

APPENDIX D

INTRODUCTION TO LECTURE ON PASSION PLAY OF 1910

The Passion Play of Oberammergau was the expression of the two great impulses of the middle ages - a deep religious faith and a childlike imagination.

How these two thoughts longer maintained their mediaeval expression in the little Swiss village can better be understood by contrast with the rest of Europe, and the Passion Play may have a deeper significance if you will bear with me for a few moments while we construct a background upon which to sketch the Passion Play of 1910.

He who would understand ever so little of the spirit that originated the great religious drama must glance far back into the Middle Ages and catch a glimpse of that intense and childlike faith that throughout most of Europe found expression in the building of glorious cathedrals. (V. 1 Cologne)

Enormous structures of stone these early builders created - vast, impressive, awe-inspiring. Shrewd builders, too, were they, for thrust was met by thrust until the vast weight of the great stone roof was safely carried by pointed arch and flying buttress and the whole stood in perfect equilibrium.

At the rear, a semi-circular apse gave added strength and beauty, while at the front rose heavenward, twin towers - gigantic, immovable, bulwarks of strength well fitted to adorn a temple to the Architect of the Universe.

Within a vast avenue of enormous columns surmounted by a lofty clear story, lifted far aloft a vast canopy of groined arches. (V. 2 Interior Cologne)

And in the warm Italian clime expressed itself in glorious stained glass and brilliant mosaic that filled the church with a blaze of colored beauty. (V. 3 Interior St. Mark's)

Without as at Milan, was a profusion of carved stone work - so to speak, a marble fairy land inhabited by thousands of marble ~~elves~~ - more like the handiwork of the great Frost King than of human hands. (V. 4, Rear, Milan)

But one may keenly appreciate the beauty of design, may know all about towers, buttresses and thrusts and still know very little about a cathedral. (V. 5 Notre Dame)

The artist who with a brush can portray the beauty of the human form and the anatomist who dissects the human body until he understands the use of every bone and muscle and tendon, will alike know little of what man really is if they overlook the fact that man has a soul which lives and thinks and aspires, and that when the soul is gone, the man is dead.

So, too, a great cathedral is more than towers and buttresses and spires. It, too, has, so to speak - a soul - the spirit of the men who builded it - a concrete expression of the aspirations, the sacrifices, the life work of the thousands upon thousands of human beings who were content themselves to live in rudest huts, to sleep in rushes thrown upon the dirt foundations of floorless cottages that they might erect a magnificent edifice to the honor of God. (V. 6 Canterbury)

He who would understand over so little of the meaning of a great Mediaeval Cathedral must see it as an embodiment of man's faith in deity - the noblest work in stone ever erected to the glory of God.

The first element in my background then is the deep, the sincere, the childlike faith of the mediaeval peasant.

My second element is the life of the Middle Ages - romantic, turbulent, childlike - perhaps most quickly portrayed by the legends of the Rhineland. (V. 7 Cologne)

We must try for the moment to forget Cologne and the great modern fortification and turn our minds to those ancient reminders of the romantic thoughts of a distant day: (V. 8 Ehrenbreitstein)

to Stolzenfels (V. 9 Stolzenfels) where lived Williswind, who, when carried away by a robber knight who tried to starve her into agreeing to be his bride, was fed by a pet raven who brought her berries until her brother rescued her and slew the robber knight; (V. 10 Rhinefels)

to the Lorelei where in the ancient day a beautiful maiden used to sit and sing - but woe to the luckless sailor who saw ever so dimly her form against the sky, for to him came shipwreck and disaster; (V. 11 Lorelei)

to Sooneck (V. 12 Sooneck) where lived the greedy Prince Heinrich who one day was conducted by a ghostly guide to a great banqueting hall where sat the ghosts of his ancestors eating rich viands and suffering agonies at every mouthful until the ghost threw back a mantle and showed that a ball of fire consumed their vitals and in a flash of light and a crash of thunder, amidst shrieks and groans, the scene vanished.

