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Heart of Europe

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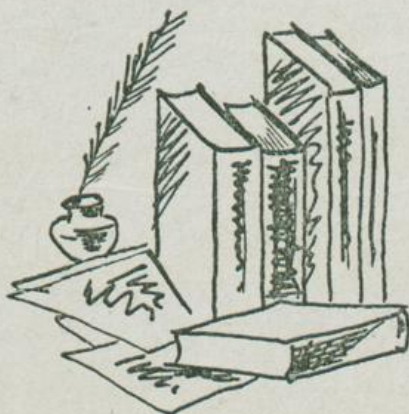
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Heart of Europe

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
CREATIVE WRITING
IN EUROPE 1920-1940
EDITED BY KLAUS MANN
AND HERMANN KESTEN



L. B. FISCHER
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Preface

AN ANTHOLOGY OF EUROPEAN WRITING FROM 1920 TO 1940

THE FORTRESS OF EUROPE is doomed. The Heart of Europe is immortal.

It may be wounded and weary, this proud and sensitive heart, haunted by sinister memories and even more terrible forebodings. But it still throbs and lives, in the middle of darkness and disintegration. However woeful and fearful, it remains the focus, nay, the dynamic source of vast energies, both creative and devastating.

* * *

The European genius has often been prone to treachery and corruption. Given to adventures and experiments, the *homo europaeus* is always in danger of going astray, of losing his moral equilibrium. There were periods of confusion and decadence during which Western man forgot his mission and wantonly betrayed the sacred legacy of Hellenic wisdom and Christian faith.

If Europe has been lovable and great, it is by virtue of this twofold heritage. Golgatha and the Acropolis are the tokens of her spiritual survival. She jeopardizes her glory when she distorts or disregards this double source of her substance. The diversity of Europe will inevitably fall into anarchy unless organized and illuminated from this innermost center. A Europe estranged from her own sublime traditions not only forfeits her universal rank but becomes indeed a public enemy—most dangerous to the very civilization that she helped create.

The crisis through which Europe passes now is perhaps the gravest of her history; it certainly involves more frightful perils to the civilized world at large than did any of the previous upheavals and ordeals. This time, two of the most illustrious members of the continental family—the nation of Caesar and Dante and the country of Dürer and Hölderlin—have utterly abandoned whatever was inspiring and constructive in their past, and, moreover, challenge and attack all those who still adhere to the essential laws of Occidental culture.

Of course, it would be absurd to hold a few individuals, however wicked and however powerful, solely responsible for a calamity of such apocalyptic dimensions. The disaster called Fascism-Nazism has its roots not only in the problematic character of two particular nations; it is derived, not only from the blunders of one particular peace conference or from the social conditions of a chaotic post-war period, but also from the abysmal depth and complexity of European thought. Undeniably, the intellectual climate of the continent fostered for many years the bacillus that has now become so murderously virulent.

The European literature of the nineteenth century—one of the most fascinating developments of human culture—was charged with ominous, or ambiguous, potentialities. If the philosophy of Enlightenment had sapped the authority of religion and feudalism, the pessimistic romanticism and extreme individualism of the following period questioned and undermined the validity of any hierarchic order—including all accepted categories of logic, ethics and aesthetics. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant inaugurated an intellectual revolution of staggering implications and consequences. Man conceived and communicated a new, daring vision of his own nature and destiny; the basic elements of the human drama—man's relation to God and society, his physical impulses and metaphysical aspirations—had to be redefined re-evaluated.

The generous illusions of the eighteenth century were refuted, once and for all, by the psychological discoveries of the nineteenth. How was it possible to ignore the sinister qualities of modern man, after the bold and tragic revelations of Nietzsche and Dostoyevski, Stendhal and Schopenhauer, Freud and Marx, Tolstoi and Kierkegaard? It became difficult, indeed impossible, to indulge in euphemisms about man's intrinsic goodness and simplicity, in view of the cruel and admirable truthfulness of such revelations.

