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A Conservative Utopia. The Conspiracy of the Carpenters: A Novel by Hermann Borchardt.

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A CONSERVATIVE UTOPIA

The Conspiracy of the Carpenters: A Novel by Hermann Borchardt

Translated by Barrows Mussey. Introduction by Franz Werfel.
Simon & Schuster. \$ 2.75.

Reviewed by K l a u s M a n n .

German literature in exile - and practically the whole German literature is in exile, since 1933 - has produced an impressive number of interesting or even excellent works; but it has failed, so far, to produce new authors. The Italian anti-Fascists have Ignazio Silone - a novelist of the first order who became famous as a refugee. But the galaxy of German anti-Nazi writers consists exclusively of names that were prominent already in the distant days of the Weimar Republic or even before the first world war. ~~But~~ ^{however,} From now on a new German name will have to be remembered: Hermann Borchardt - undoubtedly a vital, original talent.

His first book, The Conspiracy of the Carpenters, is indeed an extraordinary piece of work; bold and controversial, quite unique in its kind. The author - enormously ambitious and endowed with considerable creative energies - ventured on an enterprise of truly epic dimensions. His "Historical Accounting of a Ruling Class" is a realistic novel in the grand nineteenth-century style (there are suggestions of Balzac^a and Tolstoi) and at the same time a symbolic parable akin to medieval mysteries (his narrative was originally conceived as a colossal drama some two thousand pages long). At once fantastic and ponderous, whimsical and didactic, it is indeed one of the most curious, most perplexing experiments in modern literature - incomparable in its particular accents and mannerisms and yet typically Teutonic in its rampant capriciousness and ~~immoderate~~ pedagogical pretension. For The Conspiracy of the Carpenters is by no means just a baroque extravaganza^q: it is, quite the contrary,

conceived and presented as "an important political work," to quote an expression used by Franz Werfel in his ~~short but~~ warm and eloquent foreword. It is indeed to this political-pedagogical pathos that the fascination of Borchardt's novel is due - a fascination which, in this reviewer's opinion, is not free of problematical or even dangerous elements. The political fairy tale so fervently recommended by the great Austrian poet, Franz Werfel, is - to put it bluntly - one of the most excessively reactionary books written since the time of Metternich.

Borchardt is against Hitler, all right. His story - taking place in a fancy land that is almost Germany - describes the rise and fall of a "modern popular leader" named Dr. Urban who could be almost Hitler. He isn't Hitler, though. Everything is a little different: not the real history of Germany in the last forty years, but - to quote Werfel again - "rather a musical variation upon the elements of that history." One might also say, less euphemistically, that it is a purposeful arrangement or even a sly distortion of the historical facts. For, if it is true that our author is a real artist and as such given to childlike and inspired vagaries, it is also true that he is a political preacher and agitator - extremely cunning in promoting his cause, which is the cause of clerical conservatism.

The ruling class in Mr. Borchardt's mythological country is represented by the Conservatives, under the leadership of Adam Faust, President of the Republic, owner of machine factories and mines, also known as "the Fox of God." His teacher and trusted adviser is Professor Andrew Zorn, the theoretician of the Conservatives, author of The Metaphysics of Reaction. Another prominent pupil of Professor Zorn is Dr. Daruhi, personal physician to the President and professor of occult sciences - a spectacular gentleman with piercing eyes, dark-

brown hair over a powdered face, a pince-nez dangling on a black ribbon over the high-buttoned white waistcoat with its double row of dark-red glass buttons. Others close to the President are Bishop Hesse, who establishes with Andrew Zorn the League of Carpenters - a secret, militant brotherhood and "ideal Christian commonwealth in the vest-pocket form;" Augustus Beyer, leader of the radical Christian and activist wing of the Conservatives, a rich textile magnate^e; and, moreover, some "banking princes" and Christian-reactionary artists (the term "Christian-reactionary" is Borchardt's). These are the heroes of the chronicle. On the other side, we have the "Urbanites" (i.e. the Nazis), backed by the Liberals, atheists, and adherents to the ugly idea of "progress." Even more despicable than the desperados and ruffians gathering around the "modern popular leader" - Urban-Hitler - is "the Iron Phalanx of Intelligence, glittering with all progressive party colors including the blood red of revolution."

mostly to a kind of vulgarized heroic-aristocratic mysticism, Dr. Urban's doctrines are a macabre caricature of democratic ideals: the human type he wants to establish - "Mr. Golightly" - is indeed the standardized, ~~obedient~~, anti-heroic petty bourgeois whom Nazi propaganda presents as the dreary result of Marxist and democratic humanitarianism.

There is a civil war taking place in Mr. Borchardt's dream land, with the valiant Conservatives and Carpenters fighting the Urbanites, while the venal intelligentsia wavers and accepts bribes. The Carpenters come out victorious - naturally they do. Presently they establish a "genuinely Christian conservative commonwealth;" that is to say, the state assumes "a religious character," and unloads "its responsibility for the bodily welfare of its citizens - for the 'weekday' - upon our capitalists and fellowships, that is upon the economic system as a whole." Thus liberated from all vulgar material worries, the ~~state~~ government is free to devote itself to its lofty tasks - the affairs of the "Sunday Mortal." Censorship and the prosecution of the Iron Phalanx of Intelligence guarantee the moral soundness of the conservative commonwealth; as for such minor matters as the production and ~~the~~ distribution of vital goods, that's the headache of the Christian millionaires and the pious guilds. If Mr. Borchardt's medieval concept of the State has any parallel in modern history, it is perhaps the clerical dictatorship of Dr. Dollfuss in Austria. The fact that the Austrian chancellor was assassinated by Nazis - just as many of Adam Faust's men are murdered by the Urbanites - should not make us forget that he, Engelbert Dollfuss, ruined his country by his anti-labor policy and his indecent flirtation with Benito Mussolini.

"The forcibly defended past - the strongest force in creation, something almost unshakable - ": that is what Borchardt admires and recommends. He does so with ~~considerable~~ ^{impressive} wit and power, boldness and imagination. But, alas, his political message is as stale and muddled as his artistic vision is lively and colorful.

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