

## A LETTER FROM GERMANY

*Munich : October, 1928*

THE Editor of THE LONDON MERCURY has very flatteringly reproached me for letting my news of German literature get rarer and rarer, till it almost ceases completely. This is not my fault ; it is the fault of the new German literature itself. There is, indeed, no longer any literature in the old sense of the word, for literature in that old sense always presumed that men shared something in common, there was always a spiritual meeting ground. The so-called "Expressionism" which began during, and even before, the war became predominant immediately after, as a reaction against the "Impressionism" which had held sway since the 'eighties. But it was still an expression of something spiritually shared, just as "Impressionism" had been. George, Hofmannsthal, Rudolf Borchardt, Michael Georg Conrad, Rainer Maria Rilke, Rudolf Alexander Schroeder, Richard Dehmel, Wilhelm Schmidtbonn, Enrica Handel-Mazetti, Wilhelm Schaefer, Heinrich Mann and Thomas Mann were all at one in one thing ; they felt that each had a common duty to realise, each after his own kind, and this was the duty of their generation. The post-war generation lacks this feeling. The newest German poetry is no longer a national chorus, in which each separate poet chimes in according to his own particular strength. The only thing these poets have in common with one another now is a haughty indifference to everything that was formerly held sacred, and they are specially indifferent to Goethe who dominated German culture up to the war. That is all over. Goethe's place in the heart of young Germany is held by Kleist, or, according as tastes differ, by Hoelderlin, and already we are not wanting in signs which show that Herder will be the leader of the future. It is not certain yet, but in any case Goethe will stay in his twilight. Modern youth does not like Goethe. He seems, to their taste, to lack the energy of an individual will. Each impression they take from his works convinces them that he charged against the wind, that he owed his fame to good fortune. Modern youth reads his works out of loyalty, for they belonged once to German culture, but they have become very critical of this absolutely Teutonic culture, because it seems to them a weary, patched-together culture, which does not deserve the name, for a true culture must grow, gushing forth from the life of the nation.

According to the new generation—and this is the judgment of youth—we have not had a truly German culture since the end of the Baroque period. It sees in Lessing, who formerly counted as the foundation of classical literature, the falling off of those real German ways, to which we must return. There is a grain of truth in this claim. It is only questionable whether we have the strength to accept this truth, whether we can reach the new life and are strong enough to bear a new Baroque. It does not look very much like it. When one considers it, there does not seem to be a way. But as yet it is not a matter of deeds, and these intervals are used by hack writers to flood the market with voluminous novels. The time of so-called "young Germany," the time of cuckoos, spring and soft green leaves which also means that the fancy turns to verse, seems to have returned, and as in former days the flexible novel-form also, in which everything can be put. Accordingly, the reading public, on which the publisher counts, is served with the proven "No more War" slogan in all its possible varieties, or else the novel-writer intoxicates, first himself, and then the ever-willing reader, with the suggestive delusion that evil can at any time be removed from mankind's life and that it depends only on our own good will, whether we return to Paradise. The success of these novels, written on proved models offering panaceas, depends only on



the amount the publisher risks in advertising. These novels pile up and have to be gathered in each day with rakes, and if their authors had only half as much imagination as the money their publishers spend on press announcements, we should indeed be blessed with a flowering creative period. But no one understands why these publishers who risk so much always stand aside when it comes to works of real power. That is a secret of the publishing trade.

Still, there is not lacking in even this sad period a good promise of a return to real writing. Such authors as are responsible for this do not seek every opportunity that offers; they can wait, they are sure of their future, they are already their own future. Alexander Lernet-Holenia by degrees has laughingly overcome the stupid resistance of stupid and opposing crowds to each new fashion, and Reinhold Siegrist, the most promising of all young German poets, has a unique delicacy and, though he shuns the literary market, has won the confidence of connoisseurs, who are on the lookout for a great change, by purity of style and by the mere fact that such a writer exists. He is now so well-known that a bold theatrical manager is daring to put his *Cromwell* through the ordeal of a first-night. The third of the band is Rudolf von Eichthal with his quiet story, *The Mountain of the Cross*, which progresses gently, almost inaudibly. It is respectful even when being least allusive. Must one not call it a marvel, in the full sense of the word, when there exist these three poets, who deserve that high title, among a people that is afflicted and menaced at the very core of its being?

