

Swiss literature of today

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SWISS LITERATURE OF TODAY

This is a translation of an address given by a Swiss, Dr. Jacob Steiner, Professor at the University of Muenster in Westphalia, at the opening of the Swiss Book Exhibition at the Royal Library in Stockholm in January 1967 and again some months later at a Dinner of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique.

A review in a South-German paper (January 1967) opens with the sentence "A comparatively large number of young authors writing in German are Swiss". It is pleasant for everyone to have it confirmed by outsiders that one has a certain importance. We do not wish to call Switzerland of importance because she has produced several internationally-acknowledged authors. Writers, after all, are but individuals to whom the nation gives nothing beyond the climate to work in, whether they succeed out of harmony with or out of opposition to their background. Nor can one say that Switzerland does a great deal for her authors. There are a number of literature prizes, but these are either limited locally like those awarded by towns. They honour as much local ties as the quality of the writing and usually promote nothing new but represent a confirmation subsequent to already existing fame. Or they are prizes awarded by private patrons like the best-known amongst them, the international Charles Veillon Prize. There are a few national foundations which honour authors already arrived or encourage hopeful talent to further effort by awarding prizes or scholarships for a year. The Swiss Schiller Foundation may be mentioned here. But any such assistance is temporary only and cannot relieve the writer permanently of worries regarding his financial future. The "Pro Helvetia" Foundation should be mentioned in this connection, too; it promotes national culture inasmuch as this can strengthen the image of Switzerland.

To mention these institutions cannot hide the fact that the State itself, even in a time of economic affluence, does very little for the intellectually working man or woman. This statement does not mean censure. It is a moot point whether productivity of the individual can be increased by State assistance. But it has been established that there are hardly ever any complaints, least of all by the writers themselves. However much these may have to criticise the State, their criticism is not directed against lack of public support. This is no doubt due to the sound realisation that the creative artist whose working abilities are based on his own individuality, cannot expect assistance from public bodies who are far below his own artistic standards. To this may be added that the Swiss generally is sceptic with regard to the State in which he lives and of which he feels a part. Therefore, he does not want any help in order to preserve his "sceptic love". On the other hand, the Swiss public is satisfied with this state of affairs, because it looks upon the author not as a rare and rather wonderful creature, an animal which has to be looked after in a State preserve, but as a fellow citizen who follows his work like every other. We must not conceal that this attitude causes hardship in some cases. We are ashamed that Charles Ferdinand Ramuz who figures as the great predecessor of Jean Giono and André Chamson in French histories of literature, died in poverty in 1947. We know that Friedrich Duerrenmatt wrote his two first and most famous detective novels in order to escape material need. Even in the 'sixties, Ludwig Hohl lived in poor circumstances in Geneva. And only few friends took care of the old Robert Walser who came to new fame during the last decades of his life thanks to the

great admiration of Kafka. We know this, and the individual is also ready to help wherever he has an opportunity. The Swiss public however take this reproach on themselves in the knowledge that the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. Nobody has to suffer hunger in the Europe of today who does not wish to. The Swiss is thoroughly convinced that everyone has to face the fight for existence, and that opposition and adversities help him to mature and contribute to improve his creative ability as a writer.

Practically all Swiss authors take this attitude. Friedrich Duerrenmatt, of course, does not need to make money any more, nor does Max Frisch have to rely on his architecture. A few live as free-lance writers. But by far the largest number of those responsible for creating the literature of today in German-speaking Switzerland, have a trade or profession and no wish to give it up even if economically independent. Werner Weber is connected with literature by his daily work as editor. The same goes for Adolf Muschg who is assistant at Goettingen University, and for Otto Walter who has made the Walter Publishing Company the most important forum for new literature. Hans Boesch is road construction technician, Walter Vogt medical practitioner, and the best known amongst the young authors, Peter Bichsel, is a teacher. These are just a few examples. But they prove that Swiss authors are mostly integrated in the Community.

That Community is well-known for its complexity. Without going into details, it should be noted that, next to different races and denominational composition (57% are Protestant and 41% Roman Catholic), the most remarkable feature is the four language groups. It is simplifying matters to say that there are four official languages, for a man from Geneva or Neuchâtel does not understand at all a Fribourg mountain farmer who also speaks French. The Romansh, too, has strongly varying dialects. The situation in the German-speaking part is best illuminated by one single example: The expression in German *hinaufgehen, um hinunter zu schauen* is *ufe ga abeluege* in the Bernese dialect of the town and *embrüf gembrilotzen* in the German-Swiss dialect of Saas in the Valais. This will show clearly how the dialects vary within small Switzerland in such a way that fellow-countrymen may not even be able to make themselves understood in other parts where the same language is said to be spoken, unless they are ready to go half-way. For the German-speaking writer it is of additional importance that Swiss always talk Swiss amongst themselves. German is a foreign language which one learns only at school. This is not the place to go into the reasons for the sense of belonging and living together of such a heterogeneous society. They could be found in the fact that the boundaries of the various languages and dialects, religious denominations, customs and political units overlap frequently, so that no homogenous groups of population emerge. Furthermore, Switzerland as a National State has grown only very slowly, with the result that the Cantons and even Communes have preserved a great deal of political and economic autonomy. The Confederation was founded and has been preserved on the basis of judicious considerations for the historic necessity of a union. In the first place, it was practical reasoning, i.e. self-preservation instincts of small areas, which led to the formation of the State. And thus, even today, the Swiss are sober *Partikularisten*. In Switzerland, apart from official functions with speeches of consequence and pathos, one hardly hears a word about the essence of all things Swiss. On the other hand, there is a great deal of reciprocal criticism and scepticism with regard to the federal authorities. Only once Switzerland as a whole

