many renaissances of which the whole spiritual history of Europe consists. Nadler shows very clearly how these processes of rebirth are actually distinguished one from the other. In the Italian rebirth, for example, which begins with St. Francis and culminates in the movement which we call the Renaissance in the narrower sense, the process consists in this, that underneath a primitive people a subjected "culture-people" again begins to exercise its intellectual powers. Italy thinks of herself and appears again in the world. It is quite different with the renaissance of South-West Germany after the year 800. And, again, it is quite different with the renaissance of East Germany, the preparation for which Nadler puts as far back as the sixteenth century, but the manifestation of which is in fact the Romantic Movement of Germany. Here, in the colony, the immigrant lords and the indigenous Slavonic subjects first became a new people when they began to share the intellectual tradition of the Motherland from which the colonists came. And thus it is that this last of the many German renaissances appears so remarkable a thing to the other Germans. In it the old Germany lives again through her past, but with strange circumstances which have for the old home an unexpected charm, the charm of novelty, but have also at the same time something menacing, because, if new virtue is brought in by the colony, the Motherland feels that in this virtue there is mixed a drop of alien blood. The principle of the Motherland was the union of the German with the Roman. To this principle the Romantic Movement adds a second, that of the union of the German and the Slav. And so, if the Romantic Movement points back into the remotest past, it also indicates the distant future to which Goethe has written a prophetic prelude in the *West-östliche Diwan*. If it was for 2000 years the desire of the German people to be a bridge between the north and the south, now the colony awakes a new desire—to be a bridge between the east and the west.

Three Prussian Junkers—Heinrich von Keilst, de la Motte Fouqué (whose ancestors were Norman, but who settled on the Garonne and after the upheaval of the Edict of Nantes removed to Brandenburg—the grandfather of the poet was one of the generals of Frederick the Great) and Ludwig Achim von Arnim take the central place in Nadler's exposition. As he writes only of literature, and ends with the year 1814, he does not name the fourth romantic Junker who was born in 1815 and expressed his romanticism in blood and iron—Bismarck. But the meaning of this book lies precisely in this, that while it deals only with literature, it so exposes the fundamental forces of the nation that it narrates not only the progress of literature, but the whole fate of all the German races over a period of a hundred years.

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