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## THE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE OF GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND.

(A Lecture delivered by Dr. Paul Lang at University College on June 8th, 1923.)

(Continued from No. 113.)

*Paul Ilg*, a writer from Eastern Switzerland, spent, like Schaffner, a number of years in Germany. He was not so successful, nor did he deserve to be. He belongs, as is now apparent, to the set of writers who are only on safe ground when they can draw upon the stock of their early experiences, but who dry up when the storms of adolescence have quietened down. Yet, four of his novels at least were powerful and original in situation, if not in language. The heroes were generally young people of the lower classes who wanted to worm themselves up into higher circles; sometimes they failed, sometimes they succeeded, but usually only at the cost of a loss in character. Complete destruction might even be their fate. There are weak characters in Schaffner's novels, but besides these there are many sympathetic, lovable people as well. There are hardly any lovable characters in Ilg's novels. The writer has too much scorn and class bias. He concentrates too much only on the hard, grim aspects of things and conditions of life. And his style does not compensate one for the loss of beauty in situation. Schaffner may narrate the most daring things, they never shock one. Not so with Ilg. If some of his books made a great impression, it was because they contained admirably staged dramatic situations, because Ilg knew how to satirise with the minimum of words. One hopes to have fine drama from him. He has written one which showed promise. His dramatically concentrated novel, "Der starke Mann," seemed to indicate this development. For the time being he has preferred to write a very cheap best-seller, which has cost him many friends.

Whatever the further development of this writer may be, with him, at all events, a new element has entered Swiss literature. The unsatisfied youth who wants to become rich as long as he is still able to enjoy life, but to whom the prospect of saving up pennies for the sake of his potential children's career has no attraction, the young man who migrates towards the large cities, his mind full of romance and adventure, this type of mankind, which either becomes a successful *arriviste* or fails lamentably, is portrayed, often with brutal accuracy, in Ilg's books. The first shadows of the social struggles, which in our country have of late become very acute, are already to be found in Ilg's early novels.

They are equally reflected in *Jakob Bosschart's* last book, "Ein Rufer in der Wüste." A transition man like Spitteler, Bosschart, who is seventy years of age, started to publish about twenty years ago. His field is the *Novelle* rather than the novel. His heroes are simple folk of the peasant or lower middle-classes, often children. Few bright colours are on his palette. Like Ilg, he sees the dark sides of life. The bitter struggles of existence, the inevitable pressure of circumstances find in him a sorrow-filled painter. But his pity is great, virile and candid. Realist as he may be, he is never a cynic. Artistically he is superior to Ilg. All his words are weighed and pondered. He has no really rich imagination either, but he has the rare gift of seeing everything in its proper proportions. He is a very, very clever economist of effects. He has so developed his technique of late that he has been, not without reason, compared with Maupassant, whose tales show a similar swift, dramatic evolution. Bosschart's subjects, except that dealt with in his last great novel, which depicts the bitter antagonism between fathers defending the existing order and socialising children, so typical of present-day Switzerland, may, on the whole, not be very modern. His contribution to the twentieth century literature of our country is sure to be very welcome at least for the extremely good workmanship by which it is characterised.

There is one man who shares his manliness, who has, like him, a heart for those wrongly oppressed. *Felix Moeschlin*, a Basle writer, scorns sham and fake like the old Bosschart. Like him he stands for the old Swiss virtues: honesty, sobriety, cleanliness. But his temperament is of quite another range. Bosschart says: such is life, unfortunately. Moeschlin adds: and such it shall become, if we put up a fight. There is a constant enthusiasm in his quick style which at times may become bewildering. Moeschlin is a typical Aleman, fair-haired and blue-eyed. He is endowed with enormous vitality and power of work. Healthy architecture, healthy agriculture, a healthy combination of farm-life and town-life, healthy politics and healthy love affairs and marriages are the things he craves for. There is nothing of the Puritan about him, but much, sometimes a little, primitive "Naturburschentum." Love, freeing and liberating, and the right work are the two good things he sees in life. If his heroes fail, it is either because they do not find the right mate or because they do not find the right job. Moeschlin has so far written about half-a-dozen novels which are of unequal merit. The first three, two of which happen outside Switzerland—one in Germany, one in Sweden—are generally considered as his better works.