is questioned or threatened from outside, the differently made-up groups of inhabitants are kept together by a glowing love for their home and country. It is interesting how the Swiss manage to live together. The following example illustrates the phenomenon: Voting rights for women have so far been granted only in a few parts of the country. But the first woman Minister was ordained in Zurich in the 'thirties, and in St. Gall, there has been a woman State Attorney since the 'fifties, although the law does not grant women the right to be elected to such offices. Many such examples could be given which prove that the Swiss do not solve their problems theoretically or centrally orientated. If a man or woman is needed for a special place, he or she will be put there, whether the law agrees or not. The Swiss are practical and pragmatic.

We are not only to investigate living conditions of Swiss writers and their relation to the community, but in the first place their work. In other words, we are interested to know whether these external circumstances which correspond to an attitude of mind, have found their expression in Swiss contemporary literature. Looking at the whole extent of writing, the question must be answered in the affirmative. By far the largest part of lyrics, the art of narrative and of drama is given a typically Swiss background, and the language is reasonably aligned to nature and the human aspect of the rural or urban scene. But it cannot be denied that this *Schrifttum* is accorded only small scope. In the work of Francesco Chiesa, past-master of the Italian literature of Switzerland; Andri Peer, so much concerned with the Romansh; Georg Thuerer, the historian; Maurice Zermatten, the sensitive and worthy successor of Ramuz; — just to mention one of each of the four parts of Switzerland — the Swiss recognises his own world as he lives and feels it. The novel "Schweizer-spiegel" by Meinrad Inglin, for instance, produces a marvellous insight into the nature and thinking of the Swiss people at a historically important moment. There could not be better documentation than this novel for anyone interested in the Switzerland of the twentieth century. But narrative, although handled with superiority, is marked to such a degree by the realism of the nineteenth century, that the time before the first world war produced more material rather than special poetic greatness. This applies to a large field of Swiss literature. Certain characteristics sometimes come from the dialects which the Swiss writer uses only rarely. When he does, they lend his work the charm of the intimate otherwise unattainable. But the diminishing group of dialect writers is of only Swiss, if not exclusively of local importance. For the German-speaking part of the country, Gottfried Keller's language depicted the world of the people in such a masterly way that most of his successors hardly reach beyond variations of his image. It may be assumed that every people and every linguistic group has received such images in the course of its history. We shall not elaborate on the successors to the great Gottfried Keller today.

(To be continued.)

DIAMOND AND IRON WEDDINGS

Two couples have recently celebrated their Diamond Weddings, Mr. and Mrs. Hans and Bertha Rahn-von Arx, *Bürgerheim* Schaffhausen, Mr. and Mrs. Albert and Frieda Tobler-Kellenberger, Lutzenberg, Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, and Mr. and Mrs. Hugo and Rosina Schwarz Wuethrich, Basle.

Mr. and Mrs. Alfred and Elise Chapuis, Geneva, have recently celebrated their Iron Wedding (65 years).

(A.T.S. and "Basler Nachrichten".)

SWISS ARTISTS WIN AWARDS ABROAD

Swiss painter Gottfried Honegger-Lavater, born 1917 in Zurich and resident in Paris, has received the art prize for 1967 from the Carnegie Foundation of Pittsburgh, U.S.A. He is thus the second Swiss artist to receive this award within a relatively short time; in 1961 it was given to Alberto Giacometti.

At the second Biennale for Illustration in Bratislava, in which about 300 artists from two dozen countries participated, the young Swiss graphist and painter Paul Nussbaumer received a silver medal for his illustrated book "Tell's Boy".

Swiss musician Walter Ducloux has been named artistic director by the Los Angeles Orchestra Society.

[S.N.T.O.]

WINTER HOLIDAYS IN LUCERNE

Lucerne is not only a world-famous summer holiday resort; in wintertime, too, the numerous sights of this city, its cultural and social life as well as the possibilities of all kinds of winter sports attract many visitors. Lucerne is centrally situated with regard to other European countries, and at the same time all of Central Switzerland's sports centres are situated near-by. *Seasan-tickets* as issued by public and private transport companies and covering the whole sports region, are valid to 31st March and are for sale at the Lucerne Official Tourist Office, at Lucerne travel agencies and hotels as well as at the official booking-offices in Switzerland and at the Swiss National Tourist Office, Swiss Centre, 1 New Coventry Street, W.1. During the period mentioned, holiday-makers will find hotel prices particularly advantageous.

(N.T.O. Lucerne.)

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