The very concepts and traditions on which our civilization rests were affected by the grand intellectual assault. While the material world was being astoundingly altered by vast technical and scientific discoveries, man himself seemed to grow and change, to mature, to increase in glorious and terrible features. How dynamic and colourful the Human Comedy appeared in Balzac's epic interpretation! How fierce and fascinating was the Human Beast, as presented by Emile Zola! What unprecedented problems and solutions were anticipated in Heine's bitter-sweet irony, in Baudelaire's hazardous cult of vice and ugliness, in Rimbaud's rebellious adventure! The tragedy of human solitude—both the utter futility and inexplicable grandeur of our struggle—were experienced and formed

anew by men like Flaubert and Strindberg. Henrik Ibsen ventured to question such sacred institutions as marriage—one of the moral bases of bourgeois society; Oscar Wilde foolhardily challenged the sex prejudices of the middle class. Karl Marx—ininitely greater as an analyst than as a prophet—discovered the motive powers behind man's collective drama, while Sigmund Freud—equally inspired and equally one-sided—penetrated into the lurid maze of the human unconscious, where he found the tokens and scars of early traumas and incestuous appetites.

Nietzsche-Zarathustra bewitched the intellectual élite with his equivocal catchwords. Prometheus-like, he challenged the gods and defied the moral conventions of two thousand years; whatever had been taught or believed, from Socrates to Pascal, from St. Paul to Wagner, was doubted or attacked by this terrific revolutionary.

How thrillingly adventurous life seemed, up there, at glacial height, immeasurably beyond good and evil! An anti-intellectual, anti-humanitarian vogue swept the continent. The commonplace faith in Science, Reason and Progress provoked the new idolatry of Instinct and Intuition. The *élan vital*—the aimless energy of Life as such—was worshipped, no matter what its purpose or its direction.

But from Nietzsche's power philosophy it is only one step to Sorel's terrible defense of violence and to Spengler's dreary decline of the western world.

* * *

With all accepted codes and concepts questioned or destroyed, the moment appeared propitious for the last, decisive blow against Christian, Occidental civilization—the revolution of nihilism.

But Nazism and Fascism, it seems almost needless to say, strikingly failed—or, in fact, never tried—to fulfill the prophecies of those they claim as their literary predecessors. The demagogues of Berlin and Rome simply stole the most dubious ingredients of certain philosophies and mixed them into an obnoxious, indeed deadly, concoction. Is it Nietzsche's fault that his Superman becomes a revolting freak when represented by Hitler, Goering and Goebbels? Can we blame Tolstoi and Dostoyevski for the hackneyed imitation of their ecstasies? Is Schopenhauer's tragic vision responsible for the vulgar nihilism of maniacs and criminals? It might even be unfair to reproach Richard Wagner with Hitler's weakness for *Die Meistersinger*. . . .

All those European geniuses—being real Europeans and true geniuses—not only were bearers of the diabolic bacillus but also possessed and offered the remedy to render the poison wholesome and stimulating. The

European drama proceeds according to complex dialectical rules. Its crucial developments have often, if not always, a twofold impact: they contain the double germ of progress and disaster, of liberation and catastrophe. Each time the European genius challenges the established hierarchy of values and institutions, he threatens, deliberately or unwittingly, the basic structure of Christian civilization. This is true of the Renaissance, of Luther's Reformation, of the French Revolution and of the more recent experiments—both scientific-technical and psychological-artistic. And it is true also of the more fragile literary generation—our contemporaries—succeeding the creative giants of the nineteenth century. Their very weakness is often the source of their potency and persuasion. If some of them appear flippant and cynical, they may be so out of their tonic aversion to bombastic words and beautiful illusions. Some are bitter, out of their relentless truthfulness. Others owe their particular insight to an almost morbid sensitivity of the nervous system. Is there in modern writings a proclivity for the sterile and chaotic? Perhaps so; but there is also an authentic, passionate striving for new, valid concepts and images, the earnest, inspired will to find and formulate a new morality, a new kind of beauty, a new law, a new vision.

* * *

The pivotal experience of the first World War intensified and deepened both elements in European letters—on the one hand, the suicidal moods and feverish distortions and, on the other, the constructive will to find new solutions for the vital social and moral issues of our time. European literature emerged from the ordeal richer than ever in colors and contradictions, sublime beauties and dangerous tendencies.

The period from 1920 to 1940 in Europe was perhaps less dynamic and less significant, so far as creative writing is concerned, than were the first two decades of this century. Yet it would be erroneous to believe that literature in Europe stagnated during the years preceding the present disaster. There is a profusion of new, youthful voices—some of them shrill or weak or cheaply sensational, but others candid and powerful. True, this polyphonic concert echoes the anguish of past tribulations and often anticipates the screams and spasms of coming calamities. But at the same time we are struck by unmistakable signs foreshadowing the present fight against evil and even the future epoch of reconstruction and recovery.

