

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

MUNICH, *August*, 1926.

GERMAN literature is in danger. There are at the moment so many poets that an ordinary memory cannot retain their names. It is already impossible to see the wood for the trees; soon one will be quite unable to see any individual tree for the wood, for German literature has become an immense jungle, in which poets, along with their readers, suffocate. Every day I am ashamed when the morning postman, aching and staggering under his heavy load, empties out the new books on the floor—on the floor, because every other place has long been occupied. Books are piled up on every table, on all the chairs—books, books, nothing but books. If I were to spend an eight-hour day reading in the most cursory fashion—merely hurriedly turning over the leaves—more than half the daily output would still remain unread. There are so many of them, that when someone casually asks me whether this or that book has reached me, I am embarrassed, for my memory cannot cope any more with the unfamiliar names. When this happens to an individual, it can easily be imagined how terribly the newspapers are oppressed by this flood of new books. Each day brings them a complete library! This has many bad results. It has become impossible to glance at the literature even of the last year, let alone that since 1920. In this state of things criticism really ceases to exist. When I daily fish out from the mass of books three, the names of whose authors are perhaps, luckily, not quite strange to me, I wonder, "What can I think of them?" Present-day criticism, especially daily criticism, pre-supposes an even more solid average standard. To which of these books will comparison to the classics not be detrimental? In healthy times, the general standard found its own level by itself, and whoever reached it was esteemed as being of some worth. Whoever surpassed that standard won fame, and anyone who did not come up to it was disregarded. It is the tendency of daily criticism to recognise genius, which indeed has its own standard and always creates a new one after it. But if, in any literature, all suddenly set out to create a new standard, all standards cease and literature ceases therewith. A school of literature composed of innumerable men of genius who all claim to give their own rules would be impossible. They would devour one another, and the reader would have to examine their work with no help at all. We have come to such a pitch now in German literature. Formerly, in the good old days before the war, a writer modelled the beginnings of his style on any master he admired above all others. First imitating this one, then striving after him with a liberty that was already assured, by degrees, without wishing it, almost even without noticing it, he came to the mastery of his individuality, on which he had unconsciously been modelling himself. But this slow, quiet, unconscious—as it were, vegetative—awakening from tradition has stopped. This has occurred not deliberately, from wantonness or self-confidence, but from ignorance of tradition. When the youth of Germany went to the war, it was still too young to appreciate tradition. When it returned, it was too old: it had become too mature to go to school again and learn to recognise tradition. It had experienced too much, and the experience demanded expression. It had not time to evolve, by practising an unfamiliar style, the power to cultivate a style of its own, or even to obtain a grasp or feeling for style. Expression just burst forth from it in a mighty torrent. This was the so-called "Expressionism." Now it has passed—now it is no more.

Expressionism, in breaking the language in pieces, has also destroyed all grammar. Any young man who ever wants to relate anything finds himself obliged to put together a new syntax out of his own cunning—to make his own personal syntax. And all these young men find a publisher! This is very remarkable. Even I once was young, as much as thirty years ago. At that time I was violent, I went straight at things as hard as I could. That was the glorious time when we in Berlin, with Arno Holz and Johannes Schalf in the forefront, created "the modern movement." This not very happy name, which originated from me, was suggested by a poem of Arno Holz, but it was, nevertheless, in no way meant as a defiance of tradition, only as a battle-cry against the domination of that tradition's followers, against Spielhagen and Paul Heyse. Then Gerhart Hauptmann brought renown to our movement. It seemed almost impossible, in those days, for unknown young men to find a publisher. Our only hope was Zürich, where there was an enterprising man who had a printing-press that he did not like to stand idle. So this gallant Herr Schabelitz became the first publisher of the German modernists, and to this day we thank him. That a publisher could also possibly pay an author at the end occurred as little to the gallant Schabelitz as it did to us. I wrote close on ten books before I received any royalty. But this period of no remuneration on our first appearance was very good for us. For we wrote therefore only when we really had to, when we were so possessed that there was no other outlet and we could no longer refrain from writing or we should have been torn to pieces by our overwhelming inspiration. Royalties are one of the most dangerous inventions for writers. Now, even to-day publishers pay the young authors nothing, but all the time they promise to. Contracts are made on the basis of a royalty after the sale of so many thousand copies, and with this contract in his hand, the author can always obtain credit, or at any rate believes that he can. Publishers do not usually pay cash for their paper, any more than they do for their printing. And so it goes on. Everything is put on account. Literature has become a credit-transaction, and if you are going to live on it, your credit must be increasing. Herein lies the reason for our enormous literary over-production. This threatening and accumulating excess is above all a disturbing sign of Germany's rigid determination on no account to resign her intellectual position or to allow herself in any way to be supplanted. This has led to chaos. Young men, stirred by their youth, on the strength of it, write to publishers to publish; on the strength of it printers print; and finally the reader on the strength of it reads whatever chance brings him or whatever may be the means of opening up a huge advertisement. Criticism gives up the race; it is out of breath. For criticism is separation and rejection, and in order to know what to choose one must know what there is to choose from. That has become impossible. The critic lightens his task by narrowing his choice; Berlin critics read Prussian books, those of München the books of Bavarian poets, and soon each German district will have its particular celebrities, whom no one in the neighbouring districts knows. The very number of celebrities weakens their fame: "when everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody." Before the war it was Berlin that decided the literary reputations. Whomever Berlin recognised was recognised throughout the country. Dramatists accordingly first of all went to a Berlin theatre (and in any case to the long-famous Viennese *Burg-Theater*), for first production. If it pleased Berlin and Vienna, all the other German theatres tried to obtain it next day; if it displeased, even a previously-signed contract with a theatre in another German town could not save it, for the theatre would rather pay any penalty than put on a play that had failed in Berlin, which would mean that the piece was doomed for the whole of Germany. Only when a gifted impresario, Count Seebach, a man of

