

Switzerland's contribution to European literature

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1975)**

Heft 1699

PDF erstellt am: **24.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686738>

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SWITZERLAND'S CONTRIBUTION TO EUROPEAN LITERATURE

by Geoffrey H. Buchler, Ph.D.

Being called upon to unveil, and further, to illuminate the world of Swiss literature one is immediately faced with a rather basic question, namely: is there really any such thing as a 'Swiss' literature?

From a wholly superficial point of view it would seem not improbable that a country surrounded by three major foreign languages, and cultures, could have abdicated its right to its own literary identity and self-preservation. Yet, in order to dispel any existing misconception from the outset, one would do well to appreciate that Switzerland's decentralised structure, (from commune to canton and then to federal state), displays an inherently localised attitude in relation to its literary activities. Whether this is a factor in cities the size of Zurich, Geneva or Lucerne, or in even the smallest of villages, one thing is definite — there is no literary centre like Paris or Berlin to which the Swiss can turn with conviction. The direct consequence of this is an upsurge of localised interests, perhaps in a rather sociological sense, with great emphasis on the local people. It is a known fact that the voracity of Swiss appetites for literary matters has endowed them with the largest number of publications (newspapers and magazines) per capita head of anywhere in the world; notwithstanding the newsprint shortage! If it is not the quest for information, it is at least a vibrant sign of patriotic egoism.

A further natural consequence of the fragmented decentralised structure, is the certain bearing Swiss-born writers such as Constant, Ramuz and Pestalozzi have brought to the fore, in a broader, universal sense. The French-speaking Swiss C. F. Ramuz, who was already widely acclaimed at the beginning of this century, felt, like his German-Swiss compatriots Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Max Frisch, that in spite of his love for his native canton he had to go beyond the Swiss borders in order to project a more definitive and complete philosophy. Paris to him was 'l'abstraction, l'idée, l'invention, le principe abstrait . . .' and though his homeland claimed his later years, by then he had already created a market and a public for his novels outside Switzerland.

As a country Switzerland had, by the 17th century, become an enchanting haven, a *foyer* for respite, relaxation and mental reflection. It was to this beautifully romantic setting that Gibbon, Byron, Shelley and Dickens amongst many Englishmen, came. From Germany came Schiller, Rilke, Nietzsche and Hesse; and of Frenchmen, Voltaire, Rousseau and Mme. de Staël. Even Balzac and Dostoevsky found there the great creative stimulus that they so needed.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

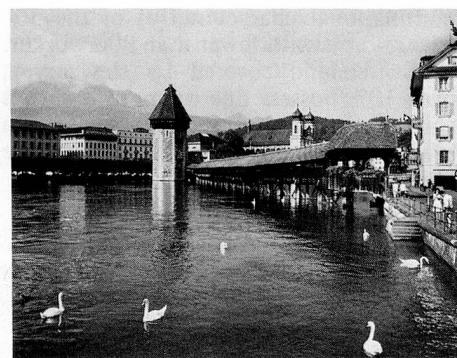
In reality, it is thus impossible to speak of a Swiss literature. There are four distinctive languages in Switzerland and to each of these languages there corresponds a distinct literature. Surprisingly, a common boundary and a shared political tradition do not make a national literature: neither is there any mutual influence between the literatures of the various language groups; for some very important French-Swiss authors have only recently been translated into German and, conversely, certain German-Swiss writers remain completely unknown to the French-speaking Swiss.

From the standpoint of language and literature the various nationalities of the Swiss Confederation project into those of their neighbouring countries — Germany (Austria), France and Italy — although the only exclusively Swiss literature is that written in the Raeto-Romance language. Latin-Swiss literature, however, produced the oldest document relating to what is now Switzerland. The first description of Helvetia and the Helvetians is to be found in Caesar's "Commentarii" commonly referred to as the *Bellum Helveticum*. Various Swiss humanists compiled their chronicles in Latin, devoting most of their prose and verse in depicting their own country. Greatly used in the 15th Latin had by the 18th century become somewhat defunct as a language: modern European languages taking its place. On the other hand, Raeto-Romansch, which was formerly spoken far beyond the boundary of Switzerland, is today mainly heard in a few valleys of the Grisons; being recognised as an official language only as recently as 1938. Although spoken by hardly 1% of the population, Raeto-Romansch and its literature, which was once predominantly ecclesiastical, became for a time political (with its popular songs) but has since remained essentially regional in character. Of Swiss dialect literature there is a little still in existence in the Ticino and the French-speaking cantons. The important instances of this type of literature belongs to past centuries, such as the different Genevese ballads commemorating the victory of the "Escalade" in 1602. However, the German-speaking part of the country consistently sticks to the use of dialect for everyday purposes; Swiss-German writers expressing themselves in both "hoch-Deutsch" and in their dialect.

