

He talked about London: said it was the capital with the greatest personality in the world. When a French listener asked him why, he said it was difficult to explain, he thought it was the combination of tradition and a humane, ever-moving and changing democracy.

Then, when someone (perhaps it was I) made the usual banal remark about being forced to live in this horrible epoch, he replied: 'But why? You have all the epochs in history to choose from!' My husband laughed and said, 'That's what I've always done'. Monsieur Benda looked at him inscrutably.

The conversation turned to English writers; he said that he had met one of our younger poets in Spain, during the civil war.

'A good young man,' he said, 'very naïve and trustful.' His face became more ironic than ever. I thought it best not to press for his opinion on his literary merits.

On Proust: that he had set out to write one thing and it had turned—unconsciously—into something else, something far greater and more important than the writer had realized.

What he said about contemporary French writers was not what those writers might wish to hear, so I will leave that alone.*

By then it was nearly eight o'clock, he looked at Jacques and stood up to leave. But it was not quite the end. My husband, with the determination of a passionate gardener, walked him to a nearby sunken garden, with a pool backed by two Roman columns and made him look at it. He submitted, gently and with humanity.

SELECTED NOTICES

The Course of German History. By A. J. P. Taylor. Hamish Hamilton. 12s. 6d.

IN the past six years there must have been many who have sought, by the study of German history, to understand the crisis through which we have lived, many who have turned to the public libraries for help in this dark and problematical matter. They will not have found them very helpful. There is the learned and conscientious Dr. Gooch, of course, indefatigable with his scissors and paste, but not very illuminating on causes, and the unspeakable Mr. Dawson, who swallows everything whole; and then there are the Germans themselves, the interminable frothblowers of the Bismarckian era, who put so much in, and the virtuous neuters of the Republic, who leave so much out, and the German political thinkers, depth opening below depth (for nonsense can be infinitely profound), from whom one turns quickly away, even when they are summarized by Mr. Rohan Butler and M. Vermeil, overcome with

*It has just been published.—EDITOR.

giddiness and nausea; and in the end one decides it is no good, there is no solution to the enigma; and turning from interpretation to hard and neutral facts, one is content, if one is wise, with Sir John Clapham's *Economic History of France and Germany*, the only really helpful book hitherto available on that dark and foreign subject.

Now there is another. Mr. A. J. P. Taylor is, I find, the only other English writer who can make German history comprehensible. He has already made sense of Bismarck's colonial policy; and he has now undertaken the huge task of doing the same, in a single short volume, for the history of modern Germany. He does not claim to have entirely succeeded. 'Now that this book is written', he admits in his preface, 'I find German history not only as distasteful, but as mysterious as before'. But that is only a relative failure; for no one can make sense of nonsense, and nonsense is so large a part of German political thought as to constitute part of German history as well. As this quotation shows, Mr. Taylor is somewhat unsympathetic to his subject. This too is an advantage; for it is a curious fact that all who have written sympathetically of German history have been bores. Mr. Taylor writes with a lively antipathy, not as one communicating an enthusiasm, but as one diagnosing a disease; and he is very readable.

Mr. Taylor begins (where all modern history must begin) with the Reformation: with Luther, whose obscene hatred of reason and the values of western civilization is a recurrent phenomenon in German psychology. (He does, I think, dangerously oversimplify the significance of Luther in relating him *directly* to German economic decline. Luther spoke for the most prosperous state in Germany; that Lutheranism afterwards settled in economic backwaters is a secondary development.) He skims lightly over the helplessness of German politics in the sixteenth, and the rise of Prussia in the seventeenth century; and begins his detailed analysis in 1815. But even before that date, certain of the cardinal features of German history, which have determined its course since, are apparent: the total unreality of its politics (and therefore the ineffectiveness of any public opinion), and the dualism of German psychology, now painfully imitating, now shrilly repudiating the West.

After 1815, Mr. Taylor has compressed so much into so small a space that it is hazardous to attempt a further simplification. In brief, he distinguishes three principal elements in German history: the Prussian Junkers, who, needing every technique of efficiency, every economy of effort, to cultivate their infertile, conquered estates, for long represented the only practical force in German politics, and were raised to be the ruling caste of Germany by Bismarck; the industrialists of the Prussian Rhineland, who, excluded from politics by the Junker aristocracy, devoted all their ability to the development, and overdevelopment, of their vast concerns, until the economic equilibrium of Germany could only be restored by the sacrifice of Europe; and finally, the Pangermanism of the non-Prussian bourgeoisie and its odious professors—the ideology of a class which, having seeped over all the frontiers of Eastern Europe, began to claim the protection of a new political frontier against the Slav nationalism that it had awakened. To find and preserve a satisfactory relation between these three elements would have required a continuous tradition of political wisdom; instead, Germany produced a tradition of political imbecility, punctuated by disastrous genius: the genius of the Prussian

Bismarck, whom Mr. Taylor represents as a mere political virtuoso postponing the inherent disasters of his system by a succession of brilliant conjuring tricks; and the atavistic genius of Hitler, the Pan-German sorcerer who sought to retrieve these disasters by still more ambitious adventures, sustained not by the skill of a conjurer, but by the blind faith of a somnambulist. For a satisfactory relation had somehow to be found if Germany was to survive: to survive, not only against the West (as Western historians have too often believed), but also against the vast, organized Slav world that menaced and penetrated the indefinite, indefensible frontier in the East.

