

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Munich, October, 1923.

NEVER have so many books appeared in Germany as at present. We older men, we of sixty and even of fifty, are going into retirement: we no longer count. I noticed this at my sixtieth birthday celebration in July. There was generous and friendly praise from journals of every shade of opinion. Yet the general attitude was like that you have towards a fellow-citizen who has become quite harmless, when you are sure that nothing he can do, no success, will ever amount to much. I felt as though I were attending my own funeral. It was very touching, but it does not stir you to new achievements.

The present belongs to the young men. He who is getting on for thirty is already regarded as an old man. And the young men are making the most of their opportunities. Everybody is writing these days. Writing books is no longer an occupation: it is an incident, like travelling, mountain-climbing, or swimming. All that is required of a book nowadays is that it be as fat as possible and printed on good paper. Any such book is sure to find purchasers. Books are no longer bought to be read, but to get rid of one's money. The principal task before a German to-day is to get rid of his money. The milliard of to-day is worth much less to-morrow, but paper itself has value. Books are therefore bought because, as the saying goes, they have a "real value," which long since has not been true of money.

But the habit of reading books has disappeared. I doubt if authors themselves any longer read their own books, nor do they write them for the purpose of expressing an idea or of presenting an argument. The only object is to be doing something, just as if you said to yourself: "I shall take a walk." You need not have any objective in view; you merely feel the need for exercise in the open air. That is the way people write books now. They have no aim other than intellectual relaxation. There is no thought of the reader. Writing is no longer a means of communication: it has become a monologue. Just as you used to whistle to yourself, so you now write. The better books of this type even gain something as the result of this method. They disclose a genuine directness, frankness, and simplicity. As you write without definite aim, entirely irresponsibly (for writing has become quite conscienceless), you indifferently put down every notion that enters your head. If it contradicts itself, you put down the contradiction with the same good-nature. Books no longer have any significance; they dance in the air like a juggler's balls. As a rule you find it difficult to determine whether they are works of the imagination, scientific treatises, or political speeches. They are a little of everything. One page is philosophical, the next lyrical, and the third political. Since it has become a habit to judge the value of books by their size, you are likely to find in them every idea that has entered the author's head during the past three months, and also its opposite.

No matter how carefully you read a book of this sort, you cannot tell what it really contains—usually everything, actually nothing. It incites other authors, and sometimes the author himself, to re-write the same book. Of course, no one succeeds in doing this. This sort of aimless monologue can never produce a real book, one that begins somewhere and aims at a definite conclusion; in other words, a rounded and constructive work. Fundamentally all these books have the same object; they are seeking the answer to the question: what is German? I know of no Englishman or Frenchman who would first have to ask himself what English or French is. This

is not a question to trouble him : he feels it, he knows it, he cannot imagine that anyone could have any doubt on that score. Every German, on every occasion, insists upon defining himself as the true German : hence all Germans have gradually become uncertain as to what constitutes a real German. The whole controversy revolves around this question. Everyone considers himself the true, *bona fide* German, and calls upon the whole history of German intellectual development as witness. All this material is dished up in each and every one of these books. They all start with the original Teutonic myths and run through to Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. If every German were fined a thousand marks every time he quotes Kant, it might still be possible to save German finance. This tremendous struggle to gain some sort of insight (or even a pure conception) as to what is really German touches your sympathies, but you cannot help feeling that there is an element of comedy in it at the same time.

