

Gertrud von le Fort

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The celebration of the eighty-fifth birthday last October in Oberstdorff, Bavaria, of Gertrud von le Fort passed off practically without comment in this country. Whilst the name of this Catholic authoress may not be unknown to the English public (the best known of her works, *Die Letzte am Schafott*, was the source of an opera by Poulenc performed at Covent Garden in 1958, and also of a Georges Bernanos scripted film produced in 1960), it would be true to say that much of her work remains literally a closed book—an unfortunate state of affairs, since her writings are concerned with many of the themes of more internationally celebrated literary figures such as Mauriac or our own Graham Greene.

Of Huguenot descent, Gertrud von le Fort was born in 1876 in Minden, Westphalia, and can trace a rich family history back to the times of the Reformation (three Le Forts fought as officers of Louis XVI in the Tuilleries, whilst the most famous of her ancestors, François le Fort had been admiral and companion to Peter the Great). From her father, a Prussian army officer, comes her love of history, plus a knowledge of military life, which stands her in good stead, for example, in her *Die Magdeburgische Hochzeit*, whilst her interest in religion stems from her mother, a devout Protestant believer. It was these subjects, History and Religion, that she proceeded to study at the universities of Heidelberg and Berlin, coming at the former under the guidance of the learned philosopher, Ernst Troeltsch; to him she is indebted for showing her the place of history as a basis for her work.

Shortly before she was received into the Catholic Church in 1925, her name became widely known to the German literary public for the first time with the publication of *Hymnen an die Kirche*. These hymns in praise of the Catholic Church, with their description of the overcoming of doubts on the part of the Soul and its final permeation with the spirit of the Church, had a great impact, and Paul Claudel wrote of these verses in glowing terms in the preface to the subsequent French translation of the work. Gertrud von le Fort had turned to writing at an early age, but being brought up in a strict household her youthful literary aspirations were not encouraged by her father. Such writings that did emanate from that pre-1924 period—comprising poems and

short stories intended for publication in literary journals—are generally in a minor key (and foreshadow but rarely the ‘problems’ which she portrays in her later works) and so she had already reached the age of thirty-eight before her name and work were more widely acclaimed. Since the 1924 *Hymns*, however, her works have appeared steadily, and to date (her latest book was published in 1961) she has three novels and some sixteen novellas (besides some poetry and essays) to her credit, all dealing with the problem of Grace.

Few of her works present this problem better than do the novels, *Der römische Brunnen*, 1927, and its sequel, *Der Kranz der Engel*, 1946, which together go to form *Das Schweisstuch der Veronika*. The authoress presents a *Kulturbild*, as the outlook of the generations at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries and their attitudes towards the Church are depicted. The old Wincklemann tradition is incorporated in the figure of the grandmother, who sits in her room and looks out onto the Pantheon in Rome, the ‘good pagan’, who relies on herself and has no need of the Church. Aunt Edelgart is an example of the person who, though a Christian, consciously turns away from the Church through a fear and inability to confide her spiritual problems in the most suitable person to give her advice, namely the priest, and goes instead to the psychiatrist—a modern predicament, this. Enzo is the budding Nazi who writes nihilistic verse and loves to wander about the fora, dreaming of the past glories of imperial Rome. Veronika, the heroine, is a girl who turns to, and is received into the Catholic Church (she resembles herein the Soul of the individual in *Hymnen an die Kirche*). The story develops the conflict of Veronika and Enzo over the question of civil marriage (for Enzo is not prepared to think in terms of a wedding within the Church) and symbolizes the then current position of Catholicism in the face of the new wave of heathen beliefs.

But herein one may well detect a possible source of weakness in her work. Gertrud von le Fort is indeed no *Programmdichterin*, but writing as she does in a, religiously speaking, pessimistic and even atheistic age, her writings with their message of love, Christian love, have a oneness of theme, due to which factor her characters tend often in consequence not to be real, individual, live people, but rather types. In *Der Kranz der Engel*, Enzo incorporating the Nazi spirit of godlessness, rants on and on in this vein, so much so that his subsequent conversion to a Church ceremony remains unhappily unconvincing and certainly out of character. Likewise Veronika, whose love for Enzo has become a