THE ITALIAN INFLUENCE

Of Switzerland's four spoken languages, Italian is the third most prominent and accounts for about 9%.

Although its natural home is in the Ticino it is unlikely that the literature of such a small group could exist without a strong and permanent relationship *vis-à-vis* Italian literature proper. A representative figure in the first half of the 19th century was Stefano Franscini who, through his principal work "La Svizzera italiana", helped to bring about the new unity of the Ticino by significantly connecting it with the spirit of the Swiss Confederation. During this century the most outstanding poet and novelist has been Francesco Chiesa. Through his convinced regionalism, and combined with a profound love for his country, Chiesa's vast influence on his contemporaries strongly contributed towards keeping the Italianata of his region intact. This tradition is still maintained by both Filipinni, an eminent essayist and novelist, and by the poet Patocchi.



Lucerne

THE FRENCH INFLUENCE

In comparison, the French-speaking part of Switzerland, although it only comprises one-fifth of the total population of nearly 6½ million, is of considerably greater importance in its contribution to Swiss literature. The basic foundation of French-Swiss literature coincides with the Reformation. A marked influence and literary impact was felt as a result of Calvin's settling in Geneva in 1541. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, himself a Genevan by birth, was a worthy disciple of the "cité de Calvin" becoming, during the course of the 18th century, a figurehead in European literature and the acknowledged leader of the pre-romantics. Rousseau's influence was also manifold; probably leading to the "Coppet circle" under the aegis of Mme. de Staël. This essentially cultural group was situated on the tranquil shores of "Lac Léman": a stone's throw away from Geneva. Here gathered such eminent French-Swiss personalities as Constant, Chateaubriand, Sismondi and Schlegel. Indeed, Coppet's stimulating atmosphere produced two particular works from the

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Geneva

pen of Mme. de Staël: "De la littérature" and "De l'Allemagne", and from Benjamin Constant, "Adolphe" — works, moreover, which had a lasting impact on Swiss-French and European literature. Stemming from both Vinet and Amiel, during the middle of the last century, also came great personal revelations of thought which were at once recognised all over Europe, establishing a demand for Swiss thinkers and historical writers like Monnier and Gonzague de Reynold at the turn of this century.

Today, with a vast amount of literary activity centered around Geneva, contemporary French-Swiss literature has a rather cosmopolitan air about it, making it often difficult to distinguish what is peculiarly Swiss or not. Perhaps Denis de Rougemont and Léon Savary imply a certain European taste and outlook but, for external impact, Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, with his "universal" theme of writing as specifically depicted in his "Aline" (1905) and "La grande peur dans la montagne" (1926), remains as the most resounding of recent authors. Surprisingly just a short year ago a writer of obscure merit outside Switzerland also laid his claim to fame after being accorded the supreme annual literary award for a novel in French: the "Prix Goncourt". As a consequence it seems likely that this accolade, which was awarded to Jacques Chessex, has heralded the revival, if not the renaissance, of Swiss cultural and literary worth in the eyes of the French-speaking world. On the point of his previous obscurity Chessex was later quoted in the Paris "Figaro" as saying — "I really feel that one day my native Canton de Vaud will be recognised as an integral part of

French cultural identity and the French language; even if it means finding out just 'where' I come from".

