CHAPTER XXV

The Cultural Afterglow of the Twenties

Although the Weimar Republic lasted so short a time, there are certain qualities in its culture which separate it from the pomposity of the style of William II and from the sterility of the Nazi era. In the first few years release from the tensions of the war and from the inhibitions of the old regime led to rapid, even frenzied, productivity. In the last few years there was an urge to speak before it was too late. It was a rich and full period but one marked in all forms of art by a certain despondency, as if it recognized that it was an epilogue to the story of German art. More specifically, literature and the arts reflected the diversity and conflict that were evident at the political and social levels.

If the period had a prophet, it was Oswald Spengler. In 1917 and 1922 respectively, appeared the two volumes of his ponderous philosophy of history, The Decline of the West, a title that sounds much more melancholy in its German form, Die Untergang des Abendlandes. In this work Spengler, using many biological analogies and an impressive amount of scholarly jargon, examines his three great periods of Western man which he called the Apollonian, the Magian, and the Faustian. He compares each of these to the four seasons of the year and concludes that the latest, the Faustian, is in its late autumn phase and that its inevitable death and decay is not far in the future. Spengler adduces all sorts of arguments to prove his thesis. Every great period has its time of "culture," when it is vibrant and alive with great ideas and great artistic output. It then moves into the time of "civilization," when it has crystallized in its forms and produces only technical and mechanistic achievements. Spengler had no trouble in finding proofs of the latter in the twentieth century. He was almost devoid of spirituality and thus of any sense of salvation. The Decline of the West seemed to fit into its moment of publication all too well. It was immensely popular both in Germany and abroad. It caused people to think that perhaps they were dancing on their graves and that they should eat, drink, and be merry.
Spengler continued his line of thought in later works, especially his *Years of Decision*, in which he comments obliquely on the Nazi triumph and warns the world of the dangerous rise of the nonwhite races.

The protest against mechanization, which had played such a considerable role in the literary production of the empire, continued to dominate much of the writing of the republic. There were some who felt that Germany had earned her downfall in the war by neglecting the specific German virtues of inwardness and spirituality and substituting for them the worship of mammon. Others felt that now was the time for the Germans to rebuild their lost world by getting rid of the modern mechanized democracy so alien to real "Germanity."

Walther Rathenau, the martyred foreign minister, was not only a political figure but also a social, political, and economic thinker who published several volumes of essays on a wide variety of subjects. Although his large fortune arose from the unchecked capitalism of the late nineteenth century, Rathenau was very suspicious of that system. When he wrote approvingly of socialism, it was not of the Marxian brand that he was thinking. He was interested in an organic society as opposed to the "horizontal," vote-counting organization of modern democracy. His own background made him conscious of the importance of the technician in the twentieth century. He seemed, although he is a difficult author to condense, to conceive of a controlling elite of education and ability, which would contribute the necessary technical knowledge and inventiveness. It is interesting to find in Rathenau this concept of a ruling elite, a concept so typical of contemporary social thought.

Another leader in the protest against mechanization was Count Hermann Keyserling whose best-known work is *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*. Keyserling traveled a great deal and delivered many lectures in a variety of countries including the United States, lectures which were well attended, especially by women. His study of Asia impressed him with the differences between the West and the East. He contrasted the concreteness of the West with the spirituality of the East and developed the idea that Germany might become the agent to spiritualize the West. Keyserling was one of a number of thinkers during this period who established schools or circles to propagate their ideas. His, called the School of Wisdom, was at Darmstadt, where he attracted a number of disciples.

Thomas Mann was unquestionably the outstanding German writer of the period; a good case can be made for the judgment that his *Magic Mountain* (1924) was the major work of the period. It is impossible to deny Mann's importance; it is possible not to admire much of his writing. He was a many-faceted man who lived to a considerable age
in a time of great change. Thus the evolution of his thought is complex, but there seems to be one pervasive quality running throughout his work: decay, disease, putrescence. Part of this is derived no doubt from Mann's family background; he was born in Lübeck of one of those commercial patrician families whose decline he describes in his first important work, the realistic social novel *Buddenbrooks: Death in Venice*, perhaps his most artistic achievement, is laid in an epidemic-ridden city. *The Magic Mountain* takes place in a tubercular sanatorium. His last major work, *Doctor Faustus*, concerns a syphilitic composer of genius who sells his soul to acquire some years of productivity. The coincidence of Thomas Mann with Oswald Spengler is instructive.

Mann was a considerable artist and was constantly concerned with the position of the artist, who for him was central. He stresses the dichotomy between the artist and the bourgeois society in which he exists. Mann was an artistic snob; bourgeois vulgarity was anathema to him. In *Death in Venice* the protagonist is content to lose his life to gain a few glimpses of the absolute beauty represented by the little boy Tadzio. In *The Magic Mountain* Hans Castorp achieves salvation and release from the sanatorium through the dazzling beauty of a fruitless dash to the battlefields of World War I. Much of this artist-vs.-bourgeois attitude can be considered an allegory of Germany or the Western world in general, a world in thrall to vulgarity.

