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Life's Fount by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

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William Ruleman
Life's Fount

Hugo von Hofmannsthal
Lebensquell

My spirit's surging with the floods of spring:
I feel a kindred turmoil spill and grow
Throughout a million budding blooms that know
A new life streaming, steaming, circling.

It is the fount of youth's eternal flow
That yields, each year, the same rich gathering
Luring, moistening, and lathering
All in beauty's freshly-transformed glow.

O thoughts, come drink your fill of this new thriving;
O timid hope and almost faded feeling;
O half-despondent travel-weary striving;

Let life's waters wash you with their healing;
O dreams and images I daily see,
May this dew's gleam lave you eternally.

Commentary

This and other early sonnets by Hofmannsthal fill me with excitement, and I have tried to capture the rapturous mood of spring with all the energy and turbulence that the original poem conveys. A strictly literal version would be mechanical and rob me of the freedom to give the sense of Hofmannsthal's music. The form (a variation on the Petrarchan sonnet) seemed taxing enough to duplicate, but attempting to do so would channel my own wayward energies: I needed such stricture to keep me from slipping into total chaos as I realized that, with all the helter-skelter savagery of the season the poet describes, I would have to wreak havoc with the original's syntax. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot in a somewhat different context, I felt the need to "force, to dislocate if necessary" the German language into a recognizable English meaning. Thus subjects turn to objects in places, nouns become verbs; and all in all, the order of Hofmannsthal's sentences, in order to make them work in English and in the meter and stanzaic form he uses, had to be dealt with violently, I felt. I also took liberties with actual wording at times; Hofmannsthal does not use a German equivalent for "lathering," for instance; but I felt that it caught the sensation of trees in flower—blooming as if they were slathered with foam—and it also calls to mind other mighty forces of nature like the spray of raging ocean waves and froth from the mouths of charging steeds. So again, I have tried to avoid a rigid transcription and be faithful instead to what I considered the original's spirit and gist. If I have been carried away by my own ecstatic feelings, I hope to be forgiven.