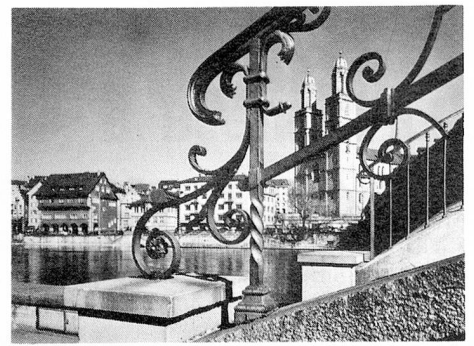
THE GERMAN INFLUENCE

For the French-Swiss the lack of any close contact outside their own country, and particularly with France, has created a veritable stumbling block. Conversely, the German-Swiss, because of their closer integration and assimilation into the German-speaking world, have assured their literature a constant and warm reception. The first literary writings in German, with national overtones, were popular ballads and chronicles commemorating primarily the great battles fought for freedom by the Swiss between the 13th and 16th centuries. The most noticeable and influential of these was "William Tell", which maintained an important position as a narrative and a play from the 15th century onwards.



Lausanne

The advent of the Reformation brought in its train the political power of Zurich and of Ulrich Zwingli who fast became the German-Swiss counterpart of Calvin. Zwingli wrote mostly in Latin, having only an indirect influence on literature, yet his successful efforts to replace the so-called Zurich bible with the Luther bible established much closer connections between Switzerland and Germany — a result of Luther's commanding and authoritative use of the German language. This pro-German affinity manifested itself at the beginning of the 18th century through the poetry of Albrecht von Haller, and at the end of the century through the historical works



Zurich

of Johannes von Müller. Between these two landmarks appeared the Zurich school of criticism and its foremost members, Bodmer and Breitinger. They strongly opposed the critical views of French rationalism and classicism; in turn vigorously promoting the appreciation of English literature in Germany. In so doing, their work inspired a revival of religious and national conceptions which had a marked effect on succeeding generations. In importance, however, they were surpassed by Johann Pestalozzi, who not only wrote about the necessity for a child's good family upbringing, but who included in his later thought the nucleus covering the entire field of the nature and destiny of man. Indeed, as an educationalist, his work for children influenced attitudes far beyond his own country.

During the course of the 19th century two particular books appeared in German, which gained almost immediate international fame. These were "The Swiss Family Robinson" and "Heidi" whose purely literary merits surprisingly escaped any considered attention in their native country. Abroad, the significance of German-Swiss literature gradually increased; from the novels of Jeremias Gotthelf to the fiction and poetry of Gottfried Keller (1819-90) and Conrad Meyer (1825-98). Both Keller and Meyer realised their own potential comparatively late in life: a phenomenon frequently observed in the history of Swiss thought. Meyer drew upon the mountains and the princely courts of the past, immersing himself in the life and culture of the Renaissance, whereas Keller, with his prose and poetry, was a



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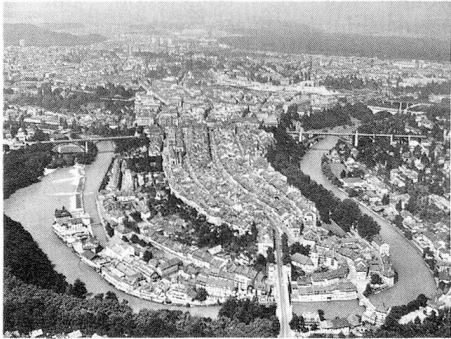
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Basel

truer "visionary" of his age. For he, with a genial humour and exuberance to match the quality of his fundamentally human attitude, brought vividly to light, whether through hymns of praise or social criticisms, the love for his country.



Berne

20th CENTURY CONCEPTS

With the advent of the 20th century came principally a change of belief, in that the values of tradition and emancipation were not necessarily irreconcilable. Thus, novelists such as Moser and Guggenheim, historians and literary men like Burkhardt and von Salis aimed at a sort of "interpenetration" of the forces of both their native country and the world at large — a universal humanism of sorts, but a definite transition towards a really European Switzerland. There was still, of course, a certain minority which held to the values of rural contentment significantly stressing the conservative element in the new age of materialism and prosperity. Others furnished antidotes to the conventional order of things and were alert to the stimulus of international thought. Carl Spitteler who won the Nobel Prize in 1919, for his epic poetry, was certainly of that school.

In answer to an undoubted divisiveness that has occurred amongst Swiss authors, through the question of whether Swiss values should be maintained at all costs or whether they should be sacrificed in the interest of a live and universal literature, one writer has noticeably almost undeniably "stepped out of the crowd" in his convictions: namely Max Frisch.

