

The Lost Stream of Frankness and Freedom

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Is there any spiritual significance in the restlessness and confusion of our times? Is there any definite tendency or undercurrent whose nature we may grasp and the direction of whose movement we may discover? If there is any tendency or meaning, what is it? Such was the question that I was laboring with in the years 1913 and 1914. I was not seeking a theory of history, nor was I in quest of some magic formula. My interest was the very practical one of a teacher and preacher who was anxious to keep his work free from antithetic efforts. I did not relish the idea of spending half my energy on work whose results would be neutralized by further activities. I was in search of some norm to guide me in sifting the conflicting demands upon my attention.

Two rather firmly established convictions encouraged me to believe that I might gain something of value from such a quest. First and foremost I believed without reservation in the method of freedom of investigation, freedom of thought, and freedom of utterance. I had long been convinced that the doctrine of free trade in ideas is the greatest discovery of mankind. I was willing to exchange ideas if I found any that I thought better than the few I already had. In the second place I had strong conviction that beneath the surface of turmoil and conflict in modern life there is an undercurrent of purpose that has spiritual value. Looking back upon the beginnings of the Christian Era from the distance of nineteen hundred years we feel quite certain that we can trace the development of a fundamental change. Man was beginning to grasp the idea of the unity of universal forces; to see that between man and that unity some ethico-spiritual relationship exists. So I believed it possible to discover beneath the conflicts, the remaking of boundaries, and the abandonment of long-accepted sanctions a clue to the nature and direction of the undercurrent of our own day. I believed that "This incredible rush and

heat, this [strange] ecstatic fever of dreams"¹ of our modern life has a meaning, that when the dross of lust for pleasure and power has been cleared away there remains a residuum of spiritual significance in the life of man.

The First Clue. Not realizing at the time whither it would lead me, I was deeply impressed in 1913, as I have been frequently puzzled since, by the implications of the letter of greetings sent to the poet Goethe by fifteen English men of letters on the occasion of the eighty-second birthday in 1831 of the "German Master." Carlyle, Burns, Southey, and Wordsworth were among those who sent the token of affection and signed the accompanying letter. The letter is an interesting document.

We hope you will do us the honor to accept this little Birthday Gift; which as a true testimony of our feelings may not be without value.

We said to ourselves: As it is always the highest duty and pleasure to show reverence to whom reverence is due, and our chief, perhaps our only benefactor is he who by act and word, instructs us in wisdom, so we undersigned, feeling towards the Poet Goethe as the spiritually taught towards their spiritual Teacher, are desirous to express that sentiment openly and in common. For which end we have determined to solicit his acceptance of a small English Gift, proceeding from us all equally, on his approaching birthday; that so, while the venerable man still dwells among us, some memorial of the gratitude we owe him, and think the whole world owes him, may not be wanting.

On the carving engraved on a golden belt were these words: "To the German Master; from Friends in England."

"Instructs us in wisdom." "The gratitude the whole world owes him." "The German Master." "Their spiritual Teacher." Certainly this must be a clue to follow. Could I but discover the wisdom in which "the German Master" instructs the fifteen English men of letters and the whole world, it might prove to be the very spiritual value that I sought—the current purpose that has carried on through the

¹ From Walt Whitman's "Years of the Modern" in *Leaves of Grass*, 1892.

nineteenth century, giving unity and purpose to the opening decades of the twentieth. In search of this wisdom I lived for months in Goethe's world, his world of literary creations, his world of "Nature, Liberty, and Fraternity," his world of "Storm and Stress." I followed this "spiritual teacher" in search for wisdom; in his dramatic entrance into the world of letters; in his tragic (as it seems to me) loss of freedom in accepting the patronage of the Duke of Sax-Weimer; and in the indifferent success with which he sought to re-establish himself as a free and independent man.

As I sifted the material of his abundant life for the "wisdom" that gave it meaning, I found myself going back to his first important work, the outburst of his fresh free youthful ardor, *Gotz von Berlichingen With The Iron Hand*, published in 1773. Whatever may be said of its limitations from the point of view of art and immaturity of thought, the fact remains that this play won for him immediate, dramatic recognition as a man of letters. The youth of Germany responded. Some note in the play went below the surface of their lives and released great floods of emotion, thought, and action that had been held in leash by the formalism and conventions of the times. Was it that Goethe, stimulated in part by the reading of Shakespeare and saturated with the results of his quest in German folklore and historical tales, had tapped spiritual values of unfathomed depth? Drafting from the sixteenth century the romantic Robber Baron, *Gotz von Berlichingen*, Goethe gives expression, through this heroic character, to some spiritual value, long suppressed, half forgotten, but indigenous in the Teutonic character, ready to be called to action. What was that value? Caught between the rapacious and demoralizing aggression of the Empire, on the one hand, and Bishop Barons of the Church, on the other, *Gotz*, Baron of Romantic Feudalism, of private warfare, of the days of "Frankness and Freedom," whose word was a bond, and whose honor was more precious than life, speaks and acts with a bold self-reliant integrity. He was of the very essence of that spiritual self-mastery and freedom that knows no fear, that courts no favors, and exacts no privileges, a freeman. Straight to the very heart of young Germany his clear call from the days of "Frankness and Freedom" goes. The crust of convention had been broken. The voice of a master had spoken. Youth had heard. The divining rod of insight had tapped a well of living water. The youth had come to quench their thirst. Goethe had become a leader in "The

Revolution." Even in "the days of treachery" "Frankness and Freedom" were speaking again.

