

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Salzburg, November 1921

WHEN I went to the University forty years ago Ranke was regarded as the greatest historian in Germany, and the ideas of his school were predominant. These ideas were based on the principle that the historian must confine himself to "just setting forth what really happened"; but we young people were no longer content with that kind of thing. We did not merely want to know what really happened; what interested us was "Why did it happen?" We wanted to understand the inevitability of events, to recognise the necessity of historical facts. It was for this reason that Marx gained so great a hold over the youth of Germany in the 'eighties. We were secretly all Marxists, not so much out of sympathy with the Labour Movement, as because Marx's view of history showed us historical events under a new and revealing light. According to him all intellectual activity was explained by economic changes; the intellect was merely a reflection of the existing economic conditions, caused by them and varying with them. This philosophy made history a real and living thing for us; Marx's system seemed to co-ordinate everything, and dates and facts of history settled down into their appointed places. After Marx came Karl Lamprecht, who satisfied this need for a methodical arrangement of historical facts in another way. Marx made history a function of economics; Lamprecht held that history was the result of the growth of spiritual life, accompanied by a steady increase in the consciousness of such growth. According to Lamprecht, the expression of the soul in the life of mankind becomes more and more conscious as time goes on, and tends to become more individual and subjective. Lamprecht believed that this was the determining factor in history and the principle of historical development. He died in 1915, and a new youth has arisen whose first experience of life was the war, with its horrors and tragedies. These young people see their country crushed, the traditional power destroyed and their own future, and indeed their immediate present, in jeopardy, and they naturally feel doubtful whether history has any meaning at all. And at this moment of doubt and despair, of the failure of inherited truths, of complete bewilderment and of general chaos, a new historian has arisen among the Germans and has offered to that perplexed race a new point of view, a new method of explaining all the events in the history of the world: Albert von Hofmann.

His first book, *Germany and German History*, was published in 1920, followed in 1921 by *The Political History of the German People* and *Italy and its History*. (All three were published by the Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, Stuttgart and Berlin.) These books show amazing historical knowledge embodied in a very remarkable point of view; there is, it is true, no evidence for the author's general assumption, but none is needed, because he does not offer his view of history as a contribution to knowledge, but only as a methodical aid to the understanding of knowledge. His system has the enormous advantage of limpid simplicity. There are truths so self-evident that one immediately and involuntarily believes in them, entirely forgetting to inquire whether they are really truths at all. And so long as a point of view of this kind is used in a methodical manner, and so long as no dogmatic significance is attached to it, it remains scientifically unassailable. As a matter of fact the so-called "theory" of Einstein is not really a theory at all, but a point of view of this kind. Perhaps theories are only possible in theology; in all other branches of knowledge we must be content with an exposition which helps us to a systematic and convenient general view of the given phenomena. We want something which gives a momentarily adequate explanation and which

enables us to a certain extent to foresee and predict future phenomena. Albert Hofmann's view of history answers these requirements in every way. He assumes that all history is determined by the physical features of the country. The history of every place is predetermined by its situation, its surrounding hills and rivers, its nearness to or distance from the sea.

Now there are, of course, human beings who do not work out their whole destiny maybe they miss it by indolently leaving undone the work presented by their fate; else perhaps they deliberately resist their fate, refuse to obey, and determine to create for themselves a destiny different from that which is prepared for them. In such a way too, there are places which also miss their destined life, whose fate is unfulfilled, because their people do not understand it or have not the force or the courage to work it out. Other places are ruined by presumptive people who force on their country a destiny to which it is not suited. In this view lies one of the greatest charms of Albert Hofmann's books; he does not allow his idea to lead him into the wilds of fatalism. It must have been a great temptation; but had he succumbed, his idea would have been nothing but an entertaining intellectual game. On the contrary, however, his delight in his discovery never blinds him to the fact that this historical destiny latent in the geography of every place is only offered to mankind as material to work out, and that its fulfilment or otherwise depends entirely on the free will of mankind.

Hofmann never forgets thus to include free will in his calculations, nor to present mankind as a free agent possessing the power of deciding how far the geographical destiny of a place shall be allowed to develop; and he is thus able to resist the lure of fatalism or mechanicalism. His brilliant conspectus of history has an active and almost heroic basis. According to him, human intellect and human power are never combined in such a way as to transform the geographical vocation of a place into human action pure and unmixed; man only partially fulfils by his actions the inherent history of the countryside. The world's history consists largely of man's obstinate failures to utilise or his deliberate destruction of the opportunities of development afforded by the nature of the surrounding country.

