

# The problem of the German-Swiss writer

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## THE PROBLEMS OF THE GERMAN-SWISS WRITER

(This is the resumé of a talk by the Swiss author Hugo Loetscher at the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique*).

It is impossible to speak of a "Swiss Literature". There are four distinct languages in Switzerland and to each of these languages there corresponds a distinct literature. A common boundary and a shared political tradition do not make a national literature and the efforts at synthesising the four alive within the Swiss precincts in one book on "Swiss Authors" have failed. Neither is there any mutual influence between the literatures of the various language groups and some very important French-Swiss authors, such as Cingria, have only recently been translated into German and, vice-versa, excellent German-Swiss writers remain completely unknown to the French-speaking Swiss.

### The French and the German case

There is a glaring difference between the situation of the French-Swiss and the German-Swiss author. French-speaking Switzerland is culturally a part of France and turned towards an all-important literary and artistic centre: Paris. French-speaking Switzerland is a "backwood" of the Gallic realm and any Swiss writer wishing to acquire a name for himself (even locally) must go and find it in Paris. French-Swiss literature, however intimately tied to the mother country, must virtually be equated with French literature. The best-known French-Swiss authors, men like Rousseau, Vallotton and de Rougemont have all flocked to France.

This is not the case for the best-known writers of German-speaking Switzerland, who have remained at home faithfully. This illustrates the difference between the relationship of German-Switzerland and Germany and that of French-speaking Switzerland and France. This difference has been accentuated during the last twenty years. From the days of Bismark to the second world war, Berlin served as the cultural centre of Germany, but from 1945 onwards there was no longer any cultural "centre" endowed with magnetic properties. Half-a-dozen big towns in Germany could each claim to

be a cultural centre in its own right, and this also held for Zurich.

The de-centralisation of German culture has then had the effect of making German-Swiss literature more independent in its inspiration. This process has been speeded up by the reaction of self-defence of Swiss authors at the outset of Nazism and its cultural imperialism. The war has helped to make German-Swiss literature into something both self-sustaining and distinct from German literature.

### The German and Swiss-German dilemma

But inasmuch as a literature is linked with a language, Swiss literature cannot be divorced from German literature. Due to this common language, Switzerland belongs to the same "cultural space" as Germany and is, in a way, a southern extension of Bavaria. German-Swiss authors however have a problem of their own: they must live in one language and write in another. The existence of two separate languages, one for administration, schools, commerce and information and one for daily life, does not trouble the average Swiss: one, German is used as a tool necessary for the modern world, the other, Swiss-German, is his real language, the one which beats in rhythm with his heart. Although a Swiss would have to write a love letter in German (provided he took the trouble to write one and didn't just dial his number on the phone) and although he has to use German practically everywhere outside his home, his language is Swiss-German and when Max Frisch tries to portray a Zurich policeman expressing himself in *Hoch Deutsch*, he inevitably sounds a little amusing. A writer is in a different predicament due to his work. He is intimately involved with the language which he uses as a medium, which means that he may have to bear the mental strain of "living" in two languages and their two "personalities". Some German-Swiss writers have solved this dilemma by rejecting the use of Schweizerdeutsch in everyday life: they speak German in the family and they write it as well so that they recover

their expressional unity. Others have done precisely the opposite: they have rejected German and use only Swiss-German in their writing.

### Swiss-German is not a solution

The latter course is a blind alley. There is no way of divorcing a language from what it stands for and what it essentially is. Whatever is written in any language is tinged with the spirit of this language and since Swiss-German is essentially a folklore and farm-yard language (as opposed to a modern, widespread and industrial language), it is more suitable for Heidi's adventures than those of Joe Valachi. In the same way, no seminarist would attempt to write science-fiction in Latin.

Swiss writers must not only solve their linguistic problems, they must also decide on what they are going to write about. There again, Switzerland's particular configuration makes their case unique. The country (or rather, the linguistic zone) being very small, the stuff of life which writers would like to develop must necessarily be local. A true reflection of the Swiss political pattern, authors often feel they just belong to the plot of land, the canton, in which they were born and where they have lived. Many excellent Swiss authors consciously limit the bounds of their universe to the limited space in which their experience has evolved. Their town or their canton have more importance in their eyes than a particular linguistic area in Switzerland, this is why Swiss literature really embraces a number of *cantonal* literatures. Decentralisation and particularism are therefore truly reflected in Swiss literature. Other writers find themselves restricted by the smallness of their native boundaries and their problems and look for inspiration in *universal* problems. The plot might still take place somewhere on Swiss soil but this is totally accessory. A Swiss village is no longer an end but just a convenient stage to unweave a story with universal significance. Durrenmatt, with his symbolism and exclusively human realism is an example in point.

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## Universal problems

Swiss literature is faced today with a number of general problems. First, like everywhere else, writers are finding out new literary forms and new means of expression. The clash between the innovators and the conservative literary establishment is particularly strong in German-speaking Switzerland. Then there is the problem of "Swissness" and a painful linguistic duality. Should "Swissness" and Swiss values be maintained at all costs? May they be sacrificed in the interest of a live and universal literature? Swiss authors are deeply separated on this issue. The most important of them all, Max Frisch, clearly acknowledges his nationality and what he owes to his country but points out that he cannot be a "Swiss" writer. Freedom and creative liberty can only be safeguarded by sleighting some traditionally Swiss conceptions. But, even though the cultural connotation of the adjective "Swiss" must take a bad mauling, there is no doubt that, as far as its geographical meaning is concerned, "Swiss" has never stood for a more flowering literary life as today.