Whoever goes in for monologues cannot adhere too closely to the natural sense of words. He himself knows what he means by the words he uses, and it is the reader's business to find it out. The task of the reader of these latest German books is by no means easy. To write them cannot be nearly as much of an effort as it is to read them. Words are rarely used in their ordinary sense. It is a real undertaking gradually to learn the special significance which words have in the book you are momentarily reading. It takes practice to get the hang of the idiom of each of these new authors. Wise publishers, wishing to save the reader trouble, have found an excellent expedient. They restrict the text more and more, and reserve their high-grade paper for pictures. Never before have so many books dealing with the plastic arts appeared in Germany—never before have reproductions been as perfect. There is hardly a painter, hardly a sculptor, hardly an architect, no matter of what period or nation, who has not a monograph devoted to him, with a selection of his best works, or quite as often with his complete works. On the technical side the reproduction of pictures has reached a point of excellence which is not even excelled in England, and cannot be touched in other countries. If there is one thing we may be proud of to-day it is the achievements of German publishers, especially of Bruckmann, the Inselverlag, and Piper. The curious thing about these illustrated works is that they succeed where the written word of the modern German so often fails. They are articulate. A queer lack of confidence keeps the German from entrusting his innermost being to words, and when by force of will he gets outside this inhibition he becomes noisy and talks at the top of his voice. His natural means of expression for subjective experiences is music ; there he manifests himself directly. Before German music began he expressed himself in his cathedrals and plastic arts. Protestantism first turned him into a talker. Sculpture was the native tongue of the mediæval Catholic German. You can still hear the mysteries of mediæval Germany in it. Protestantism to-day is disintegrating from within, and Catholicism is growing. Some go so far as to fear that Germany will become Catholic again. I hope so. Anyhow, the Catholic German is revealed in *The Plastic Arts of the German Middle Ages*. If, as I am assured, there is an increasing interest in Catholicism in England and a desire to understand its inmost essence, this work should also be welcome to the English reader. He who knows only the dogmas of Catholicism has no idea of its inward meaning. To become intimately acquainted with a symphony by reading the score is possible only for him who can supplement his own inner experience with that of the music. He who knows only the Catholic doctrine of faith, which is merely an intellectual formulation, cannot imagine the soul music of Catholic experience. Only he who has lived long enough among Catholics and has himself

lived the Catholic way of life can participate in the mystery of the Faith. You can instinctively sense it, you can as it were "smell" it, but you can never acquire it through the reason; you can perhaps approximate it by observing the attitude of Catholics. This attitude betrays an ease of bearing, incomprehensible to other people, combined with a curiously free relation to the things of the external world. At the same time there is sureness, decision, and inflexibility of action which seems almost irreconcilable with the other qualities.

This quality inheres likewise in every stoic, from whom the Catholic, however, is distinguished by decisiveness in action. The Catholic accomplishes the feat of being a stoic and an activist at the same time. He is a stoic because he has fathomed the vanity of the things of this earth, because *la vida es sueño*; he is activist because his impulse and motive to action are received not from this world of appearances but from the beyond, from the Absolute. He feels himself called upon to co-operate in the transformation of the world of this earth into the Kingdom of God. Such co-operative workers in the Kingdom of God were the great architects and sculptors of the German and French Middle Ages. This fundamentally Catholic relationship to the things of this world, this conception of considering and using this world merely as a summons for divine action, is represented in their works, with a genius which at its best matches that of the ancient Greeks.

R. Piper, the Munich publisher, has made visual for us this Catholic personality in two magnificent volumes, *The Plastic Arts of the German Middle Ages*. They are among the best examples of German book-making. Incidentally, this publisher has long been famous for his art books, such as the portfolios of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne and his works on French and early Italian paintings. In 165 plates of the above-mentioned work there is a panorama of the Catholic attitude of mind. Mr. Fried Lübbecke has written an authoritative introduction, supplying the historical background. The courage and energy of which this book gives evidence is one of the good omens at a time when there is so much misery everywhere.

The general misery weighs heavily upon intellectuals, even on those who are not actually starving. My household grows worse from day to day. I write a great deal, my plays are still acted, my wife teaches at the Academy for Music and gives private lessons. So between us, with a great deal of effort, we manage to earn enough to exist in some sort of way. We are better off than the average. But I am unable to buy any books, and it is quite impossible to indulge my former passion for drawings or etchings. If we did not occasionally get free tickets, we would have to give up the theatre entirely. It is a momentous event when the piano has to be tuned. Soon I shall have to give up even the abominable German tobacco. Travelling or any other luxury is quite out of the question. In no circumstance dare we become ill. This is the way we intellectuals live in Germany, and in our case we must thank God that we are much better off than most.

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