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Foreign Literature

Two Austrian Poets

GEDICHTE. By **RICHARD BILLINGER**. Leipzig: Insel Verlag. 1929.

GEDICHTE. By **MAX MELL**. (With woodcuts by **SWITBERT LOBISSE**.) Vienna: F. G. Speidel'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung. 1929.

Reviewed by **A. W. G. RANDALL**

THE past three or four years have seen the waning of the Expressionist school of German poetry, and the waxing of a group which is opposed to it in almost every respect. It is devoted to the peasant, while the Expressionists exalt the factory-worker or at least the city-dweller; it avows a religious faith, whereas most of the Expressionists seemed to advocate a materialistic determinism consonant with their Marxist economic and political theories; it follows the traditional forms of poetry, in contrast with the deliberately revolutionary, often incoherent technique of the Expressionists. Of this return to tradition a number of young poets along the Rhineland and in the Austrian provinces have made themselves the prominent exponents, and among the Austrians the first place is certainly taken by Richard Billinger and Max Mell, whose dramatic work is already known to the readers of this *Review*.

Richard Billinger, born in 1893 at St. Marienkirchen, in Upper Austria, made his first appearance a few years ago with the volume of lyrics entitled "Über die Äcker." This collection, slender but at once recognized by a number of critics of German literature, is included in this volume of Collected Poems, which do not belie the promise of the first publication. Billinger is revealed as a sincere, original poet, of keen observation and vigorous expression, with a strain of vivid mysticism which has almost a hint of William Blake, as in the poem "Mariae Verkündigung." Other poems have a reminder, for English readers, of Wordsworth, but it is the Austrian peasant, with his solid religious faith and his simple pride in his work, or it is the Austrian landscape, chiefly under a grey or stormy sky, that forms the subject of his lyrics. Occasionally there is a pagan glimpse, as in the appeal to the one naked saint, Sebastian, to show himself in the fields like a god, but this southern emotion is rare; it is generally the simple, unemotional Catholic faith of the Austrian villager that finds expression in these verses—and an expression which entitles Billinger to rank as a true poet, in the line of the earlier Rilke. A typical poem is "Wir Bauern," the beginning of which may be quoted as a specimen:

*Wir Bauern dulden keinen Spott
An unsern Herrn und Helfer Gott.*

*Was wären wir wohl ohne ihn?
Eine Ehschaft ohne Gatten.
Ein Bienenstock ohne Königin.
Ein Baum ohne Frucht und Schatten.*

Max Mell gives the impression of greater sophistication. Perhaps this is due to the more sustained character of his verse, which sometimes extends to the ode-form, whereas most of Billinger's work is in the short, apparently artless lyrics. Essentially the outlook on life is the same; the patient, laborious peasant, the village in sunshine and storm, the life of the fields and the Austrian valleys—these are his chief subjects, and all the complications of social revolution, wage-slavery, the sexual problem, the dirty city streets, and the garish lights, might not exist so far as his poems are concerned. Like Billinger, he is for the most part a severely objective poet, life as he finds it in the country is beautiful and ennobling, and he has no occasion for torturing self-questionings. Part of his long poem "Sommer-nacht-Gleichnis" may be quoted as an example:—

*O Leben. So erhob ich
Mein Herz zum Dank,
O Leben und Sein.
Voller guter Geister
Ist dein Kreis.
Voller rettender Wahrheit
Dein Wehn.*

There is no conscious reaction in all this, not a hint of opposition or challenge. One cannot doubt that the poet is describing what he sees and knows, and one cannot but feel a certain relief that there is a world to which the expressionists and naturalists were strangers—a world of peace and simplicity which we may well have thought had been lost to the world for ever.

Academies

DER GEDANKE EINER ENGLISCHEN SPRACHAKADEMIE IN VERGANGENHEIT UND GEGENWART. By **HERMANN M. FLASDIEK**. Jena: Verlag der Frommannschen Buchhandlung. 1929.

VERÖFFENTLICHUNGEN DER PREUSSISCHEN AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE: Jahrbuch der Sektion für Dichtkunst: 1929. Berlin: S. Fischer. 1929.

Reviewed by **A. W. G. RANDALL**

FROM these two books the conclusion might well be drawn that the academic idea is foreign to the Germanic genius. Matthew Arnold, of course, long ago explained the growth of the French Academy and reasons why a similar institution could, even should, never arise in England. When he wrote, however, there was a flourishing Academy at Berlin, and he mentioned it, even indicating that something limited and scientific in its scope such as the Prussian institution might well come in Great Britain. But the academy as the prescriber of taste, correctness of diction, and spelling, the provider of literary standards, the association of the best and most authoritative representatives of a nation's culture—this was foreign to the English as to the German tradition, and the scientific or artistic academies which both countries have possessed for many years have been extremely slow in enlarging their scope so as to admit the literary element.

Dr. Flasdiek's book is a most interesting and thorough piece of research into the evolution of the idea of an academy in England, from the age of Shakespeare until the year 1927. The purely historical section occupies five-sixths of the book and represents probably the most exhaustive study of its subject ever made. Certainly it must be indispensable to the intensive student of English literature, above all in the eighteenth century. For the non-specialist reader the main interest of the book will lie in the last chapter, which is a consideration of the academic idea in England to-day, in the light of the preceding historical study. Dr. Flasdiek discusses the British Academy and the Society for Pure English, devoting much attention to the attempts to produce a linguistic *entente* between England and the United States, and to propagate the English language in the interests of policy. His conclusion, however, is that the legislative idea of the academy is impossible of attainment in England, and is even expressly disclaimed by those leading scholars, such as Lord Balfour, who have given their support to the present-day institutions mentioned. For—we summarize Herr Flasdiek—the academy, properly so-called, is the outcome of classicism, and classicism is the outcome of a state. But England is a society, and no state. Individual freedom is still the English *Gesellschaftsideal* and it runs contrary to the academic idea.

In view of this conclusion it is curious to note that Prussia, which never claimed individual freedom as its highest ideal, and has certainly claimed to be a *Staat* before it was a *Gesellschaft*, should have had to wait until 1926 until it obtained a literary academy. Since the seventeenth century an academy of arts and sciences existed in Prussia, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries important writers were elected to it. But there was no literary section, in spite of propaganda for it by such authorities as Von Ranke, until after the war, in 1918, the proposal was actively taken up and supported by the Government, and became an accomplished fact eight years later. But it is, of course, not a replica of the French Academy; it numbers very many leading German writers, it has acted on behalf of the whole German literary craft in such matters as the censorship—to which a good deal of the volume under review is devoted—and it worthily celebrated the Lessing centenary. But it does not seem likely to aspire to the rôle of law-giver; on the contrary, many of its ideas, in politics as in literature, seem to be far from conservative. It will be interesting to watch its growth.

The Italian Academy of Sciences, Art, and Literature, which is to be formally inaugurated by Mussolini on October 28, and of which Senator Tittoni is president, will number, when complete forty members. Thirty members, seven for each of the first two classes and eight for each of the last two, were nominated last March by royal Decree, and the remaining ten will now be chosen by Mussolini. Members of the Academy will have the title of Excellency, and will rank as High Officers of the State. No member of Parliament may be an Academician and no woman is eligible for admission.

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