* * *

It is not the purpose of this anthology to introduce or publicize any particular literary movement. In fact, there are no literary movements in the war-torn, war-weary Europe of 1943; there are only the brave, if secret, opponents, the tragic victims and the venal flunkys of a totalitarian dictatorship.

The last great boom of literary schools and coteries in Europe existed during the years immediately after the first World War. It was then that Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, and the like (all started shortly before or shortly after 1914) became popular and dominated the artistic scene. Their hectic glory, however, utterly failed to last. Yet the influence of those anti-realistic—or surrealist—tendencies is still noticeable and still stimulating, while the products and patterns of the original schools have long become stale and meaningless.

During the following years—from 1925 to 1940—no literary formula was generally accepted by the continental vanguard. Of course, there were groups and cliques, Marxists, neo-Catholics, neo-Conservatives, and so forth, but their slogans and styles were determined by non-literary motives and interests. The leading figures of the European literary scene—men like Rilke and Valéry, Gide and Ortega y Gasset, Thomas Mann and Croce—may have had the authority to launch their own literary programs, but did not choose to do so.

There were no “movements,” but there was a rich variety of trends and tastes, promising efforts and superb accomplishments. Drama, novel, criticism, even poetry, continued to flourish—almost incredibly—while the continent was drifting towards disaster. No doubt Europe’s social and political élites failed signally in their task of leading and enlightening the muddled, malcontent peoples. But the record of the literary men is, on the whole, more impressive and more honorable than is the one of politicians and industrialists. The majority of European writers were not unaware of the dangers confronting them, nor were they frightened or paralyzed by their sinister insight. It would be indeed unfair to condemn the creative minds of Europe en bloc as “irresponsible” or even as treacherous. Naturally, there are sad exceptions. But in general the representatives of European letters did their utmost to warn their continent against the imminent catastrophe and, at the same time, to increase its glory by contributing new works and testimonies, some of them of sound and lasting value.

It is, then, the purpose of this anthology to present as comprehensive

and as unbiased a survey as possible of what is soundly alive and lastingly valid in the European literary production of the past two decades.

* * *

Of course, it was impossible to omit in this selection all symptoms of decadence and confusion; they are inherent in the works of the very authors who may turn out to be the heralds of a coming European renaissance. But we made it our policy to exclude from this book all those writers in whose style and ideology fascist elements predominate.

We had at first thought—somewhat apprehensively—that such political discrimination might complicate and corrupt our choice. But the omission of Hitler's and Mussolini's literary champions proved only a minor loss. Nobody will miss Hanns Johst and Marinetti—those ludicrous *poetae laureati* of the Berlin-Rome Axis. And as for those “unpolitical” conservatives who made their peace with the devil—as did Hans Carossa in Germany, Gracia Deledda in Italy—most of them are rather on the boring side. It is indeed possible to present a fairly complete panorama of contemporary European letters without admitting anybody who stained or forfeited his prestige by too intimate a contact with the powers of barbarism.

Yet, there are cases that caused us a little difficulty—Gerhart Hauptmann, for instance, Knut Hamsun and Gabriele d'Annunzio. Their literary rank is beyond any question. Should we do without them because of their political misbehavior? Undeniably, Hauptmann's early dramas are still powerful, regardless of his shortsighted servility toward Hitlerism. But then how long ago is it that he wrote *The Weavers* and *Hannele's Ascension*? The truth is that he produced nothing of real interest after 1918. This anthology, however, covers only the period between the two world wars.

That is why D'Annunzio hardly fits our scheme, quite apart from all political considerations. His poses and vagaries, accents and adventures, are impregnated with the unmistakable flavor of the *fin de siècle*; his theatrical fascination is a phenomenon of the past. It seemed more pertinent to include G. A. Borgese's brilliant analysis of D'Annunzio's character and career than to present a sample from the poet's somewhat over-aged work.

And what about Knut Hamsun—that unique old wizard of Norwegian solitudes? True, he lost his genius with his political integrity: the more ardent his panegyrics of Nazism, the more boring his novels. Yet, some of the things he produced between 1919 and 1939 are of compelling

G. Agnew The Fa