

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1921)

Heft: 4

Artikel: Carl Spitteler [Continued]

Autor: Beyli, F.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686000>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

CARL SPITTELER.

(F. BEYLI)

(Continued)

In daily life, before we associate with any man, we ask for his identification: we want to know from where he hails, in what circles he moves, and what his habits are. Works of art and literature are entities in themselves, detached from the personality of their masters. The author of the "Nibelungen" is anonymous, mythical nymbus surrounds the poet of the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," of our folk-lore we do not know how they originate, and yet these works take one of the highest places in our temple of poetry. The biography of an artist, however, often helps us to understand his creations, and in some cases it furnishes the key that allows us to enter the sanctuary. Spitteler's greatest poems especially require such a guide, because they are built on the personality of the master alone and have no basis either in the pageantry of history or in the happenings of the present.

To the curious, the babbler and the scandal-monger, the life of Carl Spitteler will appear dull. No merry anecdotes or wild stories give him a halo, as another of our great Swiss poets enjoyed during his life-time. Except for the outlines of Spitteler's career, we know hardly anything about him other than what he has revealed us in his books.

His autobiography, "Meine frühesten Erinnerungen," is probably unique in all literature, because it finishes at the age of four—at a time when the life of other mortals has hardly emerged from the semi-conscious strata to the conscious stage where the impressions and conceptions become recorded in our memory. Already in the cradle the genius of Spitteler manifests itself. Dreams and images filled his soul, and the poet still remembers, "affected as if standing before a grave and sublime work of art," how and where for the first time in his life he saw a wood; experienced a shower in the open air, noticed the flow of a river and similar things. The leitmotif of his early childhood was: "much grass and much love."

"I doubt"—Spitteler says—"whether in the whole remainder of my life I have added anything fundamentally new to this (first experience). If somebody asked me: when in your life was your ego most pronounced? which of your egos in the various stages of life is most closely related to you? which would you confess in case you had to choose?—I should answer: that of my earliest childhood."

Like Goethe he inherited his imaginative mind and "die Lust zu fabulieren" from his mother, who was only eighteen when the poet was born. At the age of three the boy could visit with her his father in Berne, and Spitteler relates how the mother felt everything deeply with him and he with her, without any words being needed. "It was like the honeymoon of two children. Every novelty along the road, and were it only a group of trees or a meadow, was by both of us felt as an adventure and absorbed with eager eyes."

To his father, who held the position of préfet, then of Chancellor of Baselland, and was later appointed treasurer of our Confederation—Spitteler is no doubt indebted for the gift of courage and will-power, without which he would not have overcome the many difficulties which obstructed the paths of the Muses. In the year 1849 the family followed the father to Berne, and with their departure from Liestal the paradise of childhood came to an end. From 1857 to 1868 the boy visited the Pädagogium in Basel, but he did not distinguish himself as a scholar.

Genius apparently shares with the common man the feeling that the years of school are years of drudgery of which we only think more kindly in later life. Spitteler says that until he was fifteen he damned the school, after that age he cursed it. Yet no doubt he drew inspiration from the teaching of the Germanic and Renaissance scholars Wackernagel and Burkhardt. No vocation for poetic art made itself perceptible. Spitteler described in a conference his first experiment in versification. "On a fine May day out into nature with pencil and paper. First difficulty: does one sit down to write poetry? or lie down? or walk about? Second difficulty: does the prompting come in the wood or in the open? on the clean paths or on the grass? For the time being I laid myself under a blossoming cherry-tree. There I lay and looked up in the air. I felt exceedingly well, but nothing happened. Certainly I could see the dark green pine wood, the blue sky and a thousand beautiful things round me. I also understood and felt that all these might be drawn and painted, but how to transform pine trees into verses of four lines, or primroses into rhymes—not an idea of this art of translation! Gradually a gentle slumber overcame me, and when I woke up I crept abash from under the cherry tree, without having accomplished a line or a single word." Not the art of poetry, but those of music and painting enchanted Spitteler first, and the crisis was, therefore, more complicated than in the case of Godfried Keller, who for many years followed a mistaken path. But at the age of seventeen Spitteler took the eventful decision: he chose poetry because he felt that through lack of technical tuition his talents for music and painting were irretrievably lost.

