

Swiss literature of today [concluded]

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1968)**

Heft 1541

PDF erstellt am: **25.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689439>

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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.

(Concluded.)

None of the Swiss writers of today has the strength to keep up the tension between the ridiculous detail and the great idea to the end and to make it fit the stage. Nobody has been able to connect the truly Swiss with the important to the same extent as he, Friedrich Duerrenmatt. The Swiss dramatists who have come after him — Herbert Meier, David Wechsler, Hugo Loetscher, Otto F. Walter and Peter Zeindler — to mention but a few — have not reached the level of the two greatest dramatists of contemporary German literature, Frisch and Duerrenmatt. They don't seem to be able, any more than other German authors, to create impressive stage figures and invent theatrical action which give the drama a convincing form.

On the other hand, as the statement from a German newspaper mentioned at the beginning, indicates, quite a number of prose writers have made a name for themselves internationally. In 1964, Hugo Loetscher received the Charles Veillon Prize for his novel "Abwässer". If Frisch called his "Homo Faber" a report, Loetscher classifies his novel as "a considered opinion". That does not only apply to the outer form (an inspector of the municipal sewers spends his time underground during a political coup and then reports to the new régime), but also to the inner attitude. The perspective that "we from the sewers cannot believe in the purity of man" lets his considered opinion become an ironic/sceptical representation of human society: A woman buys shirts and curtain material and tells her husband who has just won a case for embezzlement, that they owe shirt, vest and curtain materials to the favourable outcome of the case, i.e. to embezzlement. "Whence comes the furniture? We chose the kitchen after a murderer had been defended, the carpets we bought after a case for drunken driving, the settee and armchairs are the result of a successfully handled bankruptcy; no upholstery without larceny and no shelves without estate quarrels; without libel no crockery, without guardianship no TV set." The woman furnished the home thanks to the justice which her husband re-established, and the question comes up inevitably: How would they furnish their home if there were no injustice? The impressive trait in Loetscher's cold evaluation of society's negative aspects lies in the invention of the main character whose profession opens the various avenues, but also in the concrete directness with which he expresses everything. Nevertheless, the masterly coldness of Loetscher lacks the tension resulting from Max Frisch's commitment and the impulsive vitality which gives Duerrenmatt's work its style.

Joerg Steiner was born 1930, and after his first book "Strafarbeit", a volume of lyrical poetry, and his narrative "Abendanzug zu verkaufen", his second novel already appealed to the public. Its title is "Ein Messer für den ehrlichen FINDER", and the contents cover the years which a youthful murderer spends in borstal. The novel takes place in and near Berne, and the dramatic events are reproduced concretely and even refer to contemporary happenings. The language is concise. The style is often like minutes; clever dialogue and precise description succeed

in portraying a large measure of reality, including much social criticism, without getting bogged-down in realistic expression.

Heinz Weder, essayist, publisher and poet, recently wrote his first novel "Der Makler", a surrealist setting in which a farce destroys the idyllic village life and marks the psychic existence of modern man by a nightmare.

Adolf Muschg has reached several editions already with his novel "Im Sommer des Hasen". Large parts of it take place in Japan, and he, like Max Frisch, confronts the foreign with the nearest. The fictitious narrator is a public relations manager of a Swiss industrial concern, who writes minutes for his company in a country inn near Zurich. He had sent six young writers to Japan in order to collect original literary publicity material. As he works through their Japanese experiences and tales, his business report changes into a draft essay on his own existence, in which the exotic and the near at hand, the typical and the individual, human generalities and contemporary happenings become an insoluble whole. Muschg is a narrator who knows how to connect the great relations with certain concrete details, and his language is measured, full of epic composure emanating from intellectual superiority.

The first novel by Hans Boesch who had previously been awarded the Gottfried Keller Prize for a tale, is called "Das Gerüst". Its title indicates its basic structure. It also takes place on a building scaffolding in Alsatian potash mines which had been taken over by a detachment of German soldiers during the Third Reich. The technical and administrative affair which is described with matter-of-fact knowledge turns more and more into a human conflict which involves the actors and which ends, literally and symbolically, in a catastrophe when the scaffolding collapses. The novel evokes the working man's world and the military routine with its historic aspect of the time, but also the personal lives of the individuals. Factual statements, poetic atmosphere and dramatic action are well balanced, and thus the title of the novel becomes not only a description of the building scaffolding, but also of the human structure.

The novels of Otto F. Walter also describe occupational life, reminding the reader of Kafka, though with the difference that Walter starts not from some utopia but from some concrete basis — typically Swiss.

Peter Bichsel was discovered in 1964 at the Stockholm meeting of the "Group 47". The following year he was awarded the Lessing Prize of the Town of Hamburg and the Prize of the "Group 47". His sudden fame resulted from 40 pages of prose. The 21 tales which Otto F. Walter published, have the title "Eigentlich möchte Frau Blum den Milchmann kennen lernen". There is nothing more commonplace, more average, more Swiss than the contents of these stories. An old woman takes her school friend peonies wrapped in newspaper. One evening when the guests are shown lantern slides, someone remembers a teddybear which he had cut open as a child in order to see what was inside. The evening at the home of a working man growing old. The love affair of a married man and its end, etc.

The story which gives the book its title, tells of the milkman who comes at 4 a.m. and knows Mrs. Blum only from her bit of paper on which she leaves him her order for 2 litres of milk and 200gr of butter, and from her dented milk pail. The language is extremely simple, mainly single sentences, occasionally a key word. It seems that only facts are reproduced with as little display of words as possible. But with this, the author creates a

group of average men and women who know one another only from written notes, who don't know what to say to each other, who are almost entirely types with very limited surroundings in which to express their individuality at the most by a gesture or a commonplace reaction. It is a world like Duerrenmatt makes his Uebelohe say "which only exists, but possesses no ideas" The world of the *petit bourgeois* without sensation, a world of lonely beings who are unable to give their lives any form. Bichsel's prose is unpretentious and concentrates solely on the factual, but it stirs the reader with its complete accuracy with which people and situations are sketched. The thrift which Bichsel employs in the use of words creates purely the facts themselves in the reader's mind, and his language is as scanty as the subject. But together this reaches great artistic unity. Bichsel's words are surrounded by silence like the people and things they depict. And it is just that which creates connections and relations to such an extent. And almost imperceptibly, the reader becomes aware of a work of art. We think all we get to know is Swiss commonplace *Kleinbürgerlichkeit*, and almost without realising it, we have experienced perfect art.

Looking at Swiss contemporary literature, we see a tendency to objectivity, to sober observation and scant use of language. We discover a partiality for the concrete, in its lack of speculation and use of precisely recreated detail of a Swiss background. If we agree that the world after the second world war is characterised through objectivity and ruled by technological thinking, Swiss literature is representative of the world in general, and in this lies its great opportunity.

(Concluded.)

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