

# A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Munich.

**T**HOMAS MANN, the author of the *Buddenbrooks* and of *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*), has long been highly regarded by lovers of literature. He handles words with a goldsmith's skill and his talent is distinguished by a firm, fine, constructive feeling. During the war he suddenly came prominently before the public through the publication of an extraordinary book, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (*Considerations of a non-political Person*). It was the kind of book least expected from an author whose special tendency seemed the purely "artistic." It was at a time when German hopes were sinking, when the mood was becoming "blue," and people were impatiently calling for peace at any price. His appeal then was to the best traditions of the German spirit, and he implored it to come to a realization of the situation. This gave him the reputation of being a "conservative." Knowing him well, I had to smile, even then, at this misinterpretation. He was born in the old Hanseatic town of Lübeck. From his mother's side he, as well as his talented brother Heinrich, had an exotic strain in his blood, which made him alien to the Wilhelmsian Germany. His Germany was that of Goethe. But for that very reason it irritated him to see the bourgeoisie suddenly plunging into heedless pacificism, seeking to deny Germany's past. At the present moment the same people, incapable of mastering, or even of controlling, their "moods," are going in for the wildest sort of Nationalism. Instead of patiently labouring at the building up of a new Germany, they imagine that by means of a "Putsch" they can conjure back the old world. It is only consistent that Thomas Mann should courageously issue a warning now, and affirm his faith in the Republic. He did this in an address at Berlin, which has been received with considerable resentment by the younger generation. During the war he was regarded as a militarist, and now suddenly he is counted a revolutionary. People have, therefore, concluded that he is a thorough-going opportunist, always turning with the wind. Exactly the reverse is the case. He is what is most difficult for a German—and rarest in Germany—an idealist with a clear conception of reality. Nietzsche once said that Germans were always thinking about something which had nothing to do with any particular case at issue.

*Sapientis est ordinare*, says Thomas Aquinas. The whole wisdom of life comes to this : to bring order into the contradictions of reality, to harmonize its demands with those of one's own spiritual needs, to adjust the past to the present. In substance this amounts to giving thought to that which at the moment is essential. Scarcely anyone in Germany has a keener scent for this than Thomas Mann ; he has such a passion for the essential that it sometimes becomes almost a mania ; he has the courage of his convictions and is not afraid of stating them. He feels this his duty, no matter how often he runs his head into a wall. So his followers continually change. His admirers of yesterday are, to-day, his bitterest enemies ; those who hitherto barely had a shrug of the shoulders for him, already see him as the next President of the Republic. Over-enthusiastic friends once in like fashion put forward Gerhart Hauptmann for this office. I hope both will be spared from this ; they have more important things to do. It is a curious fact that German literature still goes back to the writers of the older generation, the men of sixty, or, at least, fifty.



The young men are helpless. They have breath only for huge programmes ; their creative force is exhausted in the excessive demands of too daring schemes. These go far beyond the limits of traditional form. The latter they have smashed to bits, but they lack the power to create a new form in accordance with the new spirit which they represent. There is no genuine relation between their artistic intention and their power of execution. In ambitious intention they go far beyond us older men ; but in craftsmanship, in taste, in technical sureness, precision and skill they are far behind. We soon learned to be satisfied with little. With every new work they come and claim that here is something that will outlast eternity ; in a fortnight it is forgotten. In the 'eighties of last century, we older men, too, began with huge promises and unmeasured ambitions. To-day, when we compare the proud confidence of our own youth with our actual accomplishments, we find it difficult to avoid a sad smile of resignation. But however little the actual results correspond with the greatness promised, certain things have nevertheless been achieved. Something remains which history one day will judge. The youngest generation, which came to the front with the war or since the war, so far cannot boast of a single achievement to which it would be safe to assign a life of ten or even five years. So far it has not gone beyond mere talent. Each new work by Werfel, Fritz von Unruh, Kornfeld, Alfred Döblin, Kasimir Edschmid, Otto Flake, and perhaps four or five other men attracts attention. There is a certain bigness, beauty, and largeness of gesture, but you are always compelled to say to yourself : " No, this work in itself won't do ; it is merely an indication, a tentative, a promise of something bigger to come. There are great potentialities here, and to judge from them something really great will come one day."