From what depths did this stream of spiritual freedom come? From what sources did it derive its power? What was its quality? It must come from sources that were deeper and broader than a mere truculent nationalism. Did not the English men of letters find here some deep spiritual teaching? Did not Carlyle believe that the two great streams of English Literature, the chivalry and romance of Sir Walter Scott, as well as the poetry of Burns came from Goethe as the fountainhead? Did not the influence of Goethe penetrate the growing literary life of the new nation on this side of the Atlantic? What was the spirit that was breaking through the restrictions and conventions in Germany; that was passing the boundaries of language and governments; that was challenging and consolidating the established order of all Europe? Thus far I had gone in my quest for a clue to the meaning of present day restlessness when the great war came. I felt that I had at least found a clue that must be followed.

As I pondered on the significance of that spiritual light that shone during the closing years of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth centuries, I became more and more impressed by the conviction that it had a value whose meaning I had by no means grasped. At times I felt that I saw its meaning and then it would elude me like a phantom. The charges and counter-charges as to the causes and issues involved in the war were disturbing and puzzling. Any answer to my question must, of course, throw some light on the meaning of the war. What had the spirit of Frankness and Freedom to do with the war?

The clarifying suggestion came from the most unexpected source. I was reading Prof. J. A. Cramb's² "Germany and the Next War," seeking information on the immediate issue of the war itself with little thought of my quest for the "spiritual teaching" of "the German Master." As I followed with profound interest the powerful development and exposition of "the faith of young Germany in 1913 (Chapter IV, Past and Future) I suddenly realized that he was dealing with facts and values to which might be given an interpretation quite different from the conclusions drawn by the author. Frequently criticism carries implications

²John Adam Cramb (1862-1913), Scottish historian.

that are not stated in the text. In Chapter IV Prof. Cramb is marshalling his forces for a crushing attack on the pretentious faith of young Germany in 1913, a faith not only industrial and political but spiritual as well. He is expounding what he conceives to be Germany's faith as to the part she will play in the future of human thought. He makes Germany state her faith in the following words:

It is reserved for us to resume in thought that creative role in religion which the whole Teutonic race abandoned fourteen centuries ago. ... Germany and the whole Teutonic people in the fifteenth century made the great error. They conquered Rome, but dazzled by Rome's authority, they adopted the religion and the culture of the vanquished. Germany's own deep religious instinct, her native genius for religion ... was arrested, stunted, thwarted.

But:

The seventeenth century flung off Rome; the eighteenth undermined Galilee itself; Strauss completed the task that Eichhorn began; and with the opening of the twentieth century, Germany, her long travail past, is reunited to her pristine genius, her creative power in religion and in thought.

And what is the religion which, on the whole, may be characterized as the religion of the most earnest and passionate minds of young Germany? What is this new movement? The movement, the governing idea of the centuries from the fourteenth to the nineteenth, is the wrestle of the German intellect not only against Rome, but against Christianity itself. Must Germany submit to this alien creed derived from an alien clime? Must she forever confront the ages the borrower of her religion, her own genius for religion numbed and paralyzed?

Powerful! Overwhelming! A terrific indictment! But what are its implications? "The seventeenth century flung off Rome." Is not that the Reformation? Does Prof. Cramb mean to imply that Germany was in fact the leader of the Reformation and that the rest of Europe simply followed in the wake of German intellectual and spiritual leadership? Did not all Europe join in the attempt to fling off Rome? Not all were successful. Even Luther, Zwingli, Calvin,

Cranmer and Knox went but part of the distance, but they did succeed in substituting for the "alien creed" of Rome the "alien" Bible as interpreted by German, French, or Anglo-Saxon scholars. This step was in effect the first victory in the long struggle for spiritual freedom. The Teutonic world had reviewed and passed its first judgement on the Bible.

But the logic of History is remorseless. The forces set in motion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could not be held in check. The status of the Bible as an infallible authority of supernatural character placed a premium on a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the Bible. Devout and devoted scholars gave themselves to this task of research only to discover that the Bible is not an infallible revelation. However valuable and valid may be the spiritual ethical content of the Bible, it is the product of man's experience, thought, and aspiration, colored and limited by the circumstances of its growth. Not only the right but the necessity of the individual to interpret the Bible for himself for which Simon Stumpf pleaded against both Zwingli and Dr. Faber of the Catholic party in the public disputation at Zurich in 1523, has been won by the compelling force of enlightenment, a victory of and for frank and free investigation. The essential claims of the left wing of the Protestant Reformation, persecuted and crushed for three centuries, have been vindicated. The Bible is an open book. The minds of the Western world review and pass judgement on its values.

