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CONTENTS

Forum	
Swiss literature: its situation	4-7
Fonds-Info	8
Official News	9/10
Politics	
Reform of the optional AHV/IV	11
SRI-News	11
History	
1939 Landi: the intellectual defense of the country	12
Tourism	
3300 km cycling country Switzerland	13
Votes	
Federal referendums of September 27th 1998	14/15
Mosaic	16/17
Dialogue	18
SSA News	19
Cover	
How healthy is the Swiss literary scene? One thing we can certainly say: it is quadri-lingual and lively! (Photo: Jean-Jacques Ruchti)	

IMPRESSUM

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Does it make sense to talk of national literature in a country like Switzerland counting four official languages? The question is not the more simple but nevertheless the more necessary in the run-up to the Frankfurt Book Fair to be held on October 7th to 12th of this year: an international event in the framework of which Switzerland will have to present the main lines of its literary production. An approach, that of the national literary reality, that it is necessary by the nature of things to differentiate amongst each of the various cultures which make up the Swiss mosaic. That may appear pretentious, but in our country it is essential to consider a German, French, Italian and – though to a lesser degree – a Romansh literature. In spite of that it is possible to identify some common points.

One of these is that, with the exception of Romansh the different literary currents are affiliated to a cultural pole outside our national frontiers. Germany, France and Italy have left their mark on Swiss literary particularities, which always maintain a strong link with their respective area of linguistic belonging.

The existence of political frontiers has in fact not prevented writers of the calibre of Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt from affirming themselves first at the German language level and then also at the international level.

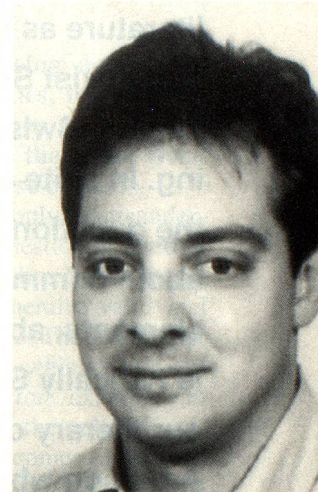
But those writers are not so numerous, who have the merit of seeing their works translated into the other national languages and even into English, which enables

them to gain access to the wider public.

On the other hand, for the majority of the volumes which are not translated, we may ask whether the national linguistic barriers do not run the risk of imprisoning the various cultures in a ghetto. All that naturally disadvantages the weaker – the Italian and particularly the Romansh minorities – : if we return to the consideration of literature, the linguistic minorities are already penalized in relation to German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland, because they dispose of a much smaller market.

However, the Swiss federalist structure guarantees the survival of the different cultural identities: by coincidence each of the three most widely used official languages are in the majority in at least one canton, with autonomous schools, media and – at the end of the day – cultures. And they are under the wing of German, French or Italian. It is particularly Romansh which is threatened with extinction, since even in Grisons it is relegated to the rank of third language behind German and Italian.

The literary tradition within the linguistic minorities plays a fundamental role not only as a vehicle for spreading and defending the minority language, but also as irreplaceable testimony to the different Swiss realities, including those that are less known.



Dario Ballanti

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