

# THE RETURN OF HERMANN BAHR

By GEORGE N. SHUSTER

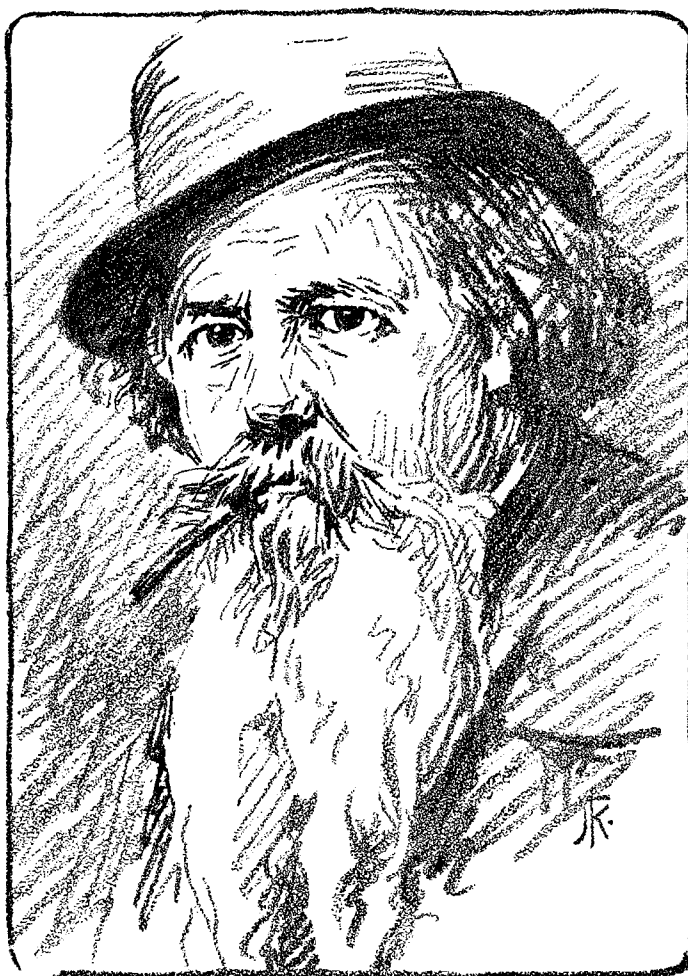
*Selbstbildnis*, by Hermann Bahr. Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag.

**K**EEPING track of the wide world is now the only way to know oneself. Has it really been only thirty years since the Chicago World's Fair struck people as a series of marvels and mysteries drawn from strange places undreamed of? Well, Lenin has forced Russia upon the most unwilling of us; France has moved just across the street; and perhaps Mussolini's chief title to fame may be his extraordinary advertising of Italian geography and politics. And so the inner record of European thought and experience during the last half-century is meat and drink to those who wish to see what our common civilization has been or is likely to become. To this record a substantial addition has been made by Hermann Bahr's *Selbstbildnis*. It is autobiography, of course, but manages by the force of circumstances to become almost unconsciously epic.

Bahr is fairly well known.\* Though generally looked upon as a spokesman of Vienna, or rather of young Vienna perhaps, he has usually managed to stand just a little in advance of whatever movements in literature proved characteristic of modern Germany as a whole. No man's plays exhibit better the various shades of naturalistic drama, and it would be difficult to find a novelist who reflects more sensitively the changing aspects of continental fiction. Then too, Bahr has talked lucidly—it is so seldom that a thoroughly up-to-date critic can be called lucid!—about

"impressionism," "expressionism," and similar matters, so that his miscellaneous writings are almost an index to theories expressed in recent art. America has not been deaf to echoes of this varied work, although it is still quite possible to introduce Hermann Bahr.

The present book is therefore first of all an agreeable chat about movements and people of some artistic importance. Bahr has been a natural traveler who picked his way into Berlin as a revolutionary young man; who learned the "sense of form" in Paris; who skirted the edges of Spanish tradition and culture; who saw what was going on in St. Petersburg; who dreamed away months among the stones of Rome; and who returned finally to that Austria which in the end was to be the more passionately beloved by him because it had become only a name. Meanwhile names are thick and sparkling on the pages of the book. Barrés, Huysmans, and Gautier rise momentarily from the Paris which they helped to provide with conversation; German poets and artists are present in throngs; there is even a vivid anecdote of Duse's rise to fame. Everything, people and places is dwelt upon with the fine



HERMANN BAHR

sympathy of a man who has learned how to know the world without blurring the outlines of his home. Besides this packed and strangely vivid book, the average volume of memoirs reads very much like Cranford.