But enough of childish legend. (V. 13 Rheinstein) If the life of knight and lady perched eyrie like on an inaccessible crag was interesting and romantic, the life of the mediaeval peasant was monotonous and filled with never-ending toil, as attested by the vast vineyards that rise in series of terraces to the very hilltops. (V. 14 Vineyards)

But in Switzerland all was different. There were no great cathedrals, no castles, no knights and ladies - yet there was the same intense religious faith - the same childlike faith seeking to express the glory of

God and the romance of life. (V. 15 Teufelsbruke)

The poverty of thinly scattered populations prevented the building of a great cathedral to point its spire to heaven - but in its place stood majestic mountains, God's own great spires, to lift his thoughts in reverence and fill his soul with awe. Inspiring must it be to live ever in the sight of the majestic glacier-clad mountains. (V. 16 Chamonix)

For the great snow-capped peak ever so suggestive of the power and majesty of the Eternal could not fail to lift men's eyes from earthly grovelling things to a contemplation of heavenly beauties. (V. 17 Interlaken)

The motto of an American State declares that "Mountaineers are always free," and true no doubt it is that life in the mountains develops a sturdiness of character, a self-reliance that makes men ever ready to dare and to do.

The mountaineer in his humble cottage on the mountain side felt none of the oppression of the Rhineland peasant. Protected alike by his inaccessible position, his sturdiness of character and his poverty, he felt no need of moated castle. (V. 18 Lucerne)

His imagination created no romance of knights and ladies, but instead the stirring legend of William Tell who in the market place of Altdorf proudly refused to bow before the ducal hat which had been raised as a symbol of feudal power. Condemned to shoot an apple from the head of his son, he brought two arrows. "Why the second arrow?" demanded Gessler. "To slay the tyrant, had I killed my son," was the bold reply. (V. 19 Oxenstrasse)

Arrested and taken by boat toward a rock-bound prison, he was overtaken by a violent storm and Gessler, unable to manage the boat, entrusted to the sturdy Tell the tiller, and Tell, guiding the boat toward the land, leapt ashore where now the little chapel stands to his memory, and when Gessler

pursued him into the dense forest, Tell slew the tyrant and rushed forth to rouse the clansmen to overthrow feudal tyranny, and on the Cliffs at Rutli, the chieftains swore a solemn oath to hold together to the death and not cease until Switzerland was free. (V. 20 Hohlegasse)

Such is the simple story of William Tell - perhaps but a legend - but to the trustful Swiss peasant it seems true history - and true it is at least to the sturdy Swiss spirit that throughout so much of the turbulent Middle Ages maintained in Switzerland a democratic independence unique in Western Europe. (V. 21 Tell's Piazza Lugano)

But if the Swiss peasant was like his lowland brother in the fundamental characteristics of keen imagination and deep religious faith, he lived in a very different environment.

In a tiny village, protected from attack by towering rocky barriers, he lived on in lonely isolation. (V. 22 Ariolo) Here were none of the distractions, none of the nervous hurry and rush, none of the strenuous, maddening struggles of modern life - here was quiet and calmness of soul. Here a thought once conceived was not swept away by a flood of newer ideas - but pondered upon and transmitted to posterity, might, perhaps, in a later generation bear rich fruit.

Such a village was Oberammergau. (V. 23 Oberammergau) For while Oberammergau in government was German, in scenery and in the life of its people it is Swiss. Here long ago stood a little Swiss village imbued with that deep childlike faith of the Middle Ages. It was not in the power of these simple wood carvers to build a vast cathedral to the honor and glory of God, but they might in the little village churchyard enact the passion of Christ; and filled with that childlike imaginative spirit that created the Rhine legends, they fashioned a fantastic play filled with devils and goblins. (V. 24 Miracle Play)

Such miracle plays were common enough in the Middle Ages, for they were the natural outcome of a combination of childlike faith and childlike imagination. More often they were given in churchyard or street, but sometimes even in the sacred precincts of the church itself. (V. 25 Miracle Play)

Some such a play was the original Passion Play of Oberammergau.

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The Passion Play of Oberammergau, then, it seems to me is the rich fruit of the blending of sincere faith and a childlike imagination, preserved in the seclusion of a little Swiss village to bring a simple but impressive lesson to the seething changing life of the 20th century. (V. 30 Oberammergau Peasants)