In interpreting the possible relations between these elements which occurred to German politicians, Mr. Taylor brings out two alternative policies: the 'Greater German' programme, being the unlimited Eastern policy of Pan-germanism in opposition to Russian Panslavism; and the 'Little German' programme, being the limited Prussian ideal of obtaining secure frontiers by conquest in the West, and accommodation with Russia at the expense of Poland in the East. Bismarck was the classic exponent of the Little German policy; the revolutionaries of 1848 (including Marx) were Greater Germans. Bismarck succeeded: but with the collapse of Austria-Hungary (which he had used as his agent to neutralize Pangermanism) and the Bolshevik Revolution (which confused the hitherto simple equation of the Little German programme), the artificial political balance of Bismarck's Germany was overthrown, and Hitler was ultimately able to unite Greater and Little German aims in a single programme of universal conquest which alone could rectify the otherwise hopeless disequilibrium of German politics and German economy. He failed; and the disequilibrium will now be otherwise adjusted. Apart from these two parties, there is indeed a third which Mr. Taylor sometimes mentions, and never without contempt: the party of the 'good Germans'. These are the Germans who have never thought about the Slavs and therefore do not need a policy in respect of them. They are good because they are ineffective. 'There were, and I dare say are, many millions of well-meaning kindly Germans; but what have they added up to?'

This is the barest summary of Mr. Taylor's brilliant book; and a summary of a work already so compressed may easily do injustice to its thesis. The book is full of interesting matter, and the analysis of the ever-increasing top-heaviness of German industry, which forced Bismarck to embark on his tariff-policy in 1879, and led, in the hands of his incompetent successors, to the necessity of war, is made with terrible clarity. The chapters on the reign of William II are admirable; it has never been treated so lucidly before. To Bismarck Mr. Taylor seems a little less than fair. Bismarck at least chose a rational policy. If one had to choose a ruling class for an utterly unpolitical people, the Prussian Junkers were at least a practical class—in fact, the only practical class available; and it is difficult to agree that they were already an anachronism in 1850, when they survived their defeat in 1918 and remained the only class which even attempted to oppose the Nazis. In resolutely opposing Pangermanism, Bismarck successfully resisted the force which has proved disastrous to Germany; and it is illogical to say that he failed because his successors could not continue his triumphs. Bismarck's political fault seems, on Mr. Taylor's own showing, to have been not in using the Junkers in politics, but in using them too exclusively.

Another small point that might be made is that Mr. Taylor has said nothing of the influence of the geo-politicians on recent German history. Mr. Taylor is in general as contemptuous as Marx of German ideologies. But there is nonsense and nonsense. The ideology of 1848 was abstract thought borrowed from France and detached from the political conditions which alone gave it relevance; the geopolitical school provided the intellectual basis of the New Order, and was as important to Nazism as Luther to the German Princes; and the New Order was a practical, though drastic, solution of the economic disequilibrium of Europe for which Germany was largely responsible. It was also very nearly attained.

'This book', says Mr. Taylor in his preface, 'is a *pièce d'occasion*'. It is being widely read by people who are interested not in the past, which it analyses, but in the present, which it may explain. What is the lesson which emerges from it? At first it seems to describe a dead world. Of the three elements which have made and unmade German history, the Prussian Junkers are finished: Russian expropriation has killed them for ever. The Rhenish industries are, for the moment at least, destroyed; if they revive, it may well be as the industrial centre not of Germany, but of a totally different political unit. Pangermanism indeed survives, at least among prisoners-of-war, who have not felt the full impact of defeat, and who blame Hitler, not for representing, but for betraying, that distressful dogma. But ideas without material roots are irrelevant survivals; and if the totality of defeat reduces Germany again to a geographical expression, Pangermanism will be left, a harmless fantasy, in the *Lufreich des Traumes*. But even if all this be true; even if Germany has threatened the world for the last time—if the problem has at last been forcibly solved, and Germany, as a political experiment, can be pronounced a final failure—there is still a practical moral to be drawn. It is the necessity of politics. There were once people who believed that all politics were relative, being merely an aspect or reflexion of economic realities. The history of Germany is a terrible refutation of that heresy. Politics are not only the reflexion, but the regulation of economic conditions. Disastrously unpolitical, the Germans have allowed economic conditions to develop unregulated, and have then allowed anyone who claimed knowledge of the mystery to assume control. It is this fact, so obvious from Mr. Taylor's book, which makes the only alternative he suggests so desperate. Looking at the disastrous course of German history from Luther to Hitler, he hankers after the old municipal traditions, the free cities, of the medieval Empire. This is impossible romanticism. Germany has been ruined by bad politics; it may be restored by good politics, but not by none.

H. R. TREVOR-ROPER.

SOME RECENT FRENCH BOOKS

Aurélien. By Aragon. Gallimard. Paris. 180 francs.

AURÉLIEN, *le bel Aurélien* as he is called, is one of the many young men who survived from the last War to find themselves unable to assimilate their appalling experiences and who plunged into a search for a sensation strong enough to fill the void created by Peace. The book is set in the Paris of 1922, a period which Aragon evokes with all the magic of a nostalgia, and is concerned with the love affairs of a group of friends.