There is also a wealth of reflection on men and books. Bahr's summaries of the differences between the German and the Frenchman are keenly and strikingly put. Baudelaire is grasped as aptly as Goethe. Nor have many known how to discuss Dostoevski more penetratingly—it would be possible to cull from this book brief passages that might congeal into a fine

\* *The Master* was produced in New York during 1910; *The Concert* followed successfully in 1916. Both of these plays may be read in translation. *Himmelfahrt*, a novel, is widely known in this country but has not been put into English. *The interdict upon all things German* which followed the war has probably been responsible for the obscurity into which Bahr has latterly fallen.

running comment on the great Russian. Such a thought as the following proves Bahr's discipleship.

Everything that lives, every form, every being, has for me so much of charm that I can hardly bring myself to ask eventually what it is worth and whether after all it may not be harmful or even vile. There is no creature however hideous, no beast however repulsive, upon which one will fail to see, after looking closely, some stray final gleam of beauty. It seems to me that with exiled Adam a merciful reflection of Paradise must have found its way into the fallen world. We do not look at one another closely enough, or we should all be in love one with the other.

This profession of faith in charity may be an explanation of why its author's thoughts run frequently to books which must be repudiated or to men whose lasting achievements were their sins.

But *Selbstbildnis*, which tells its story with the constant flavor of letters and is never far from art, gains interest primarily from the narrative of personal development which it unfolds. We have seen that Bahr has been not only a European but also a very modern and radical European. Indeed, neither the thought of Kant nor the economics of Marx nor the naturalism of Emile Zola failed to interest him. To some extent he was the promoter and apostle of these things. No idea to which the unsettled minds of recent Europe turned for strength and satisfaction quite passed him by. He was like a pool of water, which all movements and philosophies tinted with their glow.

That this pool should in the end prove solidly and unchangeably Catholic is the spiritual adventure—almost the miracle—to which *Selbstbildnis* testifies. How could a master among dishevelled modern souls—those lauded for our benefit, for instance, so breezily and decisively by such critics as Dr. Lewisohn—come back in the end to the faith *ecclesiae sancti Dei* and hold it with the fervor of a child? Convert narratives are always interesting because they cannot avoid being dramatic. This one is unusual, however, because it is a conclusion drawn from everything modern culture had to offer—almost, it might be said, from everything Europe has experienced. It has come out of the depths from which we feel that western civilization must rise if it is not to perish utterly and forever.

Bahr tells the story piecemeal, a shred here and there between the layers of his life, so that it may not seem to have happened suddenly, as in the case of Claudel who leaned against the cathedral pillar and believed. No. The Bahr household had been Catholic, though very liberal in the sense of a point of view described thus—

Liberalism rests upon the assumption that the nature of man is identical with the moral law. It believes that if man is once wholly free and at the disposition of the instincts of his own rational nature, he cannot do anything that is other than good; only because he was a slave did man learn to misunderstand his nature and forcibly misconstrue its faculties. Just as soon as he breaks the chains

of convention, his true nature will burst forth once again, irrepressibly good.

In this fashion was the French Revolution reflected in Austria as it had been elsewhere: progress would come when freedom did, the future would be king when the past was dead in its grave.

There can be no doubt that the chaos of modern thought, with the break-up of Catholic society which preceded it, is due almost entirely to belief in the principle that human nature is capable of perfection by the very fact that it is human. Bahr's account of how Austria was liberalized is of interest—

So strongly and directly alive was the inheritance of centuries of Benedictine education in them [the professors who since 1860 have ruled Austria intellectually and have renounced their ancestral faith], so completely did religious discipline hold sway over every affectation, so wholly had obedience to the moral law become a second nature with them, that this heritage of century-old ethical training, this product of immemorial Benedictine culture, this second nature put on slowly by succeeding generations, could be quite unconsciously mistaken for human nature. Only in countries with a very old Catholic civilization could there take place this confusion of a spiritual culture earned by the daily practice of a thousand years, constantly threatened by original sin, and just as constantly redeemed by newly acquired grace, with human nature. Only in such countries could the folly be believed that man, who as Kant says is in the order of things evil, may be termed good!

Yet it was in this Austria, Catholic still in name though sick unto death with modernism, reliance upon a political bureaucracy, and contented renouncement of its historic past, that Bahr grew through boyhood. At Salzburg he met the teacher whose influence was never totally to fade. "Julius Steger, a priest and professor, taught me not only Greek, but how to live." Indeed, for young Bahr, Greek itself became a manner of mortality. "Whoever," he tells us rather mystifyingly, "looks deeply enough into the eyes of the antique world, will suddenly find Our Lord Jesus looking at him through it." Both this and the older faith passed, however. Nothing remained but the desire to live, to laugh, to learn. One desperate adventure led to another; one cause was flung into the ash heap for the sake of a second, more flamingly new. Bahr was ostracized from his country because of radical views; his voice was raised on behalf of dreamy, materialistic social schemes; and he began to write widely, often malodorously.

