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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 LOBISSER.) 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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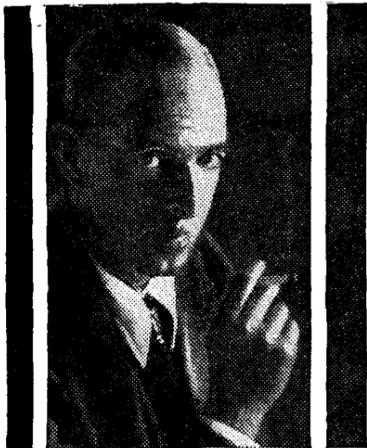
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Points of View

A Correction

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

May we take this opportunity of correcting one of Chandler R. Post's statements in his splendid review of "English Mediæval Painting," by Tancred Borenius and E. W. Tristram, published by the Pegasus Press? He says: "The superb and numerous plates of illustrations, which are so important a feature of the Pegasus publications, are somewhat vitiated in this instance by the considerations that they are very often based on Mr. Tristram's water colors rather than on the originals, and that the cases of such derivation are not each so labelled." On page 62 of "English Mediæval Painting," below the heading "List of Plates," the following text is printed: "The plates marked with an asterisk are reproduced from drawings by Professor E. W. Tristram in the Victoria and Albert Museum, except plates 57 to 61, which are from drawings in the House of Commons." There is a large asterisk against each plate which comes from Mr. Tristram's water colors. There are one or two exceptions, such as plate 4, where the source of the picture is mentioned. The reason for the reproductions from Mr. Tristram's water colors is that most of the originals are in such a state that reproductions directly from them would show little or nothing. A substantial portion of the value of the book lies in the fact that, by reproducing Mr. Tristram's extraordinarily faithful copies, it has been possible to supply students with documents concerning early primitives, some of which, since Mr. Tristram copied them, are practically invisible.

In fact, Lord Lee of Fareham, writing in *Apollo* of February, 1928, states: "With becoming modesty they (the authors) likewise omit to acknowledge the unique record of pioneering work, in this particular field,

by Professor Tristram, who, for more than twenty years, has devoted his incomparable pencil and pen to creating a permanent record of the scanty and perishable examples of British primitive painting which have survived until our day."

We are taking the trouble to make this detailed explanation, as the main goal in making the Pegasus Press plates is to supply absolutely accurate and authentic background material. THE PEGASUS PRESS
New York. C. R. E.

Contrast as a Device

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

Powerful contrast, as a literary device, has always been very effective, in fiction or any other form of writing. The most striking use of contrast in fiction, that occurs to my mind, is in Kipling's celebrated tale, "The Man Who Was." But that tale is so well known to sophisticated readers that it would be absurd to repeat it here. I have in mind an equally striking use of the same device, to be found in one of Jack London's books, "The People of the Abyss." The book is a long narrative essay, not specially readable, although more readable than the average novel. Buried in the middle of the book there is a chapter describing Coronation Day in London, when Edward the Seventh was crowned. In that chapter we find the element of contrast raised to the nth power.

More than six thousand prelates, priests, statesmen, princes, and warriors beheld the crowning and the anointing, says Mr. London; the rest of us saw the pageant as it passed. He then goes on to tell us what he observed, describing how the line of march was guarded by soldiers, by constabulary, by blue-jackets, by marines, by lancers and hussars, a superb display of armed power.

—From the Union Club to Whitehall swept the glittering, massive curve of the Life Guards, gigantic men mounted on gigantic chargers, steel-breastplated, steel-helmeted, steel-caparisoned, a great war-sword of steel ready to the hand of the powers that be. At the Abbey,—clad in wonderful, golden raiment, amid fanfare of trumpets and throbbing of music, surrounded by a brilliant throng of masters, lords and rulers, the King was being invested with the insignia of his sovereignty.—

—But hark! There is cheering down Whitehall, the crowd sways; the double walls of soldiers come to attention, and into view swing the King's watermen, in fantastic mediæval garbs of red, for all the world like the van of a circus parade. Then a royal carriage, filled with ladies and gentlemen of the household, with powdered footmen and coachmen most gorgeously arrayed. More carriages, lords and chamberlains, viscounts, mistresses of the robes, lackeys all. Then the warriors, a kingly escort, generals bronzed and worn, from the ends of the earth come up to London town; Admiral Seymour of China; Kitchener of Khartoum; Lord Roberts of India, and all the world; the fighting men of England.

—But here they come in all the pomp and certitude of power, and still they come, these men of steel, these war-lords and world-harnessers. Pell-mell, peers and commoners, princesses and maharajahs, equestrians to the King and yeomen of the Guard. And here the colonials, lithe and hardy men. And here the conquered men of Ind, swarthy horsemen and sword-wielders, fiercely barbaric, blazing in crimson and scarlet, Sikhs, Rajputs, Burmese, province by province and caste by caste. And now the Horse Guards, a glimpse of beautiful cream ponies, and a golden panoply, a hurricane of cheers, the crashing of hands; "The King! The King! God save the King!" Everybody has gone mad. The contagion is sweeping me off my feet. I, too, want to shout, "The King! God save the King!" Ragged men about me, tears in their eyes, are tossing up their hats and caps ecstatically. "Bless 'em! Bless 'em! Bless 'em!" See, there he is, in that wondrous golden coach, the great crown flashing on his head, the woman in white beside him likewise crowned.—

Then the narrative goes on to describe the crowds in the streets.—I drift with the crowd out of the square, into a tangle of narrow streets, where the public-houses are a-roar with drunkenness; men, women and children mixed together in colossal debauch. As night drew on the city became a blaze of light. Splashes of color, green, amber and ruby, caught the eye at every point, and "E.R." in great, cut-crystal letters backed by flaring gas was everywhere. The crowds in the streets increased by hundreds of thousands.—

Then Mr. London left the crowded thoroughfares and walked to the bank of the river, where he found two beggars.—I sat on a bench on the Thames Embankment. On the bench beside me sat two ragged creatures, a man and a woman, nodding and dozing. I talked with the man. He was 54, and a broken-down docker. Of course he would eat. So would the girl, and we started for a coffee-house. Between them they stowed away a prodigious amount of food, this man and woman, and it was not till I had duplicated and triplicated their original orders that they showed any signs of easing down.—

He asked them to explain what they did in the morning for something to eat. And they explained. The method was to try to get a penny, "if you haven't one saved over;" then go to a coffee-house and order a pot of tea, drink the tea in little sips, lingering and loitering at the table, meanwhile keeping the keenest lookout for scraps and crusts that others might leave behind, appropriating such scraps and crusts for themselves. "The thing," said the man judiciously as the trick dawned, "is to get hold of the penny."

Here, certainly, is a powerful piece of contrast. On the one hand the boundless cost of the coronation, with its pomp and display, its gold and jewels, gorgeous costuming; men brought from the ends of the earth to celebrate a single day; crowds in the streets running wild and flinging away their money in drunkenness and revelry. On the other hand the two outcasts, with whom the problem in life was "to get a penny!" If that isn't contrast, what is?

ROGER SPRAGUE.

General Morris Schaff, who died the other day, at the age of eighty-nine, was the author of several books, including "The Battle of the Wilderness," "Sunset of the Confederacy," and "Jefferson Davis." He was graduated from West Point in 1862, and entered the Civil War as a second lieutenant in the Ordnance Corps.

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