Hermann Güntert in the 1930s.
Heidelberg, Politics, and the Study of Germanic/IndoGermanic Religion

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Hermann Güntert (1886–1948) is less well known than he ought to be, for his reputation was largely eclipsed when Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) and his admirers promoted the legend that the French scholar had single-handedly rescued the study of “Comparative Mythology” after its 19th century collapse.1 Between the disgrace of Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and the labors of Dumézil, however, there was Güntert, who was one of the foremost linguists of his era and equally accomplished in Religionswissenschaft.2 Between 1912 and 1923, he devoted five extraordinary volumes to aspects of Indo-European religion, each more brilliant than its predecessor. First came a pioneering monograph, Über altisländische Berserkergeschichten (1912), which anticipated the later, less prudent work of numerous authors who came to see warrior rage as a religiously valorized phenomenon.3 Next, Über die ahurischen und daevischen

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Ausdrücke im Avesta (1914) advanced Güntert’s understanding of language as rooted in culture and culture as rooted in religion, demonstrating how Zoroastrian dualism structures language itself, such that Avestan (the language of the older Zoroastrian scriptures) employs two parallel sets of nouns and verbs to mark righteous beings and actions as antithetical to those that are evil or demonic. The same sort of argument animates Von der Sprache der Götter und Geister (1921), which identified a metalinguistic trope through which many Indo-European languages contrasted a “language of gods” to the “language of men.” The latter was normal, unmarked speech, but the former constituted a lofty, highly marked diction, suitable for poetry and other divinely inspired, quasi-esoteric, and self-consciously elegant acts of discourse. Calvert Watkins was still drawing on this work respectfully and productively a half century after its publication. Then there was Kalypso (1919), an anguished wartime meditation on the mythology of death, especially the Indo-European goddesses and femmes fatales who personify the grave and whose superficial charms mask the horrors of decay, dissolution, and non-being buried in their bodies, the soil, and life itself. Finally, there is Der arische Weltkönig und Heiland (1923), Güntert’s masterpiece, which treats the imagery of bonds and bondage (social, religious, legal, cosmic and existential), also the promise of liberation from them. Vast in its scope, exquisite in its philological detail, and awesome for its nuanced readings of sources, it is widely – and rightly – regarded as the finest book ever devoted to the religion of the Indo-European-speaking peoples. Inter alia, it inspired Dumézil’s Mitra-Varuna (1940),