Then came Paris and the search for art. Remarkably enough, Bahr attributes the first step in his reform to Zola's epigram, "a phrase well made is a good deed." This led first of all to a revaluation of naturalism in art and then to a search for the beautiful. He puts the matter thoughtfully—

A sense of quality stirred in me, of that quality which was independent of my whims: it was self-sufficient and

had no need of relationships with me nor did it ask for my consent or that of others; it rested in itself, obedient to its own laws, indefinable by us but laying bounds to itself. Now for the first time I felt again that there was a Power over me, and I knew that towards that Power a human being could conduct himself only as a servant. For simultaneously with the idea of quality and my growing concern with it, there appeared a set of standards: the meaning of worth and worthlessness came home to me, and seemed something ordained for me to follow—something that paid no attention to my notions but presided by reason of its own majesty. A ladder was immoveably present: transitory appearances gave way to form, change was halted, and permanence was manifest to me, almost within the reach of my hand—permanence unmoved by time and bringing to me in the midst of the stream of flitting things a pledge of the eternal. Now for the first time my life had a meaning, and dwelt in the morning glow of a way to live.

Twenty years more were required for the work of regeneration to reach completion. They were years in which he followed Baudelaire, who said in his artist's manner—*Le soif insatiable de tout ce qui est au delà et que voile la vie, est la preuve la plus vivante de notre immortalité*. Then in the end there was nearness to death, and a sharp phrase of Nietzsche's. "Finally the awful aspect of the long suffering mercy of God brought me to my knees," says Bahr. The details of the conversion are not worked out for us to see and enumerate. Perhaps the reader may therefore object that the conclusion drawn from Zola's phrase was somewhat abrupt and bizarre, nor does it seem that our author is even yet quite as thoroughly cleansed of Zola as he might desirably be.

Likewise there is mingled with the earnestness of a concluding summary of his religious experience Bahr's inclination to paradox—

Before the eruption of that ghastly malady of the spirit which is known as rationalism, no man would have hit upon the bottomless idea that he could drink through his fingertips. Kant is the physician who has cured the western world of such a malady. I had been trained too thoroughly in Kant from my boyhood to dream of pulling my own head out of the swamp. My vehement craving for authority, without which beauty, goodness and truth, so essentially necessary to my life, must remain unattainable, could not be satisfied with purely human theories . . . The mere historical circumstance that God once appeared on earth and died for us was also unable to aid me, so long as He simply left me alone. I was only then to be rescued when He Himself should lift me up, give Himself to me, and make me certain that gradually I would lessen my attachment to myself and strengthen my love for Him . . .

Of all the religions which I know, only the Catholic Church offers this assurance. The others do not even dare to propose it. Then too, my spirit is much too proud for obedience to a church which in any way grants that salvation might possibly be found without its assistance. If a church admits to me that I might perhaps be able to get along without it, my self confidence would never per-

mit me to refrain from the attempt to experiment. Only the church *extra quam nulla salus* is at all worth a trial. If one can reach the goal otherwise, why the added complication? A church which regards itself, so to speak, as one among many variants of a lost text, can offer me no certitude; and of uncertainties I have quite enough of my own.

Since then Bahr has tested his faith, realizing meanwhile "that I had always been, in my deepest heart . . . whenever I was really in touch with what I really was, a Catholic." His is a very human, a very gripping record. To have swum through the welter of modernity to the rock of Catholic tradition; to have found there the citadel by which the destiny of man, in his social no less than in his individual aspects, is guarded; and to have bent the knee while many scoffed—that is a career which Americans, who are handed so many faded flowers from European gardens, really ought to know.

## CHRISTIANITY IN RUSSIA

By FRANCIS McCULLAGH

WHEN listening in Judge Ford's Court on Armistice Day to the arguments for and against the handing over of Russian Church property in America to Father Kedrovsky, I could not help reflecting on the fact that the ecclesiastical "reform" movement in Russia changes almost every month. Just as the title "Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic" has now been superseded by "The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics" and the name "Leningrad" has replaced "Petrograd," so the title "Living Church" has disappeared, its place having been taken by "the Russian Orthodox Church." There are therefore two institutions in Russia called "the Orthodox Church," one with the Patriarch at its head, and one ruled by a body which calls itself "the Sacred Synod," and at the present moment it is Judge Ford's business to decide which of these two bodies has the right to appoint metropolitans in this country.

I shall try in this article to make the situation clear, even at the risk of being somewhat dry and technical.

In the first place the Patriarch Tikhon is undoubtedly the Patriarch of Russia, for he was elected by the last free Convocation that met in Russia—the Convocation of Bishops which met in Moscow on August 15, 1917. Two months earlier, that is, in June, 1917, a Great Sobor or Conclave of the Russian Church met in Moscow, being the first representative council of that church which had met for over 200 years, the last having come together in 1721, during the reign of Peter the Great. Like the Convocation of Bishops, this Great Sobor was perfectly free, perfectly canonical. It was composed of the entire hierarchy — metropolitans, archbishops, bishops, archpriests, priests, and other delegates, every two hundred parishioners being represented by two priests