Mann's political opinions underwent changes during the years, although he did not like to think of himself in a political context. Toward the end of World War I he published a strange book called *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*, which he described as his contribution to the war effort. In it he takes a radically German view and attacks Germany's enemies along the old line followed by so many Germans: rationalism, lack of emotional depth, lack of inwardness, etc. During the twenties his attitude evolved into one of conservative democracy. Mann was early convinced of the danger of Hitler, and soon after the Nazis came to power, left Germany and lived in exile until after World War II. He conducted much anti-Nazi propaganda and became a citizen of the United States, where he wrote a good deal that was overtly democratic.

Among those who believed that Germany now had a chance to rebuild herself in terms of her own deepest qualities, perhaps the best known was Arthur Möller van den Bruck; his work, *The Third Empire (Das Dritte Reich)*, gave the Nazis a phrase which they used to describe their regime. The First Reich was the medieval empire; the Second Reich, Bismarck's Germany. Möller van den Bruck was the prophet of the "conservative revolution," which, led from the right, would emphasize the purely German emotional and instinctive qualities and avoid the
arid rational forms developed by the West. He was opposed to Spengler’s pessimism and believed that Germany had a future which depended on the integration of the national spirit. He detested democracy and socialism as they are usually interpreted, but believed in an organic German socialism in which there would not be an attempt to level men but to place each according to his talents, an idea not far from the Nazi principle of leadership. Möller disliked any form of internationalism; his socialism was distinctly national socialism, a concept which he made popular when the phrase was still little known. Once again we have the old German protest against reason and the support of instinct.

Möller van den Bruck was not the only thinker to be attracted by the concept of the conservative revolution. A great many people, especially young men, felt that the Weimar Republic represented decadence and that Germany should restore herself through a return to her traditional values. Some of these people were active on a journal called *Die Tat* ("Action") and are generally referred to as the *Tatkreis*. While it is not fair to call them Nazis or even proto-Nazis, it is true that they were influential in undermining the faith of intellectuals in the Weimar state.

Rainer Maria Rilke, who died in 1926, and Stefan George, who lived a few months into the Nazi period, remain the leading names in poetry, although both of them made their reputations before the war. Rilke’s last volume of verse, the *Duineser Elegies*, was tinged with the melancholy and despair which came of the war and revolution. He seemed to long for death. George was the pure artist; anything that smacked of vulgarity was hateful to him. A high priest in his ivory tower, George constantly purified his language and sought for the embodiment of divine beauty in the heroes of the past. He formed around himself a circle (the *Georgukreis*) of younger writers, who did translations of great foreign works and also biographies of great leaders of the past. Although George would have been repulsed by the blatant vulgarity of the Nazis, he and his circle have been criticized both for remaining so aloof from the currents of the time and also for glorifying the concept of the leader.

It is not accurate, of course, to suggest that all literary production in Germany during the Weimar period was conservative, traditional, or decadent. The extreme intellectual freedom of the period led to all sorts of political tendencies and wide experimentation. Among the socialist writers was the tragic Ernst Toller, one of the leaders of the Communist revolt in Bavaria in 1919 who finally committed suicide in New York in 1939. Another was Bertold Brecht, who is probably best known to American readers for the sardonic and satirical, even mordant, libretto he wrote for Kurt Weill’s *Threepenny Opera*. Less violent and more
democratic was Thomas Mann’s older brother Heinrich, who moved with the times so that his works have in recent years been prominently displayed on book stalls in the eastern sector of Berlin.

Pacifism contributed at least three major figures to the period. One of these was Fritz von Unruh, an aristocratic Prussian who served as an officer during the war. He was so horrified by his experiences that he devoted his considerable talent to writing against war and calling for the brotherhood of man. Perhaps less of an artist but a more popular writer was Erich Maria Remarque, whose famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front (Im Westen nichts Neues)*, stressing the squalor and brutality of war, became a handbook for pacifists. During the last years of the republic it was usual for Nazis to attend showings of the motion picture made from this book in order to boo, hiss, and shout it down. Of course, it was banned in Germany after 1933, along with many other works mentioned in this chapter. A popular satire on the army and militarism was Arnold Zweig’s *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*. Another author who lamented the social fate of mankind was Hans Fallada, whose *Little Man, What Now?* is perhaps the best description of the sufferings of the proletariat during the Great Depression.

