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No super figures – positive development

There exists Swiss literature as little as there exist Swiss films or Swiss painting. In spite of this, the question arises about common elements, about what is typically Swiss in our literary creation. A person who looks for the answers is Christoph Vitali, responsible for Switzerland's appearance at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair.



Christoph Vitali, what do you understand by Swiss literature?

The literature of a country which is made up of four language cultures. Accordingly, there are four literatures. Whether there is anything like a national literature in Switzerland, I would not dare to decide, but I believe there is an element which characterises Swiss literature as a whole: that it has very much to do with Switzerland. If I lay before you a short text, you will recognise it relatively soon as a Swiss one.

Would this be a literary finding in the sense that one can recognise Swiss linguistic expressions, or is it a matter of Swiss subjects?

It is the subjects, and also the way in which people seek to come to terms with their own situation, how people react to the small size of the country and its limitations and at the same time try to say something generally valid, to open up to the outside. Concern for one's own location is a theme of literature since Gottfried Keller and Robert Walser. The social constraints and bodies which tend to prevent free personal development – those factors contributing to social order are without doubt particularly strong in Switzerland, and writers have for decades rubbed against these mechanisms. This is particularly the case with German-language literature, and much less so with French-language and Italian-language literature.

If we compare French-speaking, Italian-speaking and German-speaking literature, it is certainly the case that the French and Italian speakers, much more so than the German speakers, orient them-

selves towards their great mother country, i.e. to Italy and France. As we were working out the poster campaign for Frankfurt and wanted to work with Swiss expressions in all three languages, we had difficulties for example with French-speaking literature to find quotations which had anything to do with Switzerland.

It will be one of the big questions whether we shall succeed in Frankfurt in building up any kind of common appearance. Public interest will concentrate above all on German-language authors. We want to work against this, and proportionally we have invited more authors from the smaller language groups and will also be trying to put these more clearly in the limelight.

Switzerland in the 1990s is poorly. How does it go with its writers?

Astonishingly well. Perhaps it is an advantage that at the moment there are no super-figures like Frisch and Dürrenmatt, and that in consequence a positive and creative development in breadth has taken place. It is true that there is still the fathers' generation of those now in their 60s and 70s, who played a very important role in the literary history of the postwar years. But alongside them is a middle generation and a whole series of new young talents which are raising their voices quite powerfully.

How does literature deal with the present crisis of our country?

Interestingly enough, concern with Swiss problems was greater in the 1970s and 1980s than it is at the moment. It is also the task of writers to be voices crying in the wilderness. At a time when there is a growing awareness that there were, for example, difficulties in the history of our country between 1933 and 1945, it is no longer such an urgent task for writers to dwell upon it. It is no coincidence that today there is no longer a figure like Niklaus Meienberg who wrote practically exclusively about Switzerland's historical burden, without at that time knowing as many details as we do today. It is true that Adolph Muschg is concerned with these

Development in breadth

things, but not with the same obsession with which Meienberg rubbed against Switzerland.

That may be countered by the idea that the writer is quite simply a trendsetter who takes leave of politics and withdraws into private subjects.

I do not believe that there is a withdrawal from politics, but there is perhaps a less intensive concern with daily political and socio-political questions. At a time when the media report on these matters every day, there is for a writer less of a need to write about them. That this should result in a return to human subjects may well be the case.

You have invited 136 authors to Frankfurt. Is that a representative selection or a good Swiss compromise?

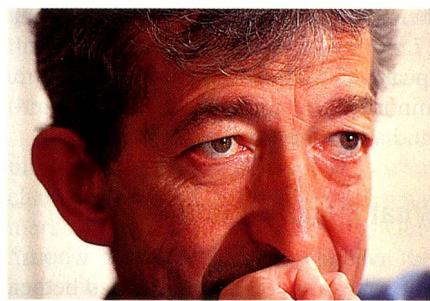
The partially very critical reaction to the large number has surprised me for naturally it must be our concern to invite as many authors as possible to Frankfurt. The more of them that are able to express themselves, the better it will be. We have indulged in no compromises. Those who have written important books and are still doing so have a good claim to be in Frankfurt. If over and above this they are the right ones, if a representative picture of the literary scene emerges, the task has been performed.

So to have the most important voices in Frankfurt was the main criterion behind your selection?

I believe that is the only legitimate main criterion. It is not a question of me rediscovering literature. But I must illustrate it. I must let it express itself in its breadth and in its variety. Naturally, such a selection is always marked by a great many recommendations which then flow into one general picture. Very important to me is not only Swiss literature in all four national languages, but also all those writing in Switzerland. There are a whole series of authors invited who do not write in a Swiss language.

In your selection, did you come under pressure from official Switzerland or from interest groups?

Absolutely not. The Federal Office of Culture left us a completely free hand in all matters, even in the cultural



"There is a whole series of young, new talents which are raising their voices with energy."

programme which would form the framework of the literary appearance at the Fair. There were absolutely no attempts to exercise pressure. Naturally, regional associations requested that their members and the authors closest to them should be taken into account, but the decision whether to give these

wide representation was exclusively my own.

You are already being accused of failing to set priorities, for example by giving the younger generation a chance to appear on the stage. What do you answer to these critics?

The first is quite simply a misunderstanding. It is not a question of inviting my Swiss literature, but Swiss literature which is as generally valid and compelling as possible. There are other areas of my work in which I can express preferences, for example in public relations or in the cultural programme, but when it comes to the central figures, the authors, they have the right to be invited on the basis of what they produce and not of whether they suit me or not.

The other accusation seems to me to be completely unjustified. We have invited a large number of young authors, taking young to mean new. A first-time author who may be 40 or 45 years old counts as a young author because it is his first book.

*Interview: Alice Baumann
and René Lenzin*

Photos: Jean-Jacques Ruchti

Switzerland in Frankfurt

Switzerland is the guest at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair, which takes place between October 7 and 12. Switzerland's appearance is under the motto 'lofty skies – narrow valleys'. Swiss authors from all four linguistic regions will be represented, as well as Swiss publishing houses. In addition, there will be, both inside and outside the exhibition area, a whole collection of other cultural events.

The project head of Switzerland's appearance is Christoph Vitali, aged 57. Vitali, a lawyer by training, was from 1968 to 1977 responsible for culture for the City of Zurich, and afterwards Administrative Director of the city theatres in Frankfurt. Since 1993, he has been General Manager of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, and he is one of the exhibition organisers best known internationally.

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