

# A LETTER FROM GERMANY

**T**HE youth of Germany is almost stifling under the pressure of a torturing desire to be recognised ; to be recognised not only by the whole world, but also by its own people, which does not understand it and perceives only a foolish impulse, but sees no outlet for its will, because it has not the visible form of its inner vision. What it lacks, and what is now at last to become evident, is to know how to see itself, and to show itself to other people. The German people, to attain that, strive for a clear picture of Germany, and the whole literature of this time, so far as it does not remain held fast in experiments of style nor seek to serve quite ephemeral topics, is a mighty struggle after a figure in which the German being may be evident and palpable ; and so, clear to the Germans themselves, comprehensible to other peoples.

Goethe cannot be this figure, for he has raised himself too high over his people. In his own lifetime he retired to a distance, not only from his own country, but from all national life : he retired into the myth he created.

Nor can Bismarck be this desired German figure—at any rate, not for the moment—nor to a generation which has just seen Bismarck's creation (the giving of political form to the German state), break up under their eyes.

So the survey, as it seeks after a figure of the German being, returns to poetry and comes to rest on a half-forgotten poet—strange-fated Hölderlin. He was recognised in his lifetime, and freshly championed by Goethe and Schiller. But he had few sympathetic friends, and was terribly lonely, poor and restless. Finally, for many years he was crazy, and his brain for a long time afterwards was extinguished, while his body lived on. He remained forgotten for a hundred years. German interest in him first revived during the war. Norbert von Hellingratt, who fell, was the first to conjure up Hölderlin's spirit into the life of German youth, with such compelling force that they now try to learn, by their knowledge of him, what it is that is stirring in themselves and think to know how to understand and, through him, to attain expression of their most secret desires and deepest thoughts ; they have found, too, in him, the seer and interpreter of German fate and mission. A whole Hölderlin literature has sprung up. Above all are to be named the prophetic book of William Michael, of Darm, *Hölderlin and the German Spirit* and, of the front rank, a new classic by a poet of the future, Hans Brandenburg's *Hölderlin, his life and work*. And at this moment there have appeared some chapters from Stephen Zweig's new and weighty book, called *Hölderlin, Kleist and Nietzsche*. Zweig's wonderful book, *Three Masters*, dedicated to his friend Romain Rolland, points at Balzac, Dickens and Dostoevsky, the essence of prolific novel-writing in the highest sense, as encyclopedic geniuses, as universal artists, who build a whole universe, and a special world, with peculiar characters and peculiar laws of gravitation, and place earthly things beneath a special heaven. This extremely vigorous work has had an overwhelming success.

Now he turns the same scrutinising, penetrating gaze, which finds the type in the individual, on to the three figures in which to-day young Germany thinks it will find locked up the original secret of the German being. That none of the three is a man of action astonishes only those who do not know that the German, to-day as much as ever, seeks the root of every deed in its conception, and therefore ascribes worth not so much to the action as to the idea that expresses itself clearly in it. Success or failure,



therefore, does not come into consideration. It is merely what was *meant* by it that he allows to have any influence or to be of any worth. In this the youth of Germany to-day is thoroughly romantic. A young Munich teacher, Fritz Striche, has very well laid down in an important, far-reaching paper, what meaning the words "classic" and "romantic" have, after all, for the German, whose opinion is essentially different from the Englishman's, Frenchman's or Italian's. Germans call "classical," striving after perfection; but perfection always demands something settled; all achievement means rest in itself; perfection calls for rest to come into itself, and so it always supposes a renunciation, even resignation of motive, which the German regards as insufferable renunciation of infinity. Everything that is called classical in art therefore is gazed at in astonishment by Germans, with a cold conscientious respect drilled in by the schools. But it leaves their hearts cold. Restraint, concentration, renunciation on that account is happy only in perpetual creation, and prevents all peace of mind in a strong, clear and confined being. Although the German gives the impression of being a born individualist, he feels his own individuality nevertheless as a further limit he will break through. His aim is Self over self. Some spirit drives him on, to lose himself in infinity.

Youth's gaze, therefore, is directed straight on those three gloomy figures. Hölderlin, Kleist and Nietzsche bracket themselves together with him, in order to plunge him into infinity. Resignation more than anything is intolerable to the German. Goethe himself, who always strove after "Renunciation," cried out incessantly that "you must do without," and, driven to it again, "To deny oneself is to win"—Goethe would not have found this warning necessary had he not seen himself perpetually threatened by his own inner rebellion.

Always in Germany, therefore, but above all to-day, can the eager reader of any very successful book be sure that it deals with those men who, in the story of the world, o'erleapt all bounds. There have just appeared, hot upon each other, three works that did not first have to make a success for themselves; the German reading public threw itself quickly and greedily on all three. That public comes from the best sphere of German poetry, from the sphere round Stephen George where that great German tradition, the heritage of genuine thought and poetry, is tended in silent devotion.

The spokesman of this group is Frederick Gundulf, known also in England by his book on *Shakespeare and the German Spirit* as much as through his Shakespearean research. He now publishes a *Caesar*, which immediately warns by its sub-title "Tales of his Fame," that a new representation of Caesar's own life must not be expected. What he shows us is rather the after-life of Caesar, his going on living after death, and his life down the centuries—through which he works even now in a figure purer, mightier and more his own than he could ever have been in his own lifetime, because his image being further from us veils his figure from the jealousy, the envy and hatred, of his environment. It is, so to speak, a biography of Caesar's immortality; and because of this is deeply gratifying to that German desire for infinity, and at the same time, perhaps, brings it into tune with it through the knowledge that at times a quite circumscribed man, a man who has absolutely fulfilled his purpose, can, though only in his own person (yet what a huge thing that is!) have some share in infinity.

Almost at the same time a second book on Caesar has just appeared; above all, it is by a Dane—but by George Brandes, the stripling of eighty-two, whom we shall soon have been reading for fifty years, and who has been seen in our midst and been heard to speak sincerely, though also with some injustice, against us so often that we have



## A LETTER FROM GERMANY

649

involuntarily become accustomed to reckoning him one of ourselves. And to these two portraits of Caesar there is now added one of that other, tragi-comic Caesar. Emil Ludwig is a poet, novel-writer, journalist and playwright, who tried, first psychology and then a play on Bismarck. One after the other he has written books on Goethe, Wagner and Rembrandt, and has always boldly risked significance of character. Now this talent (which, though overflowing with inspiration, yet has the perils of that safeguarded by a great measure of self-criticism) brings us a book on Napoleon. The fantastic, the dramatic and theatrical sides of this huge being, who was unique in the history of the world by virtue of a spell, yet at bottom was not only utterly devoid of ideas, but also intoxicated by them, and in these transports raised himself up until he became his own idealised conception of himself—all this is described freely, but with such a bias that one often asks oneself if this was really not written of a Grenadier who had already helped to storm the bridge of Arcola. Emil Ludwig has really created in this a new type. A myth? No! He is too realistic for that. Besides, he abstains from detail too much, and will have nothing to do with legend. He recounts the life, acts and sufferings of Napoleon as if he, whilst studying them as a piece of scrupulous historical research, had grown tired by the end and fallen asleep over it, and dreamt it: it is all true and so hardly lends itself to sweet dreaming.

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