

O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!

September 1914*

The nations are at each other's throats; every day countless men are suffering and dying in terrible battles. In the midst of the sensational news from the front, I have recalled, as sometimes happens, a long-forgotten moment from my boyhood years. I was fourteen. One hot summer day I was sitting in a schoolroom in Stuttgart, taking the famous Swabian state examination. The subject of the essay we were to write was dictated to us: 'What good and what bad aspects of human nature are aroused and developed by war?' What I wrote on the subject was based on no experience of any kind and accordingly the result was dismal; what I then as a boy understood about war, its virtues and burdens, had nothing in common with what I should call by these names today. But in connection with the daily events and that little reminiscence, I have lately thought a good deal about war, and since

* *O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!* (literally, 'O Friends, not these tones!') has immediate associations for the cultivated German. These are the first words of the recitative, sung by the bass soloist, that introduces the choral setting of Schiller's *An die Freude* ('Ode to Joy') in the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

it has now become customary for men of the study and workshop to vent their opinions on the subject, I no longer hesitate to express mine. I am a German, my sympathies and aspirations belong to Germany; nevertheless, what I wish to say relates not to war and politics but to the position and tasks of neutrals. By this I mean not the politically neutral nations but all those who as scientists, teachers, artists, and men of letters are engaged in the labours of peace and of humanity.

We have been struck lately by signs of a ruinous confusion among such neutrals. German patents have been suspended in Russia, German music is boycotted in France, the cultural productions of enemy nations are boycotted in Germany. Many German papers propose to carry no further translation, criticism, or even mention of works by Englishmen, Frenchmen, Russians, and Japanese. This is not a rumour but an actual decision that has already been put into practice.

A lovely Japanese fairy tale, a good French novel, faithfully and lovingly translated by a German before the war started, must now be passed over in silence. A magnificent gift, lovingly offered to our people, is rejected because a few Japanese ships are attacking Tsingtao. And if today I praise the work of an Italian, Turk, or Rumanian, I must be prepared for the possibility that some diplomat or journalist may transform these friendly nations into enemies before my article goes to press.

At the same time we see artists and scholars joining in the outcry against certain belligerent powers. As though today, when the world is on fire, such utterances could be of any value. As though an artist or man of letters, even the best and most famous of us, had any say in matters of war.

Others participate in the great events by carrying the war into their studies and writing bloodthirsty war songs or rabid articles fomenting hatred among nations. That perhaps is the worst of all. The men who are risking their lives every day at the front may be entitled to bitterness, to momentary anger and hatred; the same may be true of active politicians. But we writers, artists, and journalists – can it be our function to make things worse than they are? Is the situation not already ugly and deplorable enough?

Does it help France if all the artists in the world condemn the Germans for endangering a beautiful piece of architecture? Does it do Germany any good to stop reading English and French books? Is anything in the world made better, sounder, righter when a French author vilifies the enemy in the crudest terms and incites 'his' army to bestial rage?

All these manifestations, from the unscrupulously invented 'rumour' to the inflammatory article, from the boycotting of 'enemy' art to the defamation of whole nations, have their source in a failure to think, in a mental laziness that is perfectly pardonable in a soldier at the front but ill becomes a thoughtful writer or artist. From this rebuke I exempt in advance all those who believed even before the war that the world stopped at our borders. I am not speaking of those who regarded all praise of French painting as an outrage and saw red when they heard a word of foreign origin; they are merely continuing to do what they did before. But all those others who were more or less consciously at work on the supranational edifice of human culture and have now suddenly decided to carry the war into the realm of the spirit – what they are doing is wrong and grotesquely unreasonable. They served humanity and believed

in a supranational ideal of humanity as long as no crude reality conflicted with this ideal, as long as humanitarian thought and action seemed convenient and self-evident. But now that these same ideals involve hard work and danger, now that they have become a matter of life and death, they desert the cause and sing the tune that their neighbours want to hear.

These words, it goes without saying, are not directed against patriotic sentiment or love of country. I am the last man to forswear my country at a time like this, nor would it occur to me to deter a soldier from doing his duty. Since shooting is the order of the day, let there be shooting – not, however, for its own sake and not out of hatred for the execrable enemy but with a view to resuming as soon as possible a higher and better type of activity. Each day brings with it the destruction of much that all men of good will among the artists, scholars, travellers, translators, and journalists of all countries have striven for all their lives. This cannot be helped. But it is absurd and wrong that any man who ever, in a lucid hour, believed in the idea of humanity, in international thought, in an artistic beauty cutting across national boundaries, should now, frightened by the monstrous thing that has happened, throw down the banner and relegate what is best in him to the general ruin. Among our writers and men of letters there are, I believe, few if any whose present utterances, spoken or written in the anger of the moment, will be counted among their best work. Nor is there any serious writer who at heart prefers Körner's patriotic songs to the poems of the Goethe who held so conspicuously aloof from the War of Liberation.

Exactly, cry the super-patriots, we have always been suspicious of Goethe, he was never a patriot, he contaminated the

German mind with the benign internationalism which has plagued us so long and appreciably weakened our German consciousness.

That is the crux of the question. Goethe was never wanting as a patriot, though he wrote no national anthems in 1813. But his devotion to humanity meant more to him than his devotion to the German people, which he knew and loved better than anyone else. He was a citizen and patriot in the international world of thought, of inner freedom, of intellectual conscience. In the moments of his best thinking, he saw the histories of nations no longer as separate, independent destinies but as subordinate parts of a total movement.

Perhaps such an attitude will be condemned as an ivory-tower intellectualism that should hold its tongue in a moment of serious danger – and yet it is the spirit in which the best German thinkers and writers have lived. There can be no better time than now to recall this spirit and the imperatives of justice, moderation, decency, and brotherhood it implies. Can we let things come to such a pass that only the bravest of Germans dare prefer a good English book to a bad German one? That the attitude of our military men, who treat an enemy prisoner with consideration, becomes a living reproach to our thinkers, who are no longer willing to respect and esteem the enemy even when he is peaceful and brings benefits? What is to happen after the war, in a period which even now inspires us with some misgiving, when travel and cultural exchange between nations will be at a standstill? And who can be expected to work toward a better state of affairs, toward mutual understanding – who, I say, if not those of us who are sitting here at our desks in the knowledge that our brothers

are standing in the trenches? Honour be to every man who is risking his life amid shot and shell on the battlefield! Upon the rest of us, who love our country and do not despair of the future, it becomes incumbent to preserve an area of peace, to strike bridges, to look for ways, but not to lash out (with our pens!) and still further demolish the foundations of Europe's future.

One more word to those who are filled with despair by this war and believe that because there is a war all culture and humanity are dead. There has always been war, ever since the earliest human destinies known to us, and there was no reason on the eve of this one for the belief that war had been done away with. Such a belief was engendered only by the habit of a prolonged peace. There will be war until the majority of human beings are able to live in the Goethean realm of the human spirit. Wars will be with us for a long time, perhaps forever. Nevertheless, the elimination of war remains our noblest aim and the ultimate consequence of the Western, Christian ethic. A scientist searching for a way to combat a disease will not drop his work because a new epidemic has broken out. Much less will 'peace on earth' and friendship among men ever cease to be our highest ideal. Human culture comes into being through the conversion of animal drives into more spiritual impulses, through the sense of shame, through imagination and knowledge. Though to this day no panegyrist of life has succeeded in escaping death, the conviction that life is worth living is the ultimate content and consolation of all art. Precisely this wretched World War must make us more keenly aware that love is higher than hate, understanding than anger, peace than war. Or what would be the good of it?