spiritual love (she feels it is her mission to win Enzo over to God and her readiness in the end to forego the Church ceremony and even the Sacraments is in accordance with her own spiritual conviction in this matter) remains a bloodless, unreal woman in her relations with her fiancé. Little wonder that Enzo asks if she is of flesh and blood. In contrast one is reminded of some of Graham Greene's portrayals of women. On the question of the threatened loss of the sacraments, the girl in *The Living Room* does not worry about the sacraments in her affair with the married man. 'I could live a lifetime without them (the sacraments)' she declares. Veronika, for her part, minds terribly, and can only carry on with her plan in the conviction that God is supporting her. Again in *Brighton Rock*, Rose is prepared to marry Pinkie in the Registry Office. She trusts in God, but her readiness to marry out of the Church is, one feels, out of love for Pinkie rather than for God. Veronika's readiness, however, in her case is surely more out of her love for God.

The crux of the matter is that in Gertrud von le Fort's work no place is given to the physical aspect of love. This view is confirmed in her novella, *Die Tochter Farinatas*, where Guido Novello looks forward to a night of love with Bice as a means of revenge on her dead father, Farinatas, for what he thinks to be an old wrong, only to be suddenly and unexpectedly deviated from his course of action, when she makes her appeal to him for the sake of a higher love (the love and salvation of the city of Florence) with the result that he leaves the city with his troops before the night is over. It is a seduction scene which never materializes. Significant indeed is the declaration of one of Gertrud von le Fort's characters in *Plus Ultra*: 'Know, my child, that there is but one love . . . and that stems from heaven'. In putting her trust in, and emphasis on, spiritual love, Gertrud von le Fort is not expressing anything that is not also found in the work of either Mauriac or Greene. But the difference between these writers and Gertrud von le Fort lies in the fact that the former give place—and perhaps not an insignificant place at that—to the expression of the physical aspects of love as well. Indeed, Martin Turnell in *The Art of French Fiction* (p. 309) writes of Mauriac: 'What disturbs his Catholic critics is a continual preoccupation with sexual relations, a barely concealed delight in the crude physical detail . . . '.

But this 'preoccupation' with sexual relations is not at all inconsistent with Mauriac's Christian beliefs. For him passion can be equated with love in the long run, and often he proclaims that religion is love. The

same applies to Graham Greene. Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* loves his mistress Helen and also God, and he is constantly tormented by the thought that he is 'hitting God when He is down'. His suicide is out of love for God as much as out of compassion for his wife and Helen, because he 'can't go on hurting Him'. With this difference of approach, however, the result is that Gertrud von le Fort (perhaps because of her upper-middle class background?) rarely gets to grips with sin in the way that these other two writers do; that, whereas Mauriac tries to 'make the sinner incarnate' (*Journal II*), and Greene does likewise, more often than not she gives an abstract picture of the sinner.

The religious writer is always concerned with the presence of evil. Mauriac attempts to make 'the universe of evil perceptible, tangible and odorous'. Greene plunges the reader without preamble into the very midst of evil with his real, vivid and often seamy modern settings (*The Power and the Glory*, *A Burnt Out Case*, etc.). Gertrud von le Fort also sets out to show the presence of evil in everyday life. But she does not place her stories in Greene's 'steamy swamps and industrial suburbia'. Indeed, a favourite setting for her is the convent (*Die Letzte am Schafott*, *Die Abberufung der Jungfrau von Barby*, *Die letzte Begegnung*) and the fact that in these stories acts of godlessness can be perpetrated even within the shadow of such holy places makes decidedly effective the atmosphere and reality of evil. Nor, in fact, does she necessarily resort to a modern setting, preferring instead historical backgrounds to her stories. Her love of history must not in any way be construed as escapism, an avoidance of present-day realities on her part. As a person whose family estate was confiscated by the Nazis, whose works were proscribed and who was eventually, like so many other Germans, forced to flee to Switzerland, Gertrud von le Fort is only too aware of the realities of life. Rather does she turn to history because she feels that wickedness in all its forms has been the same throughout the centuries and thus she seeks to mirror the present by taking examples from the past. But besides this indirect association, sometimes the past and the present are directly linked in a story, as, for example, in the novella *Am Tor des Himmels*, where the atom bomb and its consequences are considered in the light of reading, during an air raid in the last war, a manuscript describing Galileo's discoveries and their implications for the modern world. (As one might suspect from the message of Christian love which she imparts in her work, from her championing the Church as a necessary spiritual and moral force at all times, Gertrud von le Fort opposes strongly any idea of nuclear war).