With this in mind we pass on to re-read the remainder of Prof. Cramb's cycle of indictments. "The eighteenth century undermined Galilee; Strauss completed the task that Eichhorn began." That is not criticism. It is statement of fact. For more than a hundred years the entire Protestant world has been struggling with this question of the authority of Christ in the Christian Churches. The very multiplicity of interpretations of the nature of Christ's life and his teachings is witness to the fact that we have not succeeded in discovering in him a definite infallible authority to which even a majority would submit. The search for an infallible guide in matter of religion and morals in Christ is following the same line of development that the search for an infallible guide in the Bible has followed. However great may have been the contribution of Christ to the religious life of the western world, he has not become an infallible guide either in thought or practice. We no

longer trim our intellectual and moral life to conform to a recognized authority in Galilee, but rather we are attempting to impose on Galilee values that are essentially Western. The Churches of the Western world are now engaged in the conflict involved in the effort to maintain the right and the necessity of private judgement concerning Christ. In short, our Western world with its long travail past is reuniting to its pristine genius, its creative power in religion and thought.

We have been to school for a thousand years in Greece, in Rome and in Galilee. We have drunk deeply of their wisdom. We have adopted many of their forms, their ceremonials, and their dogmas. In terms of a Semitic mythology and tradition we have recast much of our own tradition. Under their tutelage we have disciplined our raw western characters, but we are still Western, still Teutonic in character. The characteristics woven into the fibre [sic] of a people by thousands of years of evolution are not to be erased by a few hundred years of schooling amid alien forms and customs. Overcome for a moment by the glamour of a distant background and culture, we thought it a gift from God, a revelation from above, an infallible guide. More intimate knowledge has robbed it of its magic. It has taken its place in the history of human evolution, and is being evaluated in terms of its intrinsic worth as an interpretation of human life and values. For four hundred years we have been trying to throw off the forms of our adopted culture. The conflict between the Papacy and the Empire; between the Empire and the states; the revolt against feudalism; the development of republican and democratic ideals; the evolution of modern philosophy; the revival of interest in Western world folklore; the succession of revolutions from the sixteenth century to the present; are witness to the spiritual struggle that is going on within our Western civilization to absorb the spiritual worth of our centuries of schooling under the "alien creed" of the Holy Roman Empire and the Holy Catholic Church, and, at the same time, to preserve that essential character that is ours by virtue of our own tradition. We have been struggling to throw off a superimposed authority government and a superimposed authority religion that we might develop a relationship in terms of frankness and freedom, an honorable relationship of freemen.

Such seemed to me to be the implications of Prof. Cramb's indictment of young Germany in 1913. The undercurrent of modern history pointed, not to the truculent nationalism of the German Empire, but to the forces that threatened its overthrow. The Empire was a survival of the "alien creed" of Rome. The threatening forces of protest and revolution were Teutonic. As I reflected upon these implications, tested them in the fields of literature, of philosophy, of social development, and of religious thought and practice, it became increasingly clear to me that Prof. Cramb had given me a real clue to the nature and character of that undercurrent of modern life that gives unity and meaning to the complex and revolutionary history of the Western world during the past four hundred years. To be sure the idea was not new, but the pungent and powerful use of it by Prof. Cramb gave it a new and striking significance and revealed the pervasive character of its issues. Judged in terms of behavior the story of our Western world for four hundred years is the story of a titanic struggle to break from an alien creed, to tell its own story, to regain its spiritual freedom; to interpret the world, life, God, and destiny in terms of its own character and experience as enlightened by the wisdom of the world. The Reformation was not merely flinging off Rome. It was the positive assertion of Western world character, the first step in the struggle for spiritual freedom. Goethe was instinctively true to reality when he drafted Gotz von Berlichingen from his sixteenth century world to speak to Germany and the world in 1773. The undercurrent of the Reformation and the undercurrent of "Nature, Liberty, Fraternity," and "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" were the same, the stream of Western world character, seeking, under the pressure of its inner compulsion the freedom to express with frankness and candor its spiritual values. Defeated in its struggle with the reaction following the Napoleonic era, it comes to the surface again in 1848, suffers a second defeat only to gather new force for a still greater struggle. Partially successful and temporarily stunned by the tragic convulsions of the great war and the reaction which is following it, this undercurrent towards a true spiritual freedom still gives unity and purpose, a guiding principle, to our thought and action. The alien creed of an authority government with its imperialism, its absolutism, must give way to more complete democracy. The alien creed of authority religion with its foreign creeds and shibboleths must give way to the interpretations of religious values

that bespeak the spirit and character of our Western world
in the twentieth century.

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