

C.F. Ramuz

Autor(en): **Grandvoinet, R.**

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C. F. RAMUZ.

By R. GRANDVOINET.

Switzerland's peculiar geographical position in the heart of Europe, at the meeting place of three great racial streams — the French, German and Italian — has exercised a great influence on the cultural development of the nation. When approaching any aspect of Swiss art or culture, it is necessary to bear in mind that Switzerland is a Bundesstaat or Federated State; moreover, each of its twenty-two Cantons is a small republic with practically absolute control over its internal affairs. The people of each Canton are therefore both citizens of their own small state, and citizens of the larger Federated State. Thus, the daily life, customs and occupations of the inhabitants of each Canton are coloured by great individuality although the State has achieved the miracle of welding this diversity into the harmonious political whole which is Switzerland. These facts are sometimes rather difficult for a foreigner to grasp and often lead to a misunderstanding of Switzerland's intimate national life, her spiritual, intellectual and cultural development.

The country is divided into three main racial and linguistic groups: French, German and Italian. A fourth and much smaller group is the Romanche, which is confined to a small area of eastern Switzerland. It is natural therefore, that in the course of their historical development these groups should each have fallen under the influence of the nation which, though lying beyond the frontiers, should yet offer a certain spiritual attraction born of the similarity of language. Thus French Switzerland (consisting of the Cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Valais, Neuchâtel and Fribourg) having a frontier common with France, was influenced by intellectual currents in France. Nevertheless, as in the case of the Protestant Canton of Vaud, for instance, that beautiful, prosperous, agricultural land bordering the Lake of Geneva, there can be no truly profound affinity with Catholic France.

It is necessary that these factors should be clearly understood in order that the importance of a Swiss writer and cultural pioneer such as C. F. Ramuz be realized.

Charles Ferdinand Ramuz was born in Cully in the Canton of Vaud in 1878. His native village is one of the many clusters of brown-roofed houses bordering the Lake of Geneva, where a simple-hearted and frugal people spend their days in agricultural pursuits and especially in the cultivation of the rich vineyards covering the steep Lake slopes. Across the water rise the Savoy Alps. It is a land of rich brown soil and blue skies; a land of earth and water.

At an early age, the child Ramuz showed a precocious love of nature which soon developed into a serious questioning attitude towards life and metaphysical mysteries. His school life was that of a normal, healthy young boy, and from the age of 10 he was initiated to the yearly cycle of the vintner's life; the gathering of the grape harvest especially was his delight. The eagerness of adolescence brought him also a spontaneous need to express himself in writing. Not only poetry, but two romantic dramas in the style of Victor Hugo flowed from his pen. On leaving school, he was immatriculated at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lausanne.

The University years meant not only intellectual development but also spiritual freedom. During vaca-

tion, the young student would wander for days all over the country, accompanied only by his dog. It was then that he was able to satisfy his yearning for communion with nature. The fundamental mysticism already latent in his early years, now became more clearly evident. In "Questions" published in 1935, which give mature expression to the adolescent's obscure gropings, Ramuz says that instinctively he strove after . . . *"une vie universelle qui allait de la bête à moi, de l'insecte à moi, de l'arbre à moi, de la pierre à moi; et où il n'y avait plus de choses, où il n'y avait plus que des êtres, car tout prenait vie."*

Ramuz had then found the hidden path, the secret place of every Nature mystic.

His material situation being such as to enable him to dispense with the necessity of a bread-winning career, on leaving the University, Ramuz went to Paris in 1902, where he was to remain for the next twelve years. He was now conscious of his vocation, and indeed had been writing seriously both prose and poetry for several years past. He was also aware of discord between his creative thought and its expression; namely, between his "subject" and his artistic medium. Ramuz' subject was his native land and the people of its soil, his only medium classical French. Until then, the Vaudois had no means of creating a truly national literature. Except for local ballads, some in dialect which was however no longer current even among the peasants, they had to turn to conventional French literary styles and to express their thought in a language which, in reality, was foreign to their psychological background. It was with this in mind that Ramuz published his first volume of poems "Le Petit Village" in 1903. Here are already portrayed the types who will henceforth people his books: village lads and their accordeons, laughing peasant girls and stalwart young men. They move against the background of a fertile simple land and sleepy village streets:

*C'est un petit pays qui se cache parmi
ses bois et ses collines;*

*.....
Son ciel est dans les yeux de ses femmes
la voix des fontaines dans leur voix.*

The literary importance of these poems may well be compared to that of Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads." French Swiss literature had until then been in the tow of French — mostly Parisian — influences. Here for the first time was a native poet writing of Vaudois peasants and their simple lives, presenting them not in the pseudo-idyllic trapping of sentimental romanticism, but as real men and women, belonging definitely to a certain corner of the earth. With these poems Ramuz was already cutting himself adrift from the conventional French literary method. It was his challenge to tradition. Henceforth Ramuz strove to liberate himself more and more from convention and to establish an independent philosophy founded neither in books nor in theories, but in life itself.