Also there is another valid reason for her use of history in works written in the thirties. At a time when the National Socialists were not prepared to tolerate criticism and an anti-religious feeling prevailed, a writer could, and often did, veil his implied criticism of the regime behind a historical background.

Gertrud von le Fort takes historical examples from all centuries—from the very beginnings of Christianity (*Die Frau des Pilatus*), the Carolingian times (*Der Papst aus dem Ghetto*), on to the Thirty Years War (*Die Magdeburgische Hochzeit*), the French Revolution (*Die Letzte am Schafott*) down to the twentieth century (*Das Schweisstuch der Veronika*, *Das fremde Kind*). Much of the drive of her work derives, in fact, from her building her fictional story around one historical event to which all her energies can be directed. Thus the sacking of Magdeburg by the Imperialist troops in 1631 forms the basis of *Die Magdeburgische Hochzeit*, the death on the guillotine of sixteen Carmelite nuns in Paris in 1794 provides the background to *Die Letzte am Schafott*, the Schism in the Church in 1192 to *Der Papst aus dem Ghetto*.

Closely bound up with this love of history is her love for Germany. Feeling as she does that love must enter all forms of life, she appeals to the German people to exercise that same spirit of love by recalling their glorious past. In works such as the cycle, *Hymnen an Deutschland*, the novellas *Die Vöglein von Theres* and *Das Reich des Kindes*, for example, works all written in the thirties, Gertrud von le Fort calls to Germany to revert to the old concept of the Reich, where Church and State worked hand in hand, where the Holy Roman Emperor was the earthly representative of God. Her praises of Germany were never from political motives but from a purely Christian standpoint which has never wavered, even when she herself suffered at its hands. Thus in an essay published in Zürich shortly after the downfall of the Hitler regime, she appeals to the victors to exercise the spirit of mercy on the vanquished, despite all past horrors. The strength of this love for her native land may be judged from some lines of her poem, *Deutsches Lied*:

Ich müsste dennoch, dennoch sterben
Wenn Deutschland untergeht.

The reader of Gertrud von le Fort's works will not fail to realize the prominent place she devotes to the portrayal of women. In an essay, *Die Ewige Frau*, published in 1934 and revised in 1960, she sees woman as having a special and important role to play in modern life. Woman's mission, she asserts, is to act in accordance with the Christian

ideals of *virgo* (Veronika in *Das Schweisstuch der Veronika*), *sponsa* (Friederike in *Die Opferflamme*) and *mater* (Anne Elisabeth in *Die Verfemte*), as a means of countering the spirit of godlessness and destructive nature of man. The essay is, of course, based on the Catholic teaching concerning the Virgin Mary and it is interesting to note that long before Gertrud von le Fort formulated her ideas on the subject in her philosophical treatise, the figures of the *virgo*, etc., had already been featured in her fiction. In practically all of her works there is to be found an example of one of these types who is often contrasted with another woman who does not measure up to the Christian ideal—thus Blanche and Marie de l'Incarnation in *Die Letzte am Schafott*, Frau Bake and Erdmuth Plögen in *Die Magdeburgische Hochzeit*, Luise and Frau von Montespan in *Die letzte Begegnung*.

Her looking to woman as a means and hope of spreading and exemplifying the Christian ideal does not exclude the possibility of man also revealing like virtues. Though war and evil are perhaps more readily associated with man's destructive nature, yet is man also capable of a Christian outlook on life. She portrays such a figure in Tilly, the Imperialist leader in *Die Magdeburgische Hochzeit*, Heinrich in *Die Vöglein von Theres*, and the Prince of Beauvau in *Der Turm der Beständigkeit*. This last work, a novella set in eighteenth century France, tells how the Prince of Beauvau, an atheistic humanitarian, is confronted with the sufferings of some Huguenot women imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Their fortitude and faith despite, indeed because of, their sufferings has a profound effect on him, so that eventually he himself becomes converted to religious faith. The question of atheistic humanitarianism and religious faith which she deals with here surely echoes Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, in the climactic discussion of the priest and the chief of police.

