

*RELIGIOUS VALUES IN GERMAN
LITERATURE OF TO-DAY*

TO speak at all of religious values in literature may be regarded by some as rather questionable, on the ground that religion and the art of letters have little in common and that conscious attempts to make literature serve the cause of religion are generally failures or, at the best, half-successes, serving neither the one nor the other with completeness. But it is not quite from that point of view that the theme for this essay has been stated. Even the 'art for art's sake' critics and artists—an ever-diminishing company, in the usual acceptation of the phrase—would agree that literature was expression, individual and social. Most people would further agree that religion was still a vital, if often unrecognised, element in the life of the human being or of the community. Given literature, then, as 'expression,' and religious aspiration as the same thing, it is justifiable to isolate them for a while and discuss, without any question of propaganda or of making 'literature the handmaid of religion,' the way in which the first is being linked to the second—the particular instance under notice being that of Germany to-day where, as will be seen shortly, the enquiry promises to be especially fruitful and thought-provoking.

Writers to whom the label 'Catholic' may be specifically applied are by no means a negligible quantity in Germany to-day, even regarded from the point of view of general literary criticism. It is of some significance that about two years ago *sc* non-Catholic a

Blackfriars

newspaper as the *Frankfurter Zeitung* opened its columns to a Catholic critic of distinction, Dr. Max Fischer, and allowed him to discuss, in one or two articles, the subject of Catholic *belles lettres* in contemporary Germany. The second of his articles, which appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* for December 22nd, 1920, opened thus :

‘The times in which one could speak of an inferiority of Catholic literature seem to have passed for ever. Modern Catholic imaginative literature is year by year producing new writers of talent who deserve to be read for their literary distinction also outside ecclesiastical circles. Many of their most recent books are concerned with problems which are decisive questions of the day. The sentimental literature of entertainment . . . has certainly not departed, but it is receding more and more into the background.’

Such enthusiasm might be ascribed to Dr. Fischer’s personal convictions, but it is not without significance that he was able to give expression to it in prominent secular newspapers—he also frequently writes the rubric, ‘Katholische Literatur’ in the entirely impartial Berlin review, *Das Literarische Echo*—and when the enquirer begins to look into the record of the younger Catholic writers of Germany he is soon able to convince himself that it is no exaggeration to say that Catholic writers who make their religion an integral part of their writing are becoming more and more prominent, compelling recognition from critical circles whose sole criticism is artistic effect. Such a writer as Peter Dörfler, for example, is a novelist challenging comparison with the most distinguished of German writers of fiction to-day, and his novel, published since the war, *Neue Götter* (New Gods), dealing with the beginnings of Roman Christianity and the fight with paganism, has been compared, both in subject and level of achievement, with Henri Sienkiewicz’s *Quo vadis?* Another notable German Catholic

Religious Values in German Literature To-day

novelist of our own day is Hans Roselieb, whose *Der Erbe* (The Heir) was first published under the pseudonym Firmin Coar. Here the subject is not the struggles of past centuries, but the attitude of a rich German confronted with the antithesis between social misery and his own too-great and unjustly-acquired possessions. It is a reminder of the continued interest of German Catholics in social questions—an interest in which they once might be said to have led the Catholics of the world.

The forces of Socialism are stronger to-day than ever in Germany and there is every sign that German Catholics realise that even more emphasis than in times past is now required of the social message of the Catholic Church. Among educated Catholics excellent work is being done by the various local 'Societies of Catholic University-men for the Cultivation of the Catholic View of Life' (*Vereine katholischer Akademiker zur Pflege der katholischen Weltanschauung*), while, among lay-writers, the philosopher-convert, Max Muller, has done much to clarify the difference between Christian and Catholic social reform and the reforms of materialistic Social Democracy. This is bound to have its repercussion in imaginative literature. Little demonstration is needed of the fact that the Marxian thesis, materialistic economic determinism, has coloured a very great part of German fiction, poetry and drama for the past thirty years. It underlies Gerhart Hauptmann's earlier plays and dramas of the Naturalistic School generally; it is implicit in much of the poetry of Richard Dehmel, until his death in February, 1920, perhaps the most distinguished of twentieth-century German poets. If a change has come over German literature, in this respect, it is because of a permeation of deeper spiritual ideas and, indirectly at least, Catholic writers

Blackfriars

can take some of the credit for the transformation. It may not be out of place here to mention also that prominent English Catholic writers, from Cardinal Newman to Mr. G. K. Chesterton, have, through German versions, grown in popularity among German readers during the past few years.

The power of Catholic ideas to influence the work of writers who are either entirely non-Catholic or at least cannot be classified as 'specifically Catholic,' becomes apparent when one turns to far more prominent poets and dramatists than those hitherto mentioned. An early challenge to the naturalistic, Zola-inspired movement of the nineties just referred to was delivered by the so-called 'Blätter für die Kunst' school, whose leader, the poet Stefan George, in 1890 founded a review of that name which still appears at irregular intervals. Much of the inspiration of these poets was at first of the 'art for art's sake' description, but there was also a marked inclination to study the work of English and French poets whose inspiration, in part at least, was derived from their religion—Verlaine, Rimbaud, Ernest Dowson. What one might call the 'aesthetic Catholic attitude'—somewhat akin to William Morris's whole-hearted medievalism, or Ruskin's 'loving every part of the church except the altar'—was often assumed, and an enthusiastic and interesting appreciation of George which one of his disciples, Friedrich Gundolf, published in 1920, approximates his master's poetic symbolism to Catholic culture in a provocative chapter well worth discussing at greater length than is possible here. In brief his claim for George is that he has been able to give expression to what Gundolf calls the *Gesamtmensch*, the whole man, soul and spirit, and to this *Gesamtmensch* he opposes the man of modern progress and 'enlightenment' whose glorification began, he says, with

