

HERMAN BAHR

HERMAN Bahr's death in Munich on the 14th of January awakened many literary memories. A patriarch in the world of letters, Bahr's name had been identified with many of the thought-phases that had passed over Europe in the last fifty years. Though an unbeliever for the greater part of his life, Herman Bahr astonished his friends and associates by returning in later life to the faith of his fathers, as he had astonished them by accepting wholeheartedly the old Austrian régime after being a political innovator, even a socialist. His mind was a prism which had reflected the colours of many men's **minds**, a sort of kaleidoscope which recorded the passing pictures of his time, but with a certain and very marked stamp of his own. This is his special claim to interest.

Full of sympathy with the world in which he lived, a sympathy which never left him—for he remained a young writer in spite of his years—Bahr was always the man with his finger on the pulse of the times, who felt instinctively every change before it had declared itself; he was the literary barometer foretelling every variation in art and literature before such variations were observed by others. He called himself and was called by others the 'man of tomorrow,' and when he appeared as the man of yesterday it was because he saw in some distant yesterday an inevitable **to-morrow**.

An essayist, a novelist, a playwright, a wit, condensing into words the thought-fluids of his time, Bahr's mind changed with every passing year, until it moulded itself finally within the philosophy of the Catholic Church. His mentality and literary fertility make his life and work hard to analyse, the one because of its extraordinary mobility, the other because of its bulk and inequality of merit. His amazing conversion, and subsequent fidelity to the beliefs chosen, make the task rather more difficult than otherwise. His previous life, point of view, taste in art and writing being much at variance with Catholic thought, it is diffi-

BLACKFRIARS

cult to trace the tendencies, though always present, which led to the final change . . . Even his autobiography *Selbstbildnis* does not make clear this seeming paradox, nor give the key to his soul's wanderings,—we say soul rather than mind, because he himself says that his will was at fault. 'A child of my time I lent my ear to every error, but however quickly I ran after error, truth followed me more quickly. In vain I strove to frighten away my guardian angel; he remained with me. For long years we wrestled daily, measuring our forces one against the other. The further I went away, the nearer he drew.' This went on until the last battle in Salzburg, when God's angel finally brought him to bay, leaving Bahr defeated, but in a certain sense conqueror. 'Grace was not only given me, it was forced upon me.' He seemed to have no choice but to return to that Church of which he had always had a superstitious horror.

For forty years before this crisis Bahr had followed every new and false light that appeared on the horizon, had been the prophet of every new doctrine in so far as it affected art, always to the front in every new literary movement. Realist, naturalist, symbolist, impressionist, Bahr was each of these in turn, and the exponent of every new mode that appeared in the world of letters. He was only twenty when he first went to Berlin, where he fell in at once with Arnold Holz and the naturalist school, the influence of which is very marked in Bahr's earlier plays. A little later, he was in Paris, the ardent admirer of Bourget and Barrès. It was Paris that developed his literary talent and that inspired him with the desire for creative work. Paris revealed to him the mystery of form. Zola's word 'Une phrase bien faite est une bonne action' came as an awakening to Bahr, it opened up to him a new world of values. Strange to say it also laid the foundation for his future conversion, recalling forgotten values, even the memory of the distinction between good and evil. As he says himself, he, with the young Germany of the naturalistic school, had got beyond the idea of good and evil. 'In our materialistic outlook there was no room for such a distinction . . . With the

separation of fair and **foul** lay also the separation of good and evil . . . We had mistaken the naturalism of the French, and taking it literally, and not merely as a revolt against romanticism.'

'My conscience awoke, if only in the artistic sense. I remembered the line of Epimetheus: 'Ich irre nicht, die Schönheit führt auf rechtem Weg.' I gave myself with passionate ardour to the service of the earthly word, but I failed to hear the Eternal Word of which art is but the apparent representative.' Nevertheless, the distinction between beauty and ugliness, between form and formlessness awakened in him the desire for the establishment of moral order in the world.

In 1889 he was again in Berlin, active in the movement of the *Freie Bühne* in which Sudermann and Gerard Hauptman were the leading lights. After this second visit to Berlin came a long stay in Petersburg, after which he settled down finally in Vienna.

