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Between two worlds: books and literary figures among the Swiss abroad

By Charles Linsmayer

He celebrated Romantic Europe and was deeply affected by Franco-German enmity – Guy de Pourtalès

"Is success after forty really success at all?" wrote Guy de Pourtalès in his diary on 21 August 1921. "All that remains is admiration in art and literature. So, do women still adore men over the age of forty?" Born the son of a Swiss officer in the Imperial Guard in Berlin on 4 August 1881, he grew up in Berlin and Geneva and learned to love Richard Wagner and despise Prussian chauvinism as an engineering student in Germany. Then, as a budding writer in Paris under the influence of Maurice Barrès he became so passionate about France that he gave up Swiss in favour of French citizenship – which his Huguenot forefathers had been stripped of in 1685. This was in July 1911, three months after his marriage to Hélène Macuard from Berne. It led to him being called up to serve in the French army in 1914. He experienced a poisonous gas attack by German forces in Le Touquet, Flanders, in 1915 and consequently suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis for the rest of his life. Although he enjoyed success as a translator of Shakespeare and was financially secure thanks to a significant inheritance, he was left behind by the transition to post-war literature and, as the quote above suggests, gave up on his literary (and amorous!) opportunities as a forty-year-old. Nobody would be discussing Guy de Pourtalès today had a coup de foudre not made him into a completely different writer in 1923.

A momentous love affair

He became so caught up in a secret affair with a young woman named E. that he would have left his wife and family had the relationship not ended abruptly in 1930. His mood, alternating between despair and ecstasy, nevertheless enabled him to write much-read biographies on various romantic figures in which he captivated readers with his own erotic exuberance without them noticing. "What is the biography of a great man but the detailed formula of our secret hopes", he revealingly acknowledged in 1933, and his biographies of Liszt (1925), Chopin (1926), Ludwig II of Bavaria (1928), Nietzsche (1929) and Wagner (1932) proved so enthralling

not least because his own unfulfilled longings surfaced in each of the portraits.

But it was not until 1938 that de Pourtalès produced his masterpiece, with the novel "La pêche miraculeuse" (The Miraculous Catch of Fish), which was based on his own life. Like de Pourtalès himself, the musician Paul de Villars studies in Germany and goes to war for France, but then in 1919 in Geneva, the city of the League of Nations, he is able to transfer the reconciliatory symbolism of the novel's title to the optimistic finale of his "Symphonie lacustre". Paul's personal life is dominated by two love affairs that firstly link him with the reserved Louise, who plays an important part in his artistic development, and then with the sensuous Antoinette. The mysterious E. demonstrably served as a model for both women. The author provides each with an authenticity that only personal experience can produce despite dividing them into two figures for the purpose of alienation.

France's defeat comes as a shock

Guy de Pourtalès mediated between German and French culture in an inspirational way as an author and journalist, and it came as a great shock to him when France's part in the Second World War initially ended in humiliating defeat in 1940. Having long since returned to Switzerland, residing in Etoy on Lake Geneva, he was bitterly disappointed by the French collapse. Filled with rage, he described Germany in his diary as an "infected wound, the insanity of mankind". However, he suffered his most severe blow on 3 July 1940 when he discovered that Raymond, his only son, had been killed in Le Touquet, the very same village where he himself had been wounded in 1915. His daily writing kept him alive for another year "like a compass in the eye of the storm". He died of lung disease aged 59 on 12 July 1941 at the Hôpital Nestlé in Lausanne.

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Guy de Pourtalès

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"La pêche miraculeuse" is available in German under the title "Der wunderbare Fischzug" as volume 9 of the "Reprinted by Huber" series from Verlag Huber Frauenfeld. Almost all the biographies and "La pêche miraculeuse" are available in French from Éditions Gallimard, Paris.