Among the historical authors one of the most outstanding was a woman. This was Gertrud von Le Fort, whose spirituality pervades her writing. Her novels are usually set at a poignant moment in church history, medieval or modern, and show the constant conflict between the lovers of God and His haters. An example is *The Song at the Scaffold*, which tells of the martyrdom of a group of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution. She relates it without affected pathos and straightforwardly analyzes the personalities of the nuns and their approach toward death. Another major female writer of the time was Ricarda Huch, who was also fascinated by history. She wrote both historical novels and scholarly historical works dealing with an extraordinary variety of subjects. She seemed to be happiest when looking back with reverence at the period when an imperial German and Christian crown bound Christendom together in the empire of the Middle Ages.

Ernst Jünger is a special case and a man whose changes in attitude make an instructive study. His main writing, *The Worker*, published as late as 1932 but representative of other things he had written, is a complete statement of the veneration of the young, vigorous male who was to create the new world and who is so beautifully portrayed in the war memorial in Munich. The war ended the cult of the idea of progress; it also ended slavery to the bourgeois ideology. It is now the time for the young man, front fighter or worker, who will accept the elementary forces of life with all their dangers and their challenges. This young man
is not an individual and does not want to be one; he wishes to embody an anti-Christian group will in the new nationalism.

The Weimar Republic offered literary fare of almost any sort. In the fine arts there was also great stirring and experimentation with new forms. In architecture Germany provided the world with new styles and new types of building, some of them extremely interesting. Much of this experimentation centered around the Bauhaus in Dessau, led by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. New structural concepts stressing simplicity and functionalism introduced there remain the basis for much of the work of today.

The unique contribution of Weimar Germany to painting was the school of expressionism (e.g., the work of Franz Marc), much of which involved piercing social criticism of bourgeois society. Perhaps the work that will endure longest is the extraordinarily compassionate drawing of Käthe Kollwitz, whose delineation of the poor and downtrodden in their misery is unique.

In music it may be that greater achievements were made in the twenties in performance than in new composition. A few of the old giants were still alive, notably Richard Strauss and Arnold Schönberg. Strauss had passed his great period; he is one of those artistic geniuses whose important work is accomplished in youth. His last thirty years saw little significant production. Schönberg, however, maintained his activity and continued to be a central figure of musical controversy because of his atonal ideas and his use of the twelve-tone scale.

Of the younger generation of composers Alban Berg and Paul Hindemith are the most noteworthy. Berg, who died at fifty, composed in Wozzeck the most important opera since Puccini. Its atonality and difficulty have kept it a subject of dispute, but it has been performed in most of the major opera houses of the world. Paul Hindemith, a somewhat more orthodox composer, became famous in later years.

The performance of music remained at the same high level that was set in the nineteenth century. The great orchestras and opera houses of Berlin, Munich, and many other cities maintained a standard which can be inferred simply from the mention of the names of three conductors who were directing simultaneously: Wilhelm Furtwängler, Bruno Walter, and Hans Knappertsbusch. At Bayreuth the annual Wagner festivals continued under the direction of the master’s son, Siegfried Wagner, while just across the border in Salzburg a new festival began in honor of Mozart.

It was not only in the field of serious music that the Weimar Republic made important achievements. The old German tradition of comic opera and musical comedy was not neglected. Perhaps the best example of
this was the enormously popular \textit{Jonny Spielt Auf} ("Johnny Strikes Up") by Ernst Krenek, which was first produced in 1927 at Leipzig and swept Germany and Europe. The legitimate stage was dominated by the rich talent of Max Reinhardt, whose famous production of \textit{The Miracle} toured the Western world. The German motion picture industry produced important artistic successes with such stars as Elizabeth Bergner, Marlene Dietrich, Emil Jannings, and Erich von Stroheim. Probably in America the best-known German film of the period is \textit{The Blue Angel} with Jannings and Dietrich, which is still revived as a classic.

It goes without saying that Germany maintained her high level of scholarship in both the social and natural sciences. It will suffice merely to mention the names of Max Weber in sociology, Friedrich Meinecke in history, Albert Einstein in physics, Max Planck in mathematics, and in psychology Sigmund Freud, who lived most of his life in nearby Austria.

Germany participated to the full in the jazz-age madness characteristic of the whole world in the twenties. During these years Berlin has been described as one of the most libertine and dissolute cities in modern history. There was an almost unrestricted outlet for any kind of sexual drive or bohemian activity. The puritanical strain in the lower-middle-class Nazis was grossly affronted by this; the party launched tirades against what they termed \textit{Kulturbolschewismus} ("the bolshevization of culture"), although the connection between the artistic world of Weimar Germany and the Bolshevik party was not always discernible.

In retrospect the frenzied and agitated decade of the twenties looks like a \textit{danse macabre}. The observer today knows where all this was to lead, but at the time prosperity looked endless and the chance for gaiety and abandon without limit. Some of the creative minds of the period, with the sixth sense of the artist, saw where Germany was heading and put their fears on paper or canvas or in musical notation, where they are easily perceivable. However, they were the minority. The great mass danced on heedlessly, recklessly, until in 1929 and 1930 the cock crew and the dancers had to return to their graves.