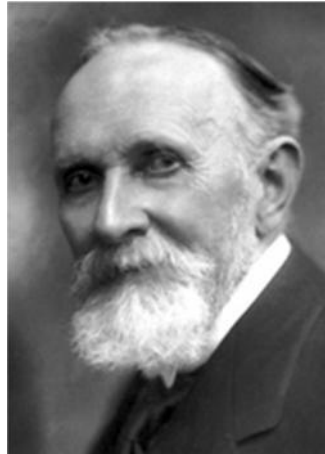


Nobel Prize in Literature 1919



Carl Friedrich Georg Spitteler

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1919 was awarded to Carl Spitteler *"in special appreciation of his epic, Olympian Spring"*.

RESEARCH INFORMATION:

The Swedish Academy, in accordance with the statutes of the Nobel Foundation, has awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1919, which was not awarded last year, to the Swiss poet Carl Spitteler for his epic, *Olympischer Frühling* (1906) [Olympian Spring].

Of this work it can be truly said that its «significance has become apparent only in recent years», and that all doubts that prevented a full appreciation had to be carefully considered until its merits, not immediately obvious, could be fully recognized, not only as ornaments of the poetic form but above all as the artistic and harmonious expressions of a superior genius of rare independence and idealism.

This is not to say that we in any way subscribe to the opinion that this poem represents the fruit of a persistent struggle with the darkness of thought rather than of a lucid liberal inspiration. The original gap between the poet's art and its appreciation by critics and readers does not in this case point to a shortcoming on either side, but rather

proves the deep and rich meaning of the work, which needs careful critical judgment to be revealed in its entirety.

Spitteler's *Olympischer Frühling* achieved popularity in Switzerland and Germany only in the revised final version of 1909. But with every year and especially since the end of the war, interest in it has grown and its circle of readers has widened; this year's impression is expected to run into several thousand copies. That is a considerable number for something as out of step with the times as a verse epic of 600 pages about the gods of Olympus, which, because of its genre, must be read as a whole and which demands the leisure and concentration of the reader. The writer, who has for decades devoted all his energies to such an enterprise, has indeed deliberately and ruthlessly isolated himself from hectic contemporary life and has given little thought to the modern demand for adequate material compensation.

He has done nothing to soften these contrasts. On the contrary, he has intentionally chosen a subject and an approach which were bound to bewilder and even repel many readers of different dispositions and inclinations or of different backgrounds of taste and education, as they tried to understand the poetic world that he opened before their eyes. From the beginning he was bold enough to appeal to their patience and endurance to follow him to the end of his curious paths, illuminated only by the clear and uninterrupted thread of the action and the soliloquies and dialogues of the heroes, which are highly dramatic despite the epic framework. The connoisseur recognizes Homeric traits, but to his surprise he is led on toward an unknown and never anticipated goal.

But for the rest, what a harsh and striking contrast between Homer's Olympus and Spitteler's idiosyncratic mythology! Nothing could be more unjust than the reproach that he likes to attract philologists and other disciples of scholarship by means of recondite allusions and profound symbols borrowed from their disciplines. His Olympians and heroes, his myths and oracles only rarely remind one of the style or tone of the older Greek poet philosophers. They can neither be derived from the latest findings of classical scholarship nor cited as evidence of the poet's dependence on any kind of allegorical

interpretation. Equally misguided are those who have spoken of a third part of *Faust*. Spitteler does not imitate anyone, not even the aging Goethe in his attempt to reconcile Romantic passion and classical balance in the masks of Faust and Helen. Spitteler's mythology is a purely personal form of expression which grew naturally out of his education and which gives shape to the living turmoil of struggling characters that he evokes in order to represent on the level of ideal imagination, human sufferings, hopes, and disillusion, the vicissitudes of different human fortunes in the struggle of the free will against imposed necessity. Why should he care that the current aesthetic enlightenment finds it difficult to accept this seemingly fantastic mixture of dream and reality with its wilful abuse of mythological names?

Even if I attempted to give a careful and comprehensive summary of the action of *Olympischer Frühling*, I could not give a clear picture of the wealth of its content, of the radiant vividness and moving power of the changing episodes, nor of their firm interrelation in an effective whole. Suffice it to say that the brilliant life of Olympus and the cosmos, manifesting itself in pleasure and trials of strength, ends in impotent despair in the face of human ingratitude, licence, crime, and misery. Herakles, the mortal son of Zeus, equipped with all perfections by his father, his relatives, and friends, but at the same time burdened with the curse and hatred of Hera, the queen of the gods, must leave Olympus to accomplish ungrateful tasks of pity and courage on earth.

The Olympians, with their deeds and adventures, their victorious fights and their quarrels among themselves are in reality supermen whom the poet values only inasmuch as they are able to curb their whims and desires.

Der Weise zügelt, der Tor lässt Willkür walten.» Above them all there is an inexorable universal law that assumes shape in gloomy powers of fate. Below them and closer to us are the mechanizing, soulless powers of nature which gods and men should put into their service for the benefit of themselves and of others, but which, abused by malice and pride, drive them into folly and ruin. The epic is full of airships and other curious inventions and its gorgeous buildings with cupolas and stately porches leave Homeric

simplicity far behind. But the plot of the impudent flatfoot people to deprive Apollo of his universal rule by means of an artificial sun and their overweening attempt to attack him in the air by means of a treacherously constructed vehicle and poison gas testify to the decay that threatens mankind when it pushes too far a self-confidence based on material power.

Spitteler describes such pranks and the strange quests and enterprises of his heroes with a playful humour reminiscent of Ariosto. His style has a great variety of tones and colors ranging from solemn pathos to the careful brush strokes of the similes and the lively descriptions of nature, which reflect his native Alps rather than the regions of Greece. The iambic hexameters with their alternating masculine and feminine rhymes carry the flow of his masterly language, which is always powerful and splendid, never without vitality, and often unmistakably Swiss.

The Academy takes pleasure in expressing its admiration for the independent culture of Spitteler's poetry by awarding him this Prize. Since Mr. Spitteler has been prevented by illness from attending this ceremony, the Prize will be forwarded to him through the Swiss Embassy.

At the banquet, Professor Oscar Montelius addressed the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Wrangel, who received the Prize for Carl Spitteler, and asked him to inform the poet of the Academy's concern for his health and of the hope that he would soon be able to write other works as remarkable as *Olympischer Frühling*.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1919/press.html