Since the appearance of Max Brod's novel, *Schloss Nomepygge*, over ten years ago, that author has been regarded as one of the great potentialities of our literature. He is a fine lyric poet, can tell a pleasant tale, and, in short, possesses one of those talents which never bring forth full blossoms but only the most promising buds, so that one is always awaiting eagerly its next effort. Max Brod has been unable to resist the general longing to try to deal with God and the whole of creation. He has rushed into philosophy and has given us his view of things in two thick volumes: *Paganism and Christianity; Judaism, A Profession of Faith* (Kurt Wolff, Munich). This work is a great apologia of Judaism. It seems as though something were brewing in the Jewish consciousness; as though a sort of Jewish renaissance were imminent among young people, possibly as a reaction against the much-hated and ostentatious doings of the Jewish war profiteers and their like. Brod compares these deplorable manifestations with the highly spiritual features of ancient Judaism, and he displays a great and forceful eloquence in his task. But he falls into the trap which lies set for all apologists: he cannot merely defend, he must needs attack. In order to show Judaism under the whitest possible light he finds it necessary to darken Paganism and Christianity. He regards Paganism as shallow; he calls it a "flight on the world's surface."

In the same way he narrows Christianity by accusing it of a failure to cope with earthly life, of a contempt for and renunciation of human activities; he is led to this view by his interpretation of the stoical spirit occasionally present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. In the Christianity described by Brod where could one find St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, or St. Teresa of Jesus, founders of great communities? Moreover, he contradicts himself strangely, for in one breath he reproaches Christianity with lack of feeling for the worldly life, and then with the

next he attacks it for its "amalgamation with Paganism," precisely because it becomes too deeply concerned with the world. And one cannot help wondering why this poet from whom we were quietly awaiting the greatest novel of our time or a splendid play has let himself wander off into this vague philosophy.

Perhaps the English readers of these letters from Germany have sometimes wondered why I tell them so much about books of all kinds and so little about actual poetry. Perhaps the Germans go in for political, philosophical, and historical writing, and have given up poetry? Far from it! They write masses of poetry. Hardly a day passes without a new poem appearing. The remarkable thing about these poems is that they are not poetry at all, but they nevertheless reveal clearly the poet hidden behind them. All the elements of poetry are there, but the poet is unable to work on them. Nothing happens, the poet reminds us of his name, and leaves us to hope for a poem of his next time. It is very difficult for critics to know what to say. The only true criticism would be: "This is not poetry, but it is clearly by an extraordinarily good poet"; but the public would complain that it did not believe in poets who could not write poetry. The only answer to that is that the same state of affairs may be found in the other arts in Germany. The case applies most especially, indeed, to painting, and one of the best connoisseurs of modern painting, Wilhelm Worringer, Professor at Bonn University, recently gave a most interesting lecture on this curious phenomenon to the Munich Goethe Society, *Artistic Problems of the Day* (Hugo Bruckmann, Munich). For a time Worringer believed in Expressionism, but he is obliged to own now that it has failed. It was only a phase, and it has already been superseded by a new fashion for a somewhat thin and cool Neo-Classicism. The Professor tries to explain the failure of Expressionism by a theory that in that movement a generation of mediocre artists demanded from themselves and their work efforts and achievements conceived from the study of the greatest masterpieces of art, and consequently only to be fulfilled by great masters. In fact, the principle was that painters must be geniuses; everything must be eternal and perfect. No one should paint worse than his ideal; so they were obliged to paint far above their powers. We Germans are always inclined to overrate learning. We like to think that if we know all about something we can do it. We mix up knowledge and insight with creative power, and are surprised when we fail to execute our conception. We overrate the power of artistic ideals and underrate the significance of talent. The fate of the Expressionist phase among our painters is a warning to all those who feel so confident of possessing the true knowledge of art that they over-reach their powers. It seems as though our literature had actually taken warning by this example in painting. The warning example of Expressionism in painting has also imbued our best poets with a spirit of deep self-criticism. It has opened their eyes to the fact that no one can rise above his own talent. Such searching criticism is healthy but dangerous; its present result is that many are mistaken about their own work. They feel that their talent is not adequate to express fully their artistic aspirations and knowledge. At the same time, work which fits their talent does not satisfy them. Consequently production ceases. And this is the reason why many men to-day prefer to write on politics, history, or philosophy instead of writing poetry. Worringer said that he wanted a "breathing space" for painting. The production by poets of books on general politics and philosophy shows that this "breathing space" has already set in for poetry.

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