The feeling of a new strength which is consequently rising again among the German people craves acknowledgment, and it is characteristic of the state of mind of this new people that it seeks this acknowledgment from the world not by writing of the heroic deeds of the past but in histories of literature, both of the past and present. Richard M. Meyer's authenticated *German Nineteenth-Century Literature* is now published anew by Hugo Bieber, and has been brought down to the present. Hans Neumann gives us his *Modern German Literature, 1885—1924*. Albert Soergel's *Contemporary Poetry and Poets* begins with the 'eighties of last century and comes down to the end of the war. Yet all these works, deserving and stimulating as they are, pale before the significance of Josef Nadler's *Literary History of the German Folk and Peasantry*, of which the fourth and last volume has just appeared, sixteen years after the publication of the first. Nadler, pupil of August Sauer, the source of strength of the whole spiritual life of the South Germans, as his grateful disciples praisingly term him, has, in his work, determined the course of all the German literary histories there have been up till now. Poets were accustomed to regard these histories as isolated, nor was it indeed an isolation of splendour. Nadler lets us see for the first time the way German poetry developed out of the struggles of the peoples of the German provincial states. What until now had only been a succession of more or less pure and individual voices is now shown as a mighty tongue in which each one of the German states joins according to the power of its native talents. Nadler's ear for the special sound of each German root is incomparable.

I am myself a living example. I recognised Nadler's importance as soon as his first volume was published, but for years before he wrote to me he had very nearly been mistaken in himself on my account. He racked his brains to discover how a born Austrian could have composed my works, works which carry on the face of them that they are Silesian. My astonishment can be imagined when it is learnt that I am really a High Austrian, that I feel thoroughly High Austrian, that besides bragging of Austrian art, letters and dialect, I take pains to write, not in High German but in the Austrian dialect. Silesia is the only German province which I do not know by sight.



Yet my father came from a family of Silesian linen-weavers and my mother grew up as a child in a Silesian official's family. Nadler thus proved to me that though I might be a genuine High Austrian, my writings were full-bloodedly Silesian. That is surely a brilliant proof not only of his infallible acuteness but also of the reliability of his method . . . to lie in wait for the origin of a poet's stock by listening to his style and accent. It was Nadler also who revealed to us the power of the Baroque, with which the body of German philological students did not in the least know how to grapple. Such great poets as the two High Germans Jacob Balde, who was admired by Leibnitz, and Jacob Bidermann, the spiritual breath of whose *Cenodoxus* can only be compared to Dante, had been forgotten by an ungrateful nation. The professional chairs of German literature were at the time of the so-called Liberalism entirely occupied with freethinkers; and they found works by poets who, like Balde and Bidermann, were Jesuits, beneath their notice. It is thanks to the life-work of Josef Nadler and Conrad Burdoch that to-day we are so broad-minded again that we can judge a poet not by the tenets he professes but by his talent, which must be no accident but the result of inspiration governed by discipline.

Far apart in age (Burdoch is nearing seventy, Nadler is not yet fifty), both these are in the direct line of succession to the brothers Grimm. They watch German originality at the eternal springs. Burdoch goes back to the times of the Emperor Charles the Fourth, of the Luxembourg house, who, though involved in all kinds of political struggles, yet had the time, and was pleased, to invite to his court at Prague the Renaissance itself in the person of the stormy Cola di Rienzi, and it was during his office that the German language first really sprang into being. Its roots lie far back, but that does not make us haughty, for these roots are affected by the roots of all Occidental races, and we have as much grounds for self-respect as we have for thankful remembrance of the spiritual support of all the united Western countries. This great tradition—to remain true to individuality and yet to be always able to absorb hospitably every spiritual movement of the whole of the West—will be the chief care of the Section for Poetic Art which last year became united to the Prussian Academy, which is run by Max Libermann. This has had plenty of sneers and jeers cast at it; but so, what is more, did the great prototype of all such institutions, the French Academy, which had its origin in an order of Richelieu's. That was the expression of a strong authority; the Berlin Academy is the expression of a strong wish for authority in artistic affairs. Its success is on the lap of the gods.

HERMANN BAHR