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Travels as a language ambassador

BY MARTIN R. DEAN

IN THE AUTUMN OF 2001 I packed my bags yet again for a trip to Japan at the invitation of Pro Helvetia. For what seemed like an eternity, I flew over the Siberian wastes and stark, snow-covered mountain ranges which metamorphosed in the shifting light into shapes resembling fabulous creatures, dinosaurs and monsters. Below me lay a landscape for which the only phrase that sprang to mind was "devoid of people". Hours after my arrival in Tokyo-Narita I was clinging dizzily to a concrete post in Shibuya underground station, as hundreds of passengers hurried past me. I had passed through the needle's eye of the Siberian wastes to enter one of the most densely-populated spots in the world.

What does a writer from Switzerland bring to a far-eastern country like Japan? Firstly, a sense of awe that takes some time to digest. Tokyo's streets have no names, and I was constantly getting lost. I was unable to decipher the script, and it seemed to me that the faces of the Japanese were virtually indistinguishable.

But the readings sparked off a ceremony of exchanges which spilled over into dinners, other encounters and talks. Japan is an inscrutable but inquisitive country. In endeavouring to communicate some information on myself, my writing and the country in which I live, I noticed how my relationship with Switzerland was gradually changing. Viewed from the perspective of Japan, Switzerland seemed to me more open, spontaneous and laid-back. I revealed my great love of Japanese gardens and, in return, had to provide information about the role of the farmers who cultivate our land; perhaps the well-tilled acre and much-loved meadow was akin to an authentic Swiss garden.

When a Japanese student of German literature translated parts of my book "Monsieur Fume oder das Glück der Vergesslichkeit" and a student read an extract, I suddenly understood more about Japanese weightlessness and this magnetic pull into the inner void. In my own now

alien-sounding words, I heard the rigid order of colours and smells which hold the innermost values of this island empire together. Did I understand anything about Japan? Had they understood me? For the duration of a reading tour I had to make do with projections: those offers of interpretation and translation that never exclude the possibility of misunderstanding and therefore provide an author with a rich source.

I required rather less imagination on my reading tour to the USA. After taking a yellow taxi along 5th Avenue, I went up in a lift to the 35th floor of a skyscraper to give a radio interview. The station was predominantly staffed by African-Americans. As I read an extract from my "Guayanaknoten" ("The Guayana Knot"), I asked myself whether knot-tying was a Swiss folk-art and whether the Swiss were in the habit of collecting knots. The radio station staff was as interested in my Swiss roots as in my Caribbean roots. The fact that a Swiss had forefathers from the Caribbean was not even worth a question. It was precisely for that reason that they empathised momentarily with me.

Unlike music and the visual arts, which effortlessly cross borders, language-bound literature appears to be at a disadvantage as an ambassador.

On the other hand, a linguistic ambassador can convey a more differentiated image of his country than the artist or musician. An author on a book tour never simply tells people about his country, but also about his relationship with that country. In so doing, he inevitably triggers an international discourse, has to know something about his country's stereotypes (milk, cheese, chocolate and Heidi) which he, too, must acknowledge as typical. His inner vision must simultaneously be his world view, because anyone who travels on behalf of Pro Helvetia immediately comes into contact with exile Swiss, Japanese Germanists, correspondents and cultural attachés i.e. a colourful cross-section of the international

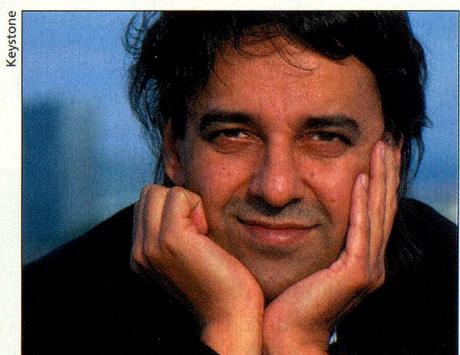
community, which accepts neither the exoticism of the foreigner nor any feelings of home-sickness.

Experiencing this openness can indirectly benefit literature; because, unlike Anglo-Saxon or Francophone literature, I believe that German-language literature suffers from isolation. Around the world this has resulted in its reputation as a solitary and provincial genre. On his travels, the linguistic ambassador can only help to dispel such a reputation by emphasising the variety, cosmopolitanism and model character of the literature as opposed to its national attributes.

It is therefore unquestionably true that a person who travels, gathers experiences that enrich his novels. My hope is that the author can return this favour at some time or another. For example, when his own books are translated and made accessible to a broader public. Books, after all, are akin to contraband, are capable of multiplying in the mind and sowing the seeds of understanding between nations. The most impressive curiosity about Swiss literature was shown by India. Weeks after my book tour, I was still receiving mail from the sub-continent. Indian students told me how they had read (in German!) and understood my novel "Meine Väter" ("My Fathers"), and enclosed the English translation by Indian authors. Thus began an exchange of ideas that has continued to this day. Swiss literature has found friends in India. When Indian literature knocks on our doors, I hope it will receive the same treatment.

Martin Dean was born in Menziken/AG in 1955 to a Swiss mother and an Indian father from Trinidad. He now lives in Basle and is an author, journalist and essayist. www.mrdean.ch

Translated from German



Martin R. Dean: language ambassador