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Reflections on Swiss literature

Are we close to the breakthrough?

Guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, Switzerland is a writers' breeding ground, thinks French language literary critic and connoisseur François Conod, and more than we know about is being written.

A teacher in Lausanne informed his class that each pupil would have to write a composition on a French-speaking Swiss writer. Cry from the heart of one pupil: "Ah! are there twenty-three?"

Many more than twenty-three: hundreds. Well then?

What is a writer? Obviously someone who writes. And if possible who publishes what he writes. Still better: who makes himself known through what he writes. We may even dream: a writer is someone who achieves glory through what he writes, someone who puts in writing what we all expect from the authentic human being. Someone who, like every artist, shapes our fears and our joys outside every materialist pretension.

Texts from Ticino

As literature from our so-called terrace in the sun, Ticino literature talks in a lively and fiery way about seasons, harvests and perfumes, about the identity of the Ticino people and the loss of identity of their emigrants. The most important characteristic of Ticino literature is its orientation towards Italy, where it is received with a healthy lack of interest.

New poetry

Clear to recognise but difficult to explain is the consistently high and in recent years the rapidly rising share of poetry published. Giovanni Orelli, Remo Fasani, Antonio Rossi, Alberto Nesi and Fabio Pusterla have published poems, while in the same period in the field of significant prose, only Giovanni Orelli's "Il treno delle Ita-

In Switzerland in the 20th century we can count on the fingers of one hand those authors who have become widely known beyond our frontiers: Ramuz, Dürrenmatt, Frisch, ...

However, for this autumn about 136 Swiss writers have been invited to make the journey to Frankfurt, of whom 27 French-speakers and 15 Italian-speakers. And even then, this is only a minority. The cause is clear: in Switzerland a lot of writing is done.

What marks literature

But what is written? And for whom? The question of discovering whether there exists a Swiss literature has been widely debated. The problem is practically insoluble. Is literature linked to a language or to a country?

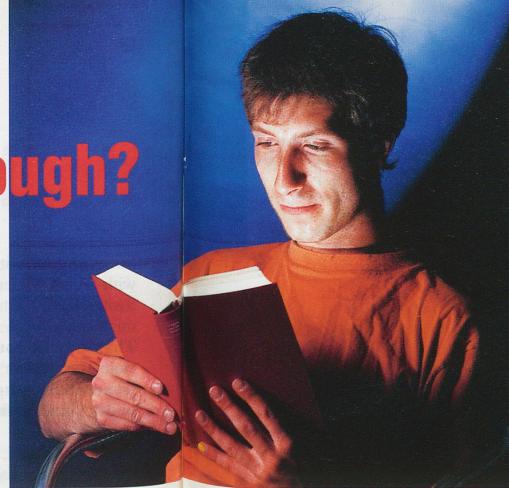
If it is to the language there can be no Swiss literature, since by the nature of things our writers express themselves in four different languages – without mentioning those who choose the Swiss-German dialect. If it is the country which counts, we may ask ourselves whether there exists a French-speaking

Reading a book always gives a glimpse of the linguistic region from which the author comes. (Photos: Jean-Jacques Ruchti)

literature, a Swiss-German literature, etc.

Do German-speaking writers write more urbanely?

For a long time things were relatively easy. It was noticed that a German-speaking writer was more likely to be turned towards the city than his French-speaking colleagues. He took part in political debates, like Muschg or Bichsel. He often had a critical attitude to his own country, while on the French-speaking side of the Sarine introspection was more the order of the day, like



Chessex for example. It will be easily understood that poetry was more the field of the French-speakers, while the art of the pamphlet was exercised more in German-speaking Switzerland.

And contrary to a tenacious prejudice it had to be noticed that humour flourished much more on the banks of the Aare or the Limmat than on those of the Rhone.

But things are in the process of changing. Geiser, the Basler from Berne, no longer has illusions about the power or the commitment of the writer. He has started to ruminate alone on his essential obsessions – in consequence existential for all of us. On the other side the Vaudois Bariel has been striving for years to put the intellectual back where he always ought to have been: at the center of the debate on ideas. Both these authors, well-known in literary circles – have problems in breaking through to a wider public.

Should we therefore come slowly to this unfortunate conclusion that what characterises the Swiss writer, what marks him off from his French, German or Italian colleagues is that he is not listened to, not read. He often has to be satisfied with confidential off-prints.

It is better to turn the problem round. What does the Swiss reader want to read? Books strongly embedded in the soil, whose action brings on stage people with local flavour. Or more likely works which have the scent of the open sea, or which present the universal me?

A fullness of critical works

We want both: we want to renew our stocks and to open ourselves. Without any incompatibility. What has changed at this end of century is that like all Swiss, writers are putting themselves in question, whichever side of the Sarine they live on. Let us rejoice. The authors of this country are beginning to understand it. The profusion of what they put into words is the flagrant proof of it and some of them have even become well-known abroad: Agota Kristof, Urs Widmer, ...

For too long a good Swiss writer has been a dead writer. So do not let Frankfurt discover the authors from here before you.

François Conod

New from the Romansh literature of Grisons

Is Romansh literature undergoing one of its Renaissances, or is it in one of its end phases? Difficult to say: three selected texts show widely differing mixture of tradition and innovation.

"Las floures dal desert" ("The flowers of the desert", 1993) brings together texts published in various magazines and to the extent of about one third unpublished texts from the estate of perhaps the most important Romansh prose writer: Cla Biert (1920–1981). A first part contains "youth stories". The merits of Cla Biert's well-known realistic prose emerge in the reflection of the standpoint of a growing boy. Precisely tailored story perspectives based consistently on the awareness and interests of a child, skilfully written reproductions of the everyday speech style of the characters, anthropologically competent situating of people and their actions within their historical context, are described. The world of young people is shown, neither transfigured nor ornamented, but in the full harshness of its group compulsions, pecking order and violent actions.

Writing against taboos

Theo Candinas, "Té-Tuá" (1993): the strikingly coded title is the product of

land and economic power Europe so much feared and fought against by the USA.

The changing story, full of tricks, between Grisons, Zurich and Florida is also the story of an emancipation. The female main character, abducted and signed up as an agent by the FBI, finds her way out of a male-dominated hinterland into the open world, and finds herself as well. The story of the friendship and lesbian love adventure of this main character, Maria, with Ladin from the Engadine is also to be read as an allegory of the emergence of the written language, Rumantsch Grischun, from the fusion of the two sister languages, Surselvisch and Ladin. There are of course fractures at the intersections between the thriller, the emancipation story laden with feminist and psycho-analytic observations and the linguistic allegory. These are to be assessed as esthetic defects, but also as an index for the experimental value and the innovation potential of this text.

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