His last book, which has just come out, depicts, with a representative example, what the moral evolution of the Swiss soldier was who, during the War, guarded the frontier and suffered terribly from his enforced and unproductive idleness. Suitable work is again the great, the liberating thing. The spontaneous reparation of a dilapidated farm saves the *morale* of its inhabitants as of that of its soldier builders.

As the writer is still a young man, he may yet surprise us with unexpected developments. He certainly has a great dynamic power and many, if sometimes somewhat chaotic, ideas. Something of a great social reformer lives in him, only so far he has not concentrated enough on the vital issues. And his very normal erotic disposition is perhaps a hindrance rather than a help for the outstanding work which he has yet to give us.

If Moeschlin is the man of action, *Albert Steffen* is the man of theosophic reflection. Steffen gives the lie to those who think the Bernese race one of vigour alone and incapable of finer feelings; just as Moeschlin gives it to those who think Basle too exclusively bent on scholarly study to be able to produce writers. The truth is, in the case of Berne, that besides producing capable warriors and administrators, this canton has at all times also produced men of great religious fervour. Gotthelf is an example, so is his son, a well-known personality in the history of Swiss Protestantism. In Steffen the religious bent of Berne has found its finest expression. But this man is at the same time a very fine writer, thus combining two things hitherto not coupled to any extent. Steffen has lived in the great cities of Germany and has observed a multitude of human beings. In the novels and stories which he has published since 1907 he deals with all strata of society: doctors, taxi-drivers, sempstress, prostitutes, delicate adolescents and coarse brutes—all put in an appearance. He does not shun any subject. Naturalism has also made for him any matter suitable for fiction, but on the one condition: that it be done with a clean mind. Whatever Steffen touches is at once imbued with undeniable beauty, it is as if the glamour of a mild autumn sun were spread about it. The prime object of this man is the psychic development of mankind. This desire has led him through a series of evolutions to Anthroposophy, an offspring of the theosophical creed which has its high priest in Rudolf Steiner and had its temple in the recently burned-down Goetheanum in Dornach.

Steffen has not only written novels and short stories; two mystical dramas and some poetry are also amongst his works. Yet his prose works are what really matters. His first novel, "Ott, Alois und Weresche," in which he shows three adolescent friends and the troubles of their puberty crises, already revealed him to be an exquisite writer with a keen interest in ideas and the subtle nuances of psychological understanding. In his next work, "Die Bestimmung der Roheit," he shows what beneficial results may arise from brutality. It awakens in the soul of the suffering creature the finest flowers of Christian sacrifice and forgiveness. In this novel a woman, who is bound in matrimony to a brute, is lead, because she accepts the ordeal of brutality, to a higher spiritual plane. In his following novels this sensitive, somewhat feminine, writer proceeds even further on his way to spiritualisation, which has now allowed Anthroposophy to submerge his art entirely with its symbols, incomprehensible to all but the initiated. As the right hand of Rudolf Steiner, Steffen recently published some verses merely for those who have reached the inner circle of this new religious movement.

The six men I have mentioned, then, Federer, Schaffner, Ilg, Bosschart, Moeschlin, Steffen, are representative of the present-day fiction of German-speaking Switzerland. I may briefly add the names of two writers who, especially with their mountain stories, had an immense vogue in Germany from the 'nineties onwards: Ernst Zahn and I. C. Heer. They are far less important for their artistic qualities than those already mentioned. In their best moments they attain the level of the early Bosschart—though this even hardly applies to I. C. Heer—in their worst they are typical of the so-called *Gartenlaube* style, something akin to your cheap fiction magazine.

What is important to keep in mind is that German-Swiss Literature of the first decade of this century is in the main represented by fiction. All careful observers agree that a certain change has taken place, say, roughly since 1910. If we consider the aspect of the Swiss literature of to-day, we are struck by the number of books in very interesting verse which has been produced since about that date, whereas the number of important novels has decreased. This general development is even to be traced in at least one of the writers of whom we have already spoken. Steffen no longer publishes fiction, he has only published verse of late.