Religious Values in German Literature To-day

the Lutheran revolution and to-day finds its only serious and reasonable questioner in the Roman Catholic Church. Now that is perhaps too slender to generalise upon, but it at least shows how, in the view of one important literary school, the religious and philosophic contest is being narrowed down as, by a slower process, it is in this country and elsewhere, to the issue, Catholicism or no religion at all. And while discussing this dissatisfaction with the modern view of progress it should be mentioned that Herr Spengler's own admissions have now established it as a fact that his famous pessimistic conclusions as to the future of our civilisation were initiated as a reaction against what he calls 'Darwinian optimism.' That reaction is also not without its effect on imaginative literature in Germany to-day.

A well-known German writer whose name cannot be omitted from any consideration of religious elements in present-day German literature is the Viennese novelist, dramatist, critic and journalist, Hermann Bahr. He has handled all types of literature with extraordinary versatility, attempting yet one more during the war when, as a sign of his own return to the Church, he produced a religious play, *Die Stimme* (The Voice), and a novel on much the same theme, *Himmelfahrt* (Ascension), both dealing—rather mechanically one must say—with a sudden conversion. Subsequently Herr Bahr returned to the light social comedy for which he is known best, but that there is a serious Catholic background to his mind—so to put it—is shown in a volume of essays he published last year under the title of *Summula*. This contained, in addition to a number of essays on Austrian art and politics, and an onslaught on Pascal which would delight Mr. Belloc, two essays on current philosophical tendencies in Germany, to the first of which might be given as title the words Bahr quotes from Lacordaire,

Blackfriars

'Qui connaît Dieu connaît tout, qui ne le connaît pas ne connaît rien,' while the second, dealing with incompleteness of human knowledge divorced from faith, might be called a good example of the way Goethe's philosophy can be pressed into the service of Christian apologetics.

'Back through Bergson and Goethe to the Thomist philosophy' would, in fact, be by no means an inadequate description of present tendencies in German philosophy, just as 'Back to the mediaeval and religious drama' appears to be the motto of more than one important German dramatist. Admiration—even if a very detached or patronising admiration—for the Catholic attitude to life breaks through again in such an influential production of intuitionist philosophy as Count Hermann Keyserling's *Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* (Travel: Diary of a Philosopher), and a careful and sympathetic study, to put it no higher, of the religious drama of a deeply religious age, has twice been the inspiration of Vienna's leading poet, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The first occasion was before the war, when he produced his effective adaptation of the English morality *Everyman*, now a familiar item at all seasons in the German dramatic repertory. The second occasion was only last August, when, at the Salzburg Festival Theatre, he produced his *Grosses Welttheater* (Great Theatre of the World), a direct following of Calderon's solemn and deeply religious *auto sacramental* *El Gran Teatro del Mundo*. Calderon is likely to prove a growing force in Austrian drama; one wonders to what extent the intensity of the religious atmosphere in which his religious drama thrived will reproduce itself in Austria to-day. The interest in Calderon is there, however, finding expression in the work of leading imaginative writers. That cannot be without a certain influence, just as the widespread performance in our theatres of the medie-

Religious Values in German Literature To-day

val mysteries and moralities would rightly be regarded as of considerable potential importance to religion.

There is one subject which no discussion of current German literature can very well omit to mention—the 'Expressionist' tendency. German Catholic reviews, such as the Jesuit *Stimmen der Zeit*, have contained thoroughgoing attacks on it. These were inspired, one may suggest, more by a distrust of leading Expressionist writers—many of them definitely anti-Christian, some of their works openly subversive of religion and morality—than by any fundamental religious or moral objection to what one might term the Expressionist philosophy. Technically, Hermann Bahr has written a useful discussion of it called *Expressionismus*—Expressionism is opposition to Impressionism, the external representation of things. That carries with it an equally firm opposition to Realism and Naturalism, and since, as has been mentioned, the beginnings of Naturalism in German literature, as in other literatures, were inseparably connected with materialistic determinism, a deeper spiritual demand might be anticipated from the Expressionists. And such indeed, we do find. Extravagance and eccentricity apart, there seems to be a possibility that some of the poets labelled 'Expressionist' may assist in carrying German literature forward to a spiritual renewal such as would have been thought impossible of attainment in the heyday of Zola-ism. Among the Expressionist writers there is only one, Reinhard Sorge, a convert who died during the war, who is definitely Catholic, but several others, such younger men as Kurt Heynicke and Hermann Kasack, give proof in their work of an almost pathetic disillusionment with the materialism and the idea of progress their fathers found so satisfying. Only by a large number of quotations could one show how, under a great deal of revolutionary exuberance and utterly heretical philo-

Blackfriars

sophy, a spiritual *Sehnsucht* is making itself felt in the work of the younger writers. If only there were a Charles Péguy to crystallise it all, and give the watchword! But men of that stamp are not easily raised up by a country so radically separated itself from the Catholic tradition, and for that reason the prevailing German discontent with materialism may remain, as far as literature is concerned, an inchoate mass of vain yearning, vague aspiration and bitter disillusion, with here and there a confident return to the traditional idealism of the days when Germany was a nation of *Dichter and Denker*. Prophecy is impossible at present.

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