During his twelve years in Paris, Ramuz served his apprenticeship in no master's school but in his own. They were not easy years, filled with self-deceptions and disappointing experiments; yet out of them was born a new art. This first period produced a steady flow of published works. The "Lettres de Paris" a

series of weekly articles to the "Semaine littéraire" (1906-07), "Les Circonstances de la Vie" (1907) a novel published in serial form, "Jean Luc persécuté" (1909) a novel, "Nouvelles et Morceaux" (1910) short stories and essays, "Aimé Pache, peintre vaudois" (1911) an autobiographical novel, "Le Feu à Cheyseron" (1912) a novel, "Vie de Samuel Belet" (1913) a novel and a masterpiece. As early as 1906 the "Circonstances de la Vie" aroused the hostility of the cultured bourgeois circles of Lausanne. For the first time they were given to read about people exactly like themselves; Emile Magnenat, a provincial Vaudois notary, his servant-girl, the Swiss German Frieda Henneberg. It is a realistic exposition of Swiss provincial life with its passions, nobility and petty crimes; and although provincial life in Switzerland is much the same as it is elsewhere, it is always more unpleasant to read about local humanity stripped of the glamour of a foreign setting. "Le Feu à Cheyseron" shows the conflict between the Germanic and Latin elements in Switzerland, a subject which Ramuz developed again later in the more mature "Séparation des Races" (1922).

Ramuz' style and method were beginning to take shape. With the works of the first period, he was asserting himself as a tragic writer, not by the literary form adopted, but by his personal attitude to life expressed through the medium of his novels. He is essentially a fatalist in his conception of the power of nature, the "circumstances of life" over the lives of men. Men carry their fate within themselves and their inner being is closely woven into the chain of universal life. Self-knowledge alone can liberate the individual and the hidden essence, or truth, of life can only be found in the communion of man with God-Nature. This is the message held in the "Vie de Samuel Belet."

The years in Paris therefore served to consolidate Ramuz' nature mysticism, which is not merely a theory, but an intuitive conviction founded on experience. Paris freed him from the shackles of provincial life and helped him discover his creative personality.

In 1914 Ramuz returned home, apparently without any definite plans. His homeland shone before him with renewed beauty after his long absence. The Great War had repercussions even in this quiet corner; trains of wounded rolled daily through the Lake villages which lie on the international highway of the Simplon. Outwardly unmoved and untouched by the War, Ramuz nevertheless suffered spiritually; it was for him a new school of experience as he admitted in "Le Grand Printemps" (1917).

In 1914 Ramuz published "Raison d'être," which is in reality a vindication of the cultural heritage of the Canton of Vaud. Vaud is a land rich in natural beauty but poor in historical and legendary past, possessing no individual culture, but only a series of conventions and prejudices imposed upon it by foreign influences and which conflict with the psyche of its people, dependent on purely local conditions. Vaud belongs however to the kingdom of the Rhone, to which also belong the Canton of Valais and the French Provence. This 'kingdom' is a whole, united by a sort of mystical correspondence born of similar geographical and climatic conditions, of the Lake and the Rhone, the soil and the sky; it is united also by language, not French, but the old Langue d'Oc. This

regional individuality, felt obscurely by the peasants and expressed in their gestures and speech, had not yet found expression in literary art. It is this artistic expression which Ramuz intends to give his people and which he will achieve by mystic communion with the "soul" of the land itself and of which the inhabitants are, as it were, the manifestation.

This conception is the basis of Ramuz' art. His is an absolute break-away from the French schools. He does not attempt a transcription of life into art, but his art is itself the expression of poetic experience in the face of the nature of his country. Moreover, his work holds both national and mystical elements which are entirely personal and liberate him from a narrow regionalism.

Up to 1914, the novel was Ramuz' medium. He found however that he could no longer use this conventional literary form, for he was aiming at a synthesis of life itself, whereas the novel is analytical. He therefore had to find something new, something corresponding to the apparent formlessness of life itself. Many critics have found fault with the "formlessness" of Ramuz' later works which sometimes appear like a series of disconnected prose pieces. ("Les Signes parmi nous" (1919); "Présences de la Mort" (1922); "Amour du Monde" (1925); "Passage du Poète" (1923); "Derborence" (1925), etc.). The real unity of his compositions lies however in the unity of atmosphere and natural phenomena, in the unity of the life rhythm of his characters and their work. It is indeed difficult to classify Ramuz' later prose works. They are neither tragedies, lyrical poems, nor novels. Perhaps they had best be styled as visionary prose poems or myths. In any case they are the expression of this contemplation of a nature.

Ramuz is without doubt a nature mystic. The medium of such a writer may be shaped by secondary factors (ambiance, race, education, culture), but the fundamental experience is the same the whole world over. Walt Whitman or Ramuz, Wordsworth or Traherne — the poetic experience, the creative mystical union with nature underlying their art is essentially the same.

Ramuz' later work has a hypnotic, suggestive power; one cannot close his books and have done with them, for they re-echo and linger on in the shuttered halls of the mind. The publications of the second period are too many for enumeration. Apart from those mentioned above, perhaps a few present even more particular interest to the foreign reader: "La Grande Peur dans la Montagne" (1925); "Farinet" (1932); "Taille de l'homme" (1934) a philosophical essay; "Besoin de Grandeur" (1937) an essay.

Although we stand so close to Ramuz in time, we are certain that his place in literature is assured both as a writer and as a pioneer. He has made his Canton conscious of its inheritance, of its personality. He has forged a wonderful medium of poetic expression for his fellow citizens, liberating them from French literary and linguistic conventions. His language is slow, powerful and rugged, akin to the speech of the Vaudois themselves, so foreign to the cold, staccato brilliancy of Parisian French. Although he has not founded a school, the younger generation of French Swiss writers are following his lead, and already there is a quite definite essentially French Swiss modern literature, worthy of interest and of great promise.