Before we more closely approach some of the outstanding men in whom it is easy to observe this revival of lyrical poetry in the Switzerland of to-day, it is, however, necessary to link up this movement as a whole with some other phenomena. There can be no doubt that the new and

eloquent stream of lyrics, seen in Swiss literature to-day, is due partly to the excitement of the War. But it is also partly the reflection of the impetus radiating from German expressionism as shown in poetry. Werfel, especially, seems to have had a direct influence on more than one of the younger Swiss poets. Only, whereas in Germany the politically active wing of expressionism was on the whole stronger and more original than the religious-mystical, it may be well to note that in Switzerland the politically active wing is hardly existent. The religious-mystical wing, on the other hand, is so strongly expressed that it has very notably altered the whole aspect of modern Swiss poetry. Owing to the particularly propitious moment some verse writers, who had published before 1910, but were not much noticed when only the novel mattered, now came naturally into their own. They found reader ears now, although their art might not fittingly be described as expressionistic.

This applies partly to the oldest of the poets with whom I am now dealing. *Max Geilinger*, now thirty-nine years of age, is a Zurich writer and the successor to Gottfried Keller as "Staatschreiber." Geilinger is conspicuous for some books of verse in which Nature is celebrated in images which are often daring. This poetry has a dynamic, often dithyrambic, character. There is a pantheistical inspiration in it, which evinces unmistakably the influence of Walter Whitman. The poet has, however, developed a metre of his own in which he may yet achieve great success. His verse is characterised by a full, flowing rhetoric, conveying, so to speak, the broad, mighty rhythm of this century of gigantic enterprises.

*Siegfried Lang*, a Basle poet, who is three years younger, has far more measure. He is essentially a static poet who has been influenced by Hofmannsthal and Stefan George, who has also been much inspired by the French symbolists. In his poetry the optic and acoustic elements are more happily blended than in little, if any, other Swiss poetry. It is especially the eminently musical character of his art that makes it interesting and significant for modern Swiss poetry, as different from the hitherto overwhelmingly plastic poetry of Keller, Meyer, Frey and Spitteler. Siegfried Lang, who has fulfilled the promise of Leuthold, has so far produced three books, published at long intervals. Each of them showed very marked progress. He has, in fact, already developed such a lofty and chiselled language that he cannot appeal but to a very select public. Of the poets of this country—all differences taken into account—one might better compare him with W. B. Yeats than any other.

The Bernese *Max Pulver*, who has lived for many years in Germany, has a more strongly marked mystical bent than Lang. In him the vision is not always completely enshrined in adequate words and pictures. The inner explosion is often too strong. Passionate love and mystical perfection are the two trends of his poetry, whilst in Siegfried Lang's poetry there are few poems which deal with love, but many which depict the sensations felt by contact with Nature. Pulver is more introspective, his language more baroque, sometimes even turgid. Like Steffen he has also lived in close contact with Anthroposophic circles. He took his degree with a book on pure philosophy and has edited some mystical German writers. More than any living Swiss poet has he been inspired by English writers. He mentions Milton and Shelley as having had a great influence on him. Pulver does not write fiction at all, but he has published a number of lyrical dramas, some of which have been produced. "Igernes Schuld" is perhaps the best of them. They deal mainly with celtic mythology, which has a peculiar charm for this Swiss Romantie. The sorcerer Merlin is a figure who has attracted him over and over again.

Shortly—keeping to chronological order—we may now mention *S. D. Steinberg*, an Israelite poet of Zurich of great word mastery. His ballads of the Old Testament are wonderfully carved frescos, couched in language in which each word is measured and thought out. Steinberg was terribly shaken by the crisis of the War. A little booklet, "Untergang," shows this in a violent, expressionistic manner. There is great and fascinating pathos in the verse of this writer.

A still younger man is *Karl Stamm*, who died already in 1918. His name thus came naturally into somewhat exaggerated prominence. He was a teacher and had had a bitter life to go through. Now he is considered the typical war poet of Switzerland. Not only because he published with some fellow-soldiers a booklet of soldiers' verse. He probably, even more than Steinberg, suffered mental agonies from the ghastly nightmare of these times. His language, which was fairly plain in the beginning, soon became modelled on the contemporary expressionistic writers. It became finer and more gripping. His best poems are those in which a violent feeling of despair is expressed. They have great dynamic power and are characterised by sincere, candid emotionalism.

Pulver, endeavouring to bridge over the antagonistic aspirations of the hero and the saint in himself by an appeal to mystical introspection has found a brother in *musis* who is exclusively bent on inner salvation. *Konrad Baenninger* published