However, Spitteler had still to tread a long and stony path before his first manifestation as a poet appeared in public. His father was a man of commonsense, and had no sympathy with the artistic proclivities of his son. From 1863 to 1865 Spitteler was a student of jurisprudence at Basel. In the latter year he decided for theology, and he visited the universities of Zürich and Heidelberg between 1865 and 1868. But the student of law and divinity found more satisfaction in the pursuance of the creations of his mind than in the solution of dogmatic problems. Great dramatic and epic problems occupied him even during the time he prepared for government examination. The consequence was that the theological commission of Liestal did not even admit him to the latter, giving as reason "the unbelief and ignorance" of the candidate. This blow served as an incentive to Spitteler to whip up his will and energy and to show his mastery in a field which was not congenial to him. He made his Muses pause and studied industriously. In 1871 he avenged the ignominy he had suffered, passing the examination in Basel with the highest marks. The parish of Arosa offered him the post of minister, but Spitteler refused because he agreed with the commission of Liestal which had stigmatized him as a sceptic.

The poet became an Auslandschweizer instead, living in Russia and Finland for eight years as tutor in the family of a Russian general. About this period we have no biographical data. We only know that the plan for his great work, "Prometheus und Epimetheus," which he had conceived on the night of arrival in Heidelberg, was brought to maturity during this exile, so that it was practically ready for publication when Spitteler returned to Switzerland in 1879 after the death of his father.

In the novel "Imago" the poet has developed twenty-five years later the psychical crisis through which he passed after his homecoming—the conflict between artistic inspiration and the exigencies of daily life, between the patrician

and plebeians, between genius and the multitude. Spitteler's first book, "Prometheus und Epimetheus," appeared in 1880, published by H. R. Sauerländer in Aarau; probably no publishing firm of greater fame would undertake the task. The poet waited "modestly and reverently" for the verdict of the public. J. V. Widmann, the literary editor of the "Bund" and intimate friend of Spitteler, published a eulogistic review in his paper, and Gottfried Keller, Nietzsche, Böcklin, C. F. Meyer and Adolf Frey expressed their appreciation of the book. But one or two swallows do not make a summer, and a poet cannot live on the admiration of a few. For the recognition of a wider public Spitteler had still to wait for many a year, and meanwhile he was forced to shackle his genius to the drudgery of school teaching and journalism. Widmann procured him a post at a girls' school in Berne; from 1881 to 1885 he taught Greek and Latin at a private school in Neuveville, after that he became editor of the "Gränzpost" and the "Basler Nachrichten," at last literary editor of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung."

Through an inheritance Spitteler became independent in 1891, when he removed to Lucerne with his wife and two daughters, and a never-ceasing stream of poetry has since flown from his Olympian height. But most of these works are of such a sublime nature that they needed a prophet to procure them a reading public. This prophet was J. V. Widmann for Switzerland, and the composer Felix Weingartner for Germany. Of Spitteler it cannot be said that he found recognition abroad before he became appreciated in his native country, because there was a Spittelergemeinde in Switzerland when not even his name was known across the Rhine.

In our humble opinion it is no mere chance that the fame of Spitteler's genius was first carried beyond our national confines not as a man of the art of letters, but of music. Indeed, the works of our poet have a musical rhythm such as we find in very few of the masters of German literature. Even his prose is not like ordinary prose: "Prometheus und Epimetheus"—which, while not written in metre, follows the rhythmical form—in some parts reaches such heights of transcendent sublimity that it sounds more like a symphony than like a prose work.

Yet greater is the affinity of Spitteler's poetry with the art of painting. Whereas his works have nothing in common with any other modern writer, we are reminded of Böcklin by the great mystical and epic creations and the richness of colour in the descriptive topography, and we think of Hodler if we contemplate the monumental, superhuman structure of the characters and the vigour of line in their presentation.

