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"MODERN SWISS WRITERS."

(Lecture by Dr. P. LANG.)

The last lecture of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique before the summer holidays was "caviare" for the lovers of good literature and a tonic for those who, although they do not exclude poets from the category of honourable professions, take little interest in their creations. Dr. Lang revealed himself a master in the interpretation of our intellectual life, and this qualification should stand the new Secretray of the N.S.H. in good stead in his task to make Swiss Kultur better known over here.

Just as the light emanating from prominent stars hinders the detection of other celestial bodies in their immediate neighbourhood, so the tradition of great writers as Switzerland possesses in Gottfried Keller, C. F. Meyer, Gotthelf and Spitteler, deters a more recent school from gaining recognition. But poets also have their practical needs, and appreciation of their works during the authors' lifetime is more useful to them than bills drawn on posterity. Spitteler, in a memorable speech on the occasion of Gottfried Keller's centenary, has warned us not to idolize any of our great writers in the same way as the Germans have done with Goethe, because this would sterilize future literary production; and E. Korrodi, the Feuilleton Editor of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung," has prescribed himself the task of protecting the contemporary writers against the tradition of the last century. We Swiss abroad are especially apt to forget the present over the past, as it is more difficult for us than for our compatriots at home to keep in touch with the literary movement. For this intrinsic reason alone the lecture should have been greatly welcomed: the intuition with which same was conceived gave it the stamp of high literary value.

Dr. Lang first spoke of the general social conditions in Switzerland which favour a Renaissance of literature, "a spring-time which promises a harvest never dreamt of." The religious struggles of the second half of the last century, which provided a bad playground for pure poetry, do not exist any longer, the "Kantönlicheist" has lost part of its prestige, a certain provincialism, still very pronounced a generation ago, is gradually disappearing. The cause of this the lecturer attributes to the development of our cities and to an increase in the general standard of living. The growing industrialisation of the country has brought with it the defeat of the "Seldwylertum," a broader outlook and a more open mind. It was the cause of wealth, and this in its turn benefited the intellectual life. Dr. Lang then alluded to the great controversy which has been waging for a couple of years whether Switzerland has a literature of its own or not. One party considers Rousseau a Frenchman, and speaks of C. F. Meyer as a German poet, holding the opinion that a writer belongs simply and entirely to the language in which he writes. On the other hand, there are men like Professor de Reynold who try to distil the "esprit helvétique" and trace it backwards through centuries in all writers of Swiss origin. The lecturer sees in this latter thesis more a hope than a fact, not a reality, but a promise. However, it cannot be denied that Swiss writers show the influence of their immediate surroundings, that something akin to a Swiss spirit and a Swiss individuality exists amongst nearly all of them. The first characteristic is a certain "Schulmeister" instinct, which often gets the better of the artistic sense. The pedagogue is to be found in Bodmer, Haller, Gotthelf, Keller, as well as in Federer, Moeschlin, Steffen and Ganz, to mention some of the younger writers. Free of it were C. F. Meyer and Leuthold, the purest artists of alemanic Switzerland, but just for this reason less known and beloved than the others. Another, if less, pronounced feature of Swiss literary individuality is a certain chastity in sexual matters. There is not a single example of a pornographic novel in our literature, such as is to be found in so many other literatures. If we look at writers like Paul Ilgor, Hans Gang, considered "modern," and try to find that particular note which would prove them to be Swiss, we need only compare their works with those of the contemporary Germans to see the difference immediately. In general modern Swiss literature is far less local and cantonal than it used to be half a century ago. The example of Meyer and Spitteler, both of whom maintain a high cultural standard, has to a great extent overcome the Seldwyler idyllism of Gottfried Keller in this respect. The philosophy of the writers is generally broader, the problems they deal with are more complex, according to the more complex life of the great cities. The strength of our peasant and mountaineer literature is continually decreasing. The local poets still exist, of course; but they do no longer determine the colour. The great centres of the modern Swiss writers, each of which has a very active literary movement of its own, are Zurich, Geneva and Lausanne. We have not yet a Swiss tradition. And we feel the good and the evil of this want. The evil is that it costs each poet

much trouble to find his own style; he is bound to be influenced strongly by the tendencies of the literature in the language of which he writes; it takes him generally a long time to assimilate these influences and to find himself. The Swiss poet, therefore, reaches his best comparatively late: Keller, Meyer, Spitteler, in fact every one of the older generation prove this. The good is that only the strongest survive: no weakling can make the matter easy by swimming in tradition. Our writers are bound to be worth something or risk destruction.

It is not possible to give even an outline of the second part of the lecture, which dealt with the personalities and gave an analysis of the works of seven Swiss writers: the lyric Karl Stamm, the novelist Jakob Bosshart and the dramatist Max Pulver representing the German, Henry Spiess and C. F. Ramuz the French, and Francesco Chiesa the Italian literature. The choice of the names was difficult owing, as Dr. Lang said, to "embarras de richesse" and a certain arbitrariness could not be avoided. As illustrations of the works discussed recitations were given which greatly embellished and enlivened the lecture. Signora Lunghi and Monsieur Haldimann kindly assisted the lecturer by reciting pieces in their own idiom. Even those of the audience who do not know much Italian must, judging by the applause, have experienced the beauty of Francesco Chiesa's poetry, and we felt proud at the thought that this is also one of our national languages.

By.

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