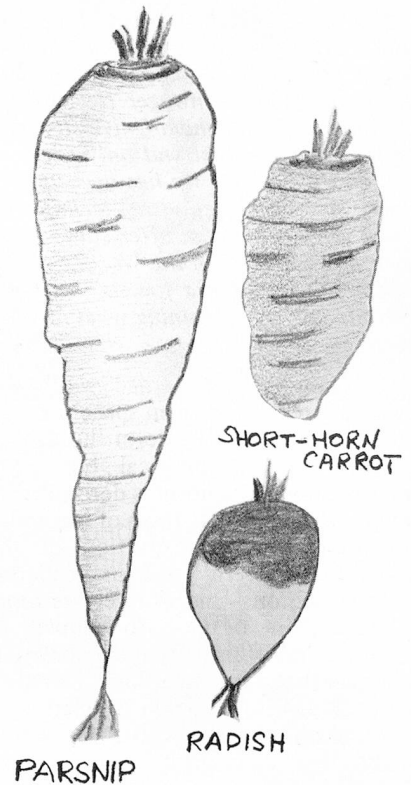
Together with Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who was born ten years after him (in 1921), Max Frisch stands pre-eminent as being fully capable of portraying the dramatist's and novelist's image of contemporary life. Moreover, these two Swiss authors have become the most important German-speaking writers to consistently reach a world-wide audience in the post-war years. Although Frisch and Dürrenmatt have a great deal in common with practically parallel development, Frisch can be characterised by his finer morality, perseverance at the same philosophical problem, and a clarity in style and presentation, especially noticeable in "The Fire Raisers" and "Andorra" (1961), Frisch's most successful play. Dürrenmatt, however, does not possess this, yet he is considered to be more dramatically inventive and imaginative. Yet for their "genre", and those like Jacques Chessex, universalism is their language. This is the road they have chosen to personal achievement and to the wider portrayal of Switzerland as a country not just of cheeses, chocolates and watches, but of books and the arts as well.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Strangely the answer to Switzerland's future contribution to European literature will stem very much from its past history, simply because, without detriment to their connections with European civilisation, many Swiss regard the existence of a manifold national literature with considerable satisfaction. Between the extremes of absolute diversity and absolute harmony there is room for all aspects of expressions of thought and imagination. Since Switzerland has never had a truly cultural centre such as Florence or Berlin were once for Italy and Germany — and Paris is still for France — each group (and sometimes each individual writer) expresses itself according to its character and region. This may have its advantages, but it also has its dangers which can only be overcome on the level of a vigorous communal consciousness. So far this consciousness has proved adequate. A deteriorating structural change could occur only if the minorities were estranged from the confederate whole, or if the majority forces were tempted to exploit their position regardless of tradition which is in any event quite improbable. In fact, although the numerical relationship of the different languages is slightly shifting, there is no serious peril to the balance of the dissimilar cultures. On the contrary, because the underlying ideals are very much alive, they may produce further highlights of national integration. A development of more than a thousand years is at the basis of Swiss literary life and this, more than anything else, will continue to shape what might be called an evergrowing and everlasting "patrimonium Helveticum".

Photographs by courtesy of SNTO.

FOR THE GARDENER



If you have a garden why not make it productive in the way of food. For a comparatively small outlay you can provide yourself with many good fresh vegetables and fruits. Seeds are going to be scarcer this year than previously due to the very dry spell in the early part of 1974 and the later very wet period.

If you have not tried growing your own crops to date, why not have a go at such things as parsnips, carrots, lettuce, peas, onions, shallots and cabbage. They are not that difficult to raise. You may think that you have not got sufficient ground to accommodate these crops, but you know a few lettuces, radishes and so on included in the herbaceous border would not be out of place. Dotted around they can look quite attractive in their own right.

You need a bit more room for growing peas, but if you can choose a variety such as "Meteor" which is a very early grower and quite a good cropper and also has the advantage of growing not more than about 18 inches in height, the amount of space required is cut to the minimum. These peas can be sown in February under cloches and will mature in about 12 weeks, successional sowings can be made right up until August. Very little staking is required.

Shallots and onions can be grown from sets (baby bulbs) which can also be placed out in February. Many of the seeds for the suggested items are sold in pelleted form which makes for easy growing and saves waste of seed.

Don't forget, get your seeds early in order not to be disappointed.