

Swiss Mural Poetry

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what he wrote, and what he wrote was but a small part of what he invented and planned. Three-quarters even of his printed books are what he called "Lenwerke" — written to find out what he could do and do best — they were a feeling about for the epic form he wanted — "Form-gymnastik," he called his ballads. Some things he seems to have written because the sheer difficulty of them provoked a tussle. Had he published all he wrote, it would be seen that he tried every kind of literature imaginable. Prose — wonderfully good and also some wonderfully strange prose — he wrote; but prose he called "the enemy": it was in verse that he most of all sought after his own excellence.

A volume, in unrhymed verse, of seven myths of creation called "Extramundana" (1883), was but a selection from sixty myths of the creation and destruction of the world. In 1889 came his first book of lyrics, entitled "Butterflies," which he wrote in order to learn to rhyme, the first of the poems being written with the aid of a Dictionary of Rhymes! This little book of verses was followed by "Literary Parables" (1892), "Ballads" (1896), and "Bell Songs" (1906). In the meantime his "Hauptwerk," "The Olympian Spring" (1900-1910), had begun to appear; and at the end of his life, in 1924, appeared the verse rendering of his first and last love, "Prometheus the Longsuffering." Six of these books of poetry have been drawn upon for the "Select Poems of Carl Spitteler," translated by Ethel Colburn Mayne and James F. Muirhead, published by Putnam's in 1928.

Of the seventy-three poems and parts of poems that make up this book, forty-three bear the initials E. C. M., and twenty-eight are signed J. F. M., while two have both initials to them. The lioness's share belongs to Miss Mayne even more than this arithmetical presentation indicates; for she translated the two long pieces from the "Olympian Spring" that bring up the rear. But Mr. Muirhead gains weight by virtue of contributing the Introduction. In several instances each translator has given a version of a poem, and the original is printed as well.

I had known Spitteler's work for fifteen years in the original when I first read this translation. I took it up with misgiving — with a kind of dread. Homer was the only big poet I had ever read in translation, and that because I unfortunately must. I hated the very idea of verse translation. I made up my mind for disappointment — and was delighted!

By the time I laid the book down, after reading it nearly at a sitting, I almost wished I had known nothing of Spitteler. I felt I should like to know how this poetry would have appealed to me if it could have been taken as an original English creation. Should I have felt that it was not original — that the poets had got it from somewhere second-hand? I think not. Even knowing the originals, I was captured by the freshness and apparent spontaneity of this English poetry. It did not read like cut flowers, but like flowers with roots in the earth beneath them.

I am afraid I must not begin on any detail. Elbow-room fails. But it would be a joy to talk for whole pages about these poems. To show how the translators have overcome difficulties, have transmuted meaning and music, have turned Spitteler's great heavy omnibus words, often so poetical, into ripples of English monosyllables; how artfully they have reflected his effects and peculiarities; to linger over lines that I stopped to repeat several times before going on with the reading. That bitter-sweet, wry-smiling, "Schalkhaftigkeit" that bubbles out in Spitteler is often Englished with a fascinating felicity. His occasional idyllic sweetness and emotion, too. Many of the lyrics are little masterpieces, not merely of translation, but also of English versification and of universal poetry.

What gave me most pause was the epic specimens at the end. Before I read them! How could Spitteler's great rolling waves of rhythm and rhyme, tumbling in like breakers when the tide is rising, with beaded words so long that three or even two sometimes fill a twelve-syllable line — how could that be put into our sweet, finely-mixed, monosyllabic language, and in five-foot rhymed iambs — an inch too short for the measure. But when I read Muirhead's beginning of the "Dulder" and Miss Mayne's two piece of the "Olympian Spring," it is as if I could not go down to dinner until long after the bell had rung. I had to finish first! If it can be translated like that, these plucky and clever people should in due course give us the whole thing.

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NEW HOPES.

Sassalbo, the name of a huge mountain in southern Grison is almost unknown even to the most ardent student of Swiss geography, but let it not astonish you if one day you find it competing for fame with that of Carrara.

Sassalbo is the most fascinating group in the valley of Poschiavo, and although its highest peak does not exceed the 10,000ft. limit, its towering masses are imposing. The massive wall-like formation of the mountain, makes an impassable barrier, which safeguards, at least from that angle, the town which lays at its feet from any foe. — In Sassalbo you have the German "Kolossal" coupled with the "wunder-schön" resulting in a perfect picture of Alpine splendour and majesty — What grander sight can you wish for than looking up at Sassalbo, when the sun is gradually sinking behind a yet higher range, and throwing its last glorious rays upon it, bathing the whole group in a golden glory of beauty.

But man, who is forever seeking to improve his own conditions, desires to utilise this mass, and hopes to make from it a new industry, a money-making concern. Perhaps in these difficult times, he is welcome, for we encourage anything that is going to improve the present state, and add to the glory of our Homeland. Last year many samples were taken of Sassalbo's marble, and it stood the various tests remarkably well. Quite recently a huge block was quarried and sent to a well-known workshop, where under the chisels of expert sculptors, it will pass its final test. Should this result be satisfactory, we might hope to see Poschiavo a centre of considerable activity; for roads and a funicular railway of some description would have to be built, in order to convey the live rosy coloured marble to the Bernina railway station for further exportation. Workmen and clerical staff for the offices would be needed and we have no doubt that preference would be given to local or national unemployed.

Yes perhaps yet in that old southern town may we hear the humdrum of a Swiss Carrara.
Young Anglo-Swiss.

A FABLE.

Once upon a time, in a far-off country, there was a poet who was so fine a poet that, when he spoke, pearls of wisdom fell from his lips. When he spoke in sadness, his hearers would be sad also, but when his words were glad, the hearts of his hearers would fill with joy. You will perceive that this poet was also a fine actor, and he was much honoured in his country.

Now it befell that he travelled abroad to a country where some people of his tribe were living in exile, to speak to them in the ways of a poet and to gladden their hearts. All these people of his tribe were invited to hear him speak at an appointed place. Some said "Yes, I will come, perhaps" and some said "No, I cannot come to hear him," and others there were who said "Who is the poet that I should give him my evening? There is always the Cinema."

Only a few were there at his feet to listen to his message and when he spoke with gladness their hearts were full with joy, but when his words were sad their hearts were heavy and they wept with him. The few said that he was a very great poet and they begged of him to come again.

But in this land of exile the natives heard that there was a strange poet in the country and they gathered round him in numbers and begged of him to speak to them in the ways of a poet. Then which he did; and the natives, who were not used to his manner of speaking, yet perceived the meaning of his message and they knew that he was a very great poet.

The name of the fabulist is not La Fontaine, but the name of the poet is — Monsieur Jean Bard.

F.S.

SWISS MURAL POETRY.

(Vom Jahre 1808).

Drey Brüder Bertschi bauen hier zusammen
Johannes, Peter, Abraham, mit Namen.
Zwei Jakob und zwei Niklaus Pieren
Den Bau mit allem Fleiss ausführen,
Auch Cristen Egger Helfer wahr
Im tausend acht hundert und achten Jahr.

(An einem Haus bei Adelboden. 1900).

Die Segens Hände breite,
Herr, über dieses Haus;
Und leite und begleite
Du selbst uns ein und aus
Wir wissen, an dem Segen
Aus deiner lieben Hand
Ist's ganz allein gelegen
In jedem Amt und Stand.

(An einer Sennhütte in der Nähe des Diemtigals).
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Gibt 'schwähre Käs' und machet Freud.

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