Spitteler is not a national poet as Gottfried Keller, Jeremias Gotthelf, and, in a minor degree, C. T. Meyer were. As his stage he has chosen the world, as players mankind with its hopes and disappointments, its aspirations and defeats. The theme which underlies, more or less obviously, all the works of Spitteler is the struggle between the genius and the multitude, the herd and the crowd. This hero-worship finds no limitation in the men of the greatest cultural achievement; even his peasant and farm-servant protagonists are types of supermen, standing high above their surroundings. As a Swiss Spitteler shows himself in the choice of scenery, and in the use of words from our dialect. His gods and goddesses with foreign names move about in our Alps and on our Jura, and scores of provincialisms are borrowed from the "Schwyzerdütsch."

Spitteler's philosophy, as expressed in his works, is one of resigned pessimism:

"Erbärmlich klingt's zwar nicht, allein es wird so sein:

"Der Weltenwert höchste heissen Form und Schein."

This is the verdict of Zeus about the aim of the world and our life, and all the Olympians acclaim the dictum. However, Heracles, the man brought up by Zeus as his own image, but bereft of fame, success and happiness by Moira starts his mission to the earth with the words:

"Mut sei mein Wahlspruch bis zum letzten Atemzug,

"Mein Herz heisst: Dennoch! Herakles bedarf nicht Dank."

For a first acquaintance with Spitteler's genius the easiest access is through his short prose works. "Mädchenfeinde," "Conrad der Leutnant," "Gustav," "Friedli der Kolderi," and "Meine frühesten Erinnerungen" will appeal to everybody who loves good literature. They pave the way to "Imago," in which realism is united with symbolism; from there the path leads up to the ethereal "Prometheus und Epimetheus," which Gottfried Keller called a "sibylline book," and to the epos "Olympischer Frühling," Spitteler's greatest work. The climb is steep, but he who has reached the height enjoys a feeling of grandeur and sublimity such as very few books give.

SCHWEIZERISCHE KULTURGEMEINSCHAFT.

(BY OPTIMUS.)

Die politische Krisis, welche die Schweiz während des Weltkrieges durchgemacht hat, ist uns in den grellsten Tönen geschildert worden; unsere heimatlichen Zeitungen redeten vier Jahre lang Tag für Tag von der Gefahr, welche unser Land bedrohte, und auch in Vorträgen im Schoosse unserer Vereine ist uns der Teufel mehrmals an die Wand gemalt worden. Noch vor wenigen Wochen wurde die ganze nationale Leidensgeschichte vor unserem Geiste heraufbeschworen, als ob es gelte den Beelzebub für immer unserem Gedächtnis einzuprägen.

Worin bestand die vermeintliche Gefahr? Darin, dass die Rassengemeinschaften, welche unsere Nation ausmachen, den rings um unsere Grenzen brandenden Krieg von zwei Gesichtspunkten aus betrachteten und so bei ungleichen Akten und Szenen des grossen Weltdramas Beifall klatschten oder in feierlicher Lautlosigkeit verharren. Also Meinungsverschiedenheit, welche Meinungsaustausch ruft. Ist aber nicht jede tiefgründige Ehe ein Ideenkampf zwischen zwei Seelen? Oder will jemand behaupten, dass jenes die Idealehen sind, wo die Gefühls- und Gedankenwelten der beiden Gatten restlos ineinander aufgehen? Mir scheint, dass der Geisteskampf vielmehr ein Zeugnis vorhandener Kulturwerte ist, der durch die gegenseitige Befruchtung neue Werte schafft. Natürlich darf dieser Kampf nur mit reinen, geistigen Mitteln geführt werden, und jeder Gatte muss dem andern Verständnis und Nachsicht entgegenbringen; wer sich durch Meinungsverschiedenheit zu Wutausbrüchen, Beleidigungen oder gar Misshandlungen verleiten lässt, beweist damit nur seinen eigenen Unwert.

Wir haben diese Analogie gebraucht, weil sich Vorstellungen des Einzellebens leichter in Begriffe fassen lassen als die komplizierteren, uns weniger alltäglich vor Augen tretenden Vorgänge des Staatenlebens. Von einem lassen sich aber Rückschlüsse auf das andere ziehen, und Lehren und Grundsätze, welche für das Individuum oder von der Familie gelten, müssen folgerichtig auch auf die nationale Psychologie Anwendung finden. Und ist unsere Nation nicht das schönste Beispiel einer ehelichen Ver-