(PMB)

# COMMENT

## THE END OF THE "RHONE AU RHIN" DREAM?

The idea of a waterway linking the Rhone to the Rhine is very dear to the hearts of many *Romands*. It is a recurring theme, as old as the idea of a cross-Channel tunnel, and, according to the reminiscences of the elder members of my Neuchâtel family, was very topical in the 1900s already. The aim was not just a canal crossing through Switzerland, but the possibility of cruising

from Basle to Geneva, from Geneva to Marseilles in a steamboat. The idea was latent in many of the important projects of the past decades. The freight station of La Praille, in Geneva, was built with the possibility of Geneva becoming a port one day firmly established in the minds of those who conceived the project. The Rhone-to-the-Rhine canal, or its myth, emerged again when extensive works were being made to irrigate the plain of the Broye, when the Broye and the Thielle canals linked the lakes of Morat, Neuchâtel and Biel, and when the Aar was channelled into the lake of Biel through the Aar canal. Back in the 17th century, it was almost possible to go from Neuchâtel to Geneva on boat thanks to the Entremont Canal, which joined the Orbe plain to Cossonay. From Cossonay to Morges, goods were transported on carts because the Venoges was no longer navigable. Today this canal has been filled in and there are few remaining traces of it.

In 1965, a special commission studied the feasibility of a fluvial link from Basle to Geneva and concluded that it was economically senseless. "Transhelvetica", the association that had fought for the Rhone-to-the-Rhine Canal for decades, decided that this study had been inspired by jealous railway and road interests and that its conclusions were therefore not valid. Transhelvetica commissioned the Battelle Institute to make a study of its own. The Institute, taking the social profit into account, arrived at different conclusions. The issue was becoming rather delicate and political, and Federal Council commissioned another team of experts, well separated from commercial interests, to see the problem for themselves. Unfortunately for the Transhelvetica canal supporters, its findings are that it would pay to make the Rhine navigable up to Klingnau, where the Aar meets the Rhine, because the port of Basle will soon be overburdened, but not, in the present economic set-up, create a navigable channel further upstream.

However, the matter is not yet settled and the Federal Council, according to a traditional procedure, has submitted the Commission's report to the individual cantons. They have up to 31st July to give their opinion to Berne. The Federal Council should be making concrete proposals at the beginning of 1971. There is no doubt that the possibility of cruising from Geneva to Basle on a chriscraft is very alluring and would make Swiss waters especially attractive. The value of a transhelvetica motorway would be predominantly touristic since canals have long lost their competitiveness with railway, with the possible exception of particularly bulky raw materials. The realisation of such a project will depend on whether "touristic" can be equated with "economic" in this case.

(PMB)

# SWISS NEWS

## FEDERAL

### New military credits held in reserve

In a "message" to Parliament, the Federal Council asked for renewed credits of about 200 million francs for improving military fortifications, extending training-fields, buying land and acquiring communication and sapping equipment. The Federal Council, which had only the week before submitted a series of economic dampening measures to Parliament, was well aware that the proposed expenditure would have effects going against these measures. For this reason it has suggested that Parliament should accept the principle of the expenditure and leave the time of actual outlay to the good judgment of the Department for Finance. This means that Parliament will be voting for credits (which are available but which may not be spent because of the official policy of restraint) to be used at an unspecified time.

### The national roads budget

Switzerland is to spend 765 million francs on its highways this year. This sum is 35 million francs larger than what was foreseen in the Budget and will allow the opening of 90km of new highways across the country. Fifty-five million francs spent in excess of last year's budget written down on this year's account will soon have to be voted. New motorway stretches to be shortly opened to traffic are 26km on the N.2 between Augst (Bl) and Haerkingen (So) passing through Lenzburg and Daettwil (Ag) and 14km between Attikon (Zh) and Waengi (Tg). The remainder lies in central Switzerland, the largest stretch being on the Simplon highway in the Valais. In French-speaking Switzerland there will not be any new span of motorway opened to traffic but present works will continue. Vaud gets 63 million francs, 56 for works and seven for land acquisition. The main effort will be centered on the N.9 where work on the Villas-Sainte-Croix to Venne stretch will be nearing completion. Neuchâtel gets 20 million for work between Saint-Blaise and the Bernese border. Geneva gets six million, four of which will be devoted to purchase of land and two for the completion of the link between the Geneva to Lausanne motorway and Cointrin airport.

### Switzerland and the U.N.

A high-ranking civil servant, Mr. Langenbacher, was the outspoken herald of the growing opinion that Switzerland should join the U.N., at a recent youth conference on civil problems. He maintained that joining the U.N. was not only a question of solidarity with the world community but also a question of preserving our vital interests within the U.N. organisation. Switzerland should avoid keeping at a distance from U.N. activities when