high ideals and infallible judgment, who was the first to recognise the talents of young Richard Strauss, became director of the Dresden *Hof-Theater*, did the predominance of Berlin arise. Munich, always jealous of the north, followed his example. Only after the war, as patriotism faded before the oncoming tide of local feeling, did every small town begin to be ruled by the desire to have its own original productions. People no longer cared what Berlin thought; they wanted to form their own taste. A Berlin success is more likely to be regarded suspiciously, may even turn out to be received with hostility. But to be called on to judge of a play that has not yet been produced anywhere so flatters a small town that, above their pleasure at that, the success of the play is assured. At last, each small town now has a chance of having a say in the matter; the German sees in this chance (especially as he does not understand it) a sign of democracy. Each small town now wants its own special first-performances. They are shamed if they have to bring in dramatists from outside—they have their own. In every German town, these groups of particular poets publish their own magazine. Here also is provincialism, which is excellent. Germany is a storehouse of cities and small towns whose culture goes right back to the Middle Ages, retaining a living tradition through all vicissitudes, through all the proposed changes of science, and Germany's power lies in this unbroken chain of history; not world-history, not the country's history, but place-history, town-history and family history. Even the smallest German town is a very alert entity, which, just because of its proud self-consciousness, remains steadfast in every external change, and for precisely this reason feels a breath of immortality above itself. This provincialism is a blessing to Germany as regards culture. All our hopes are based on it, but from a literary point of view, disastrous chaos comes of it now. There is no memory strong enough to take notice of all the names of poets who, although famous somewhere or other in Germany at the moment, are unknown in the very next city. Who can be expected then to find time and patience to read their *works*? Poets feel this themselves, and are always forcing themselves to produce something unusual—something shatteringly new, so offensively and revoltingly new that the uproar which the work arouses in the town, and even in the neighbourhood beyond, may stir up general curiosity. They even found magazines so as to have an effect not only on practice but on theory. But the magazines are already so numerous that gradually they in their turn make an entire field of literature. Germany has never had a particularly outstanding and recognised paper, not even in politics, and certainly not in literature. There has never been a *Times*, never a *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The need has always been felt, and the paper has been tried again and again, but always fruitlessly. The German is always inwardly opposed to any kind of intellectual subjugation. He is always calling for leaders, but he never allows himself to be led. He does not recognise the value of tradition and therefore he takes no account of it, because his passion for a personal and special originality is too strong. He is a beginner; every German starts his life at the beginning, as if no one had ever lived before him. There is great evil in this, but it is the cause of his renown, his position in the world and his justifiable pride. And when one of these poets gradually triumphs, thus proving the extent of his originality, to the general admiration of the *cognoscenti*—when he triumphs thus, in spite of the appalling lack of intellectual unity and the almost grotesque over-production, it must be with quite a genuine work of the true poet. Such are Lernet-Holenias' mighty *Demetrius* and young Reinhold Siegrist's overwhelming *Cromwell*, two plays of a truly classical perfection which will outlast all the confusion of these so confused times.

HERMANN BAHR