

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

BORIS VON MÜNCHHAUSEN, the ballad-poet, recently lamented: "German people, your soul is dead, for your literature is dying!" Although this was a pitiful climax, it has nevertheless reminded us of a danger which troubles even the optimists, for each book is suffocated by the rest.

That is why criticism has become impossible. The poet whose publisher cries the loudest and spends the most money for announcements in every newspaper is the one who has a success. Further, the public are favouring foreign rather than native authors. This has come about not only by reason of the German's inborn preference for everything foreign, but also because of a practical consideration—namely, that reviews of English, French or Spanish authors have already appeared in their own country, and out of them the publisher of the German translations collects all the praise, with which seductively to regale the German reader. Proust's fame was for a long time placarded everywhere; now it is Unamuno who is dinned into our ears, and advertising is already beginning for every practically unknown American. So it seems almost a miracle that, quite unexpectedly, two up till now totally unknown poets have succeeded overnight in establishing themselves, winning not only the vain and fleeting fame of a day but being taken by the people straight to its heart. This is the more extraordinary since these two poets Hans Grimm, with the novel, *Nations Without a Chance* (Langen, Munich) and Hans Friedrich Bluck, author of *Battle of the Stars* (Diedericks, Jena) are both Low Germans, and so come of a race which from earliest times has not only preserved its intellectual art and imagination free from effacement or adulteration, but has also been guarded and even carefully kept secret from others.

The Low German is free from any tendency to be vain. He has no wish to establish his rights first of all by becoming famous. He doesn't *want* to show himself. It is enough for him to keep his forefathers' inheritance untarnished, to take care that its unsullied glory will hold sway over the meaning of existence for his children and his children's children. He does not care very much what other Germans are doing. If they leave him alone, he leaves them alone. But if he does live apart from them, nevertheless in secret he feels entirely answerable for them, because he imagines himself to be the centre of everything German. It is enough for him to be just a single member in the service of the nation, but it must be that one which knows everything. Scarcely any other German race has such a strong feeling of responsibility for the whole nation. In no other is the race-feeling more alive, *but* in no other is the readiness to set the community in order so strong; and on one condition, namely, that the community succeeds in becoming the pure expression of that visible and acknowledged practicable authority which is the urgent longing of all its members. The need for such an intellectual governing authority for the whole nation is felt at the moment by the whole race, even though self-will and an unsociable desire for isolation may usually predominate. The dire need of all the German races has welded them together intellectually and has again taught them to acknowledge the necessity for authority.

An outward sign of this inner change is the creation of a new section of the old Prussian Academy, for teaching and encouraging the art of poetry. The reason for academies is that a nation must express itself, and give to everybody a clear picture of its state of mind. The sudden idea of the Prussian Minister of Culture to assemble a kind of Areopagus of writers from all the German races (and also from the Austrian

ones, which have become politically separated from Germany) promises the best effects, if only the growing pains from which such attempts are seldom spared could be overcome. It always takes some time before such an ambitious and far-reaching plan gets into working order. It grinds to start off with, because it needs oil. Criticism does not spare it, nor should it escape criticism, in so far as it is constructive and not merely destructive. There has already been much fault-finding with the name under which it will be joined to the old Prussian Academy, namely as the section for the Art of Poetry.

Personally, it is not my wish (though I also had the honour to be called to it as a foreign member) to call myself a poet, not from a false sense of modesty but because I want to see this name kept solely for those who write in verse. Prose at the moment can far and away excel the magic influence of verse on the nation, both in intellectual power and fruitful effect. Jacob Grimm has defined far more clearly than many dozens of poets put together the German spirit, mien and destiny. Indeed, he would probably have haughtily saved himself from belonging to a section in poetic art.

But all this is, at root, only controversy; almost a quibble. It is a side issue which does not affect the essentials of this great attempt to create and ensure an authority, a superior court for the allaying of all doubts, scruples and questions within the domain of the Written Word.

In all the arts, we Germans are drawn afresh into the danger that hinders every single German artist in his own particular art (which is neither the inheritance of the past nor the necessity of the future), the danger of listening only to the urge, very often the mood, of his own gifts; and further, each artist wishes German art and the German spirit to begin once again, as it were, from the beginning. We are only saved from the chaos which this spirit, in all ages, finds strangely attractive by the inflexible resolve to establish an authority strong enough to force itself on public opinion. The Minister of Culture deserves the nation's praise for his courage. Whether there will be produced power to realise the possibilities offered is uncertain.

In my last *Letter from Germany* I drew attention to two young German poets who at that time were still unknown in Germany. In the months that have elapsed since I last wrote, one of them, Alexander Lernet-Holerin, has become famous. His plays are produced everywhere, and prizes are awarded him.

There is still not much said about Reinhold Siegrist, but of course it was years before Holerin made himself felt. Siegrist must not despond. He has, in the meantime, finished a new work, *Saul*, which is wonderful in the sureness of its dramatic climax. Siegrist is on the point of reaching classical perfection. Many critics notice this, and are chary of him on this account, for they fear a new classicism.

We are on the threshold of a new order of things. All form is now overthrown: the desire for form and the power for form are destroyed. To find them again is the problem of the present. Everyone agrees upon this, but as soon as any sign of form appears anywhere everyone misunderstands it, and sees in it only the evils of mere decadence. Siegrist has to suffer from this misunderstanding. He is not in the least a classicist, he does not model himself on old styles, he has his own and that is strong enough to break down all opposition, in time.

HERMANN BAHR