A poet, Herman Bahr made it rather his business to criticize other poets than to write poetry himself. Filled with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, he drank at every possible source, but rather with a view to criticize the knowledge thus acquired, than to lend to it the weight of learning. A born critic and essayist, **he** wrote much for the passing moment, and even in his novels and plays it is the essayist who is always to the fore, the delightful *causeur*, showing up every passing event or social phase in his **own** inimitable manner. It was his special talent to discover talent. He discovered Eleanora Duse, he discovered Hofmanstal, of whom he said that if he had died at twenty he **would** have been the greatest poet of twenty that the world **had** known. But Hofmanstal did not die at twenty, a fact that Bahr seems to have regretted, although he was Hofmanstal's friend. Later it was Bahr's privilege to discover Austria for his own countrymen. A seeker of art **up** and **down** life's highways and byways, a worshipper of form for form's sake, a first class critic writing in the best reviews and papers, it was small wonder when art under the sunshine of his praise came into its own.

BLACKFRIARS

Born in Linz (in 1863), educated in Gratz and Vienna, Bahr remained in spite of his many wanderings an Austrian, and his essays deal chiefly with Austrian writers and with the Viennese stage. Among those published in book form may be mentioned *Austriaca*, *Renaissance*, and *Inventur*. He also published two or three books dealing with theatrical art in Vienna. Interested from his earliest years in the stage, Bahr not only wrote plays himself, but was the guide and inspirer of other playwrights. It was probably through his influence that the Viennese stage attained to that eminence that it enjoyed in the nineties and afterwards. Bahr's own plays are unequal in merit, both as to subject matter and technique. The earlier ones are full of political and social satire, and bear the stamp of the *Freie Bühne* and the Berlin naturalistic school. His later plays are of a different genre, and some of them had enormous success. *Das Konzert*, for instance, was played in every European country, and was viewed with enthusiasm in America. Among his plays may be mentioned *Sanna*, *Der Meister*, *Die Kinder*, *Josephine*, *Das Phantom*, *Das Prinzip*. All his plays and novels are marked to a certain extent by whatever mode happened to be uppermost at the time of their writing. In his novels, among others *Die Rahl*, *Die Rotte Kora*, and *O Mensch*, he is always the clever psychologist and subtle delineator of social life. In his later ones, *Himmelfahrt*, *Der inwendige Garten*, and others he makes quite clear his return to the Catholic Church and Catholic outlook on life.

The influence of other nationalities never altered Herman Bahr's typically Austrian mentality. His wit, his persiflage, his mobility of temperament, his charming humour, distinguish him at once from his heavier German brethren. Berlin, Paris, Petersburg, Spain, Morocco may all have given a certain impress to his writing, but left intact his own personality. Everywhere he was interested in studying not only the intellectual life, but also social conditions and religious and political problems. 'For the last forty years I have taken part in the intellectual life of the West. Wherever truth was sought, I took part in the search, 1

HERMAN BAHR

not only took part, I was beforehand. I have shared all the intellectual moods and fashions of these forty years, or rather I was their prophet.'

Whoever in future years may wish to study the life of letters in Europe from 1880 to our day will find it mirrored in Herman Bahr's writings. Everywhere and all through his life he was *au courant* not only with intellectual, but also with social and political life. He prophesied the downfall of Austria long before it came about, and lived to see with sorrow the fulfilment of this prophecy. In 1918 he wrote: 'All the inevitable that has come upon us might have been obviated, and has become necessary only because in these later years the imperatively necessary was never recognized until it was a week too late.' Bahr himself was never too late. He was not a politician, but his sound common sense helped him to a clear political outlook. He saw the dangers of mere opportunism, and as an artist he saw the dangers of mere money getting. 'Nowadays whoever bakes bread, or metes out justice, or heals the sick; artist, or king, or whoever he may be, and whatever he does, is done for money. Bread is baked with impatient hands, not with a view to bread, but to money, and the bread tastes of money, it has become money. The financier is, after all, the man with the cleanest hands, because he deals only in money . . . But the artist is the one who can bring happiness to others. He can make others happy because he can help them towards beauty and goodness.'

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