And so we wait eagerly. But so far we have waited in vain, for the next work again is nothing but indication and potentiality, not the promised work itself. This modern literature does not get much beyond gymnastic exercises. It undeniably has the merit of having set itself a high standard, and of having shaken the nation out of a smug self-sufficiency. But up to the present it has not succeeded in producing a work that measures up to its own standards. It has rendered us dissatisfied with the good average productions, but the work of higher quality whose special advocate it has become is still due.

The theatre suffers particularly. It has always been dependent upon a mixed repertoire. It cannot live by masterpieces alone—in the first place because there are not enough masterpieces, and in the second because the spectator does not always wish to see masterpieces. He goes to the theatre, not to be deeply moved only, nor for the sake of the Aristotelian *Káθαρσις*, but chiefly to be entertained. Entertainment within the limits of good taste, obtained without ignoble means, is an absolute essential in the theatre ; otherwise one has to apologise to oneself afterwards. Because the French know this and have the knack of supplying this demand with wit and charm, they dominate the stage of Europe. For a few years before the war we had gradually become their competitors. The number of authors who were able to construct an effective play, powerful in action, without offending good taste, was growing from year to year. Now the demands of criticism are set at such ideal heights that a play of mere entertainment is not even admitted. It insists upon measuring every German author by Shakespeare. For that reason young talents suffer from over-stimulation ; they habitually put on the grimaces of genius, but the public is not deceived by this, and, since it no longer gets what it wants in the theatre, it runs to the cinema. We are face to face with a real crisis in the theatre, and the blame for it lies primarily in the lack of understanding of the " superliterary "



criticism. A play that pleases people is automatically subject to this sort of criticism. Every influence is exerted to prevent plays that have pleased from becoming successful; at any rate they are depreciated as far as possible. For an author a theatrical success is associated with so much abuse and suspicion that for weeks he hardly dares show his face among decent people. But a theatre cannot in the long run live by failures, and they are the only plays which can count upon a certain critical favour. *In magnis voluisse sat est* is a proverb which no theatre-going public anywhere in the world believes.

Emil Ludwig began his career by following Hofmannsthal's footsteps; then he wrote a wise book on Bismarck, an unforgivable one on Wagner, and an admirable work on Goethe. Not long ago he told Rembrandt's story in *Rembrandt's Schicksal*. It is a quiet work of restrained power, filled with reverence and a keen sensitiveness for the obscure sides of life where the demonic and all sorts of problems touch one another. At the moment he is engaged in a law suit with the Ex-Kaiser Wilhelm, who objects to being put on the stage in Ludwig's play *Die Entlassung* (*The Dismissal*), while he is still alive. The chances are that the Kaiser will be unable to prevent production of the play, but it is doubtful whether Ludwig will obtain anything but a *succès de scandale*. There has been a good deal of revived interest in Bismarck thanks to the appearance of the last volume of his *Mémoires* and Schüssler's book *Bismarck's Sturz* (*Bismarck's Fall*), in which all the material is gathered and reworked. Ludwig's play consists of three compact acts. It is really in the manner of the older French plays, the scenes are well handled, there are many attractive surprises and all the parts are excellent. It is as amusing as a piece by Scribe, much sounder than one by Sardou, and yet it indicates the dark background of this instance of ingratitude and its far-reaching importance upon the world's history. Whatever form an author chooses in the last instance is his own affair. I can imagine *Hamlet* as a comedy and *Le Mariage de Figaro* as a tragedy. But one feels that Bismarck's figure is of heroic proportions and one should prefer it reserved for a Shakespeare. As long as such a one is lacking, one can conceive it only in association with Wagnerian music. Here is another instance of the evil consequences which arise out of the extravagant and exaggerated literary requirements of the young generation. The public itself has got into the habit of taking only masterpieces seriously. Every work of art contains in itself the standard by which it is measured. An unspoiled public has an instinctive feeling for this standard and unconsciously applies it. The young men of the present day are not satisfied with this natural standard; they self-consciously apply another one of their own making, and, of course, cannot measure up to it. Emil Ludwig is much more honest; he knows what he can do, and knows quite well that he does not reach Shakespeare's stature. So he has not tried to give us the illusion of a Shakespearean Bismarck; he is satisfied with an Emil Ludwig Bismarck. But the public, for the present the reader, and, I fear, if the play is produced, the spectator will not be so easily satisfied. It will be annoyed that Emil Ludwig is not Shakespeare, or that at least he does not act as though he were. It does not matter so much that our young poets live beyond their means or have poetic ambitions beyond their power. It is much more dangerous that the public is disappointed when a poet is honest enough not to attempt to pretend to a higher rank than he deserves.