Not by chance has Gertrud von le Fort turned increasingly to the form of the short story, and especially so since the second World War. The short story form has enjoyed great popularity in Germany in the post war years due to the American influence of Hemingway and others. Her own preference for the shorter prose form owes nothing to this influence. Not in her work is to be found the repetition, the colloquialisms, the seeming lack of conclusion, which one associates with the American version. Her application of the short prose work is a deliberate attempt to create dramatic tension in the expression of the conflict of good and evil by means of a rigid adherence to the features of the German *Novelle* with its traditionally few characters, its concen-

tration upon one event hinging on the *Wendepunkt* (turning-point), which in her case represents that stage in the story where the individual is called upon to make his decision for or against the Church and God. To maintain dramatic tension in the longer prose form of the novel is more difficult and Gertrud von le Fort's work over the years can be seen as a conscious attempt at a refinement of technique, whereby she can best present a backcloth of evil out of which the picture of Christian love may emerge. The short story demands a concentration upon the material in hand and allows for little deviation and sidetracking from the main point either on the part of the writer or of the reader. The building up of atmosphere and the dramatic nature of the dialogue that one finds so frequently in her work—notably in *Die Consolata*, where the main action takes place in an empty, deserted hall in which the papal legate and the defeated tyrant face each other, whilst outside the sounds of the approaching mob can be heard, or in *Die letzte Begegnung*, where the nun Luise and her former rival Frau von Montespan meet in a room in the convent and the plot is developed to a climactic peak in one long sequence—confirms one's opinion that Gertrud von le Fort successfully presents a drama in her short stories.

Symbolism plays a considerable and important part in her work. The present age has been described as one in search of symbols, but whereas the modern writer tends so often to draw upon personal and private ones, the symbols she uses are taken from the Bible, the Catholic Mass and the liturgy. One recalls that she did, after all, write at the time of the rise of the modern liturgical movement (one thinks of Paul Claudel in France as another example). For her, the cross is a dominant symbol as a sign of suffering, but of victory too. The guillotine in *Die Letzte am Schafott*, itself a sign of suffering symbolizes the Cross. Significantly it is the Cross in the cathedral in *Die Magdeburgische Hochzeit* which remains the focal point, unbowed and majestic, after the sack of the city. And ever present is the symbol of divine Grace in the form of a ray of light (as in *Hymnen an die Kirche*) or as a fountain (*Der römische Brunnen*).

Germany has long recognized its leading woman writer. In 1947 she was awarded the *Münchener Dichterpriis*, one year later the *Badischer Staatspreis*. The Gottfried Keller prize in 1952 and the Literature prize of North Rhine-Westphalia in 1955 were also bestowed on her. One cannot pretend that she is a writer of stature comparable to that of her practically exact contemporaries, Thomas Mann or Rilke, but she is a writer who seeks to present an important theme in godless times in a

simple and lucid fashion without resort to popular tricks. She has never renounced her serious literary concerns. She is a member of the older generation who has most decidedly helped in a bridging of the gap from the pre-second world war days to the present-day young writers, a person who has helped during those 'barren wastes of post war German literature' to create an atmosphere of stability both with her choice of theme with its ever optimistic note of hope, and with her use of clear, simple neo-classical language. As Greene wrote of Mauriac, so too one may say of Gertrud von le Fort that here is a writer for whom the visible world has never ceased to exist and whose characters are people with souls to save or to lose. If one can judge from the number of translations of her works of late, ranging from versions in English American to Japanese, then they may well be signs that people beyond the confines of Germany are coming to value her writings.

Heard and Seen

SITUATION REPORT

Whatever may be said by the band of young iconoclasts who have just started a new film magazine, *Movie*, there is a new spirit stirring in the British cinema. 'All we can see', they insist in type the size usually employed for minor headlines, 'is a change of attitude, which disguises the fact that the British cinema is as dead as before. Perhaps it was never alive. We are still unable to find evidence of artistic sensibilities in working order'. It is the privilege of the young to be extreme, and the editorial board of *Movie* is to be congratulated on breaking new critical ground on which to cultivate a fine and lively set of fresh ideas and prejudices that are in honourable descent from *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*: but not everyone is going to agree with them. To do them justice, agreement is the last thing they are seeking, since they feel that they have a great many new and important things to say that have been left unsaid in this country for far too long. And disagreement on the grand scale they soon aroused, as those who listened to Carl Foreman talking to them in the recent 'New Comment' programme dedicated to *Movie's* first number will remember with amusement.

Still it takes, as they say, all sorts to make a world; and if *Movie* is entitled to one opinion, this need not stop others from holding different ones. I, for one,