

Max Frisch - his 100th Birthday : the outsider

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The outsider

Max Frisch, who would have celebrated his 100th birthday in May of this year, always saw alienation as part of existence. The more transient his places of residence, the more at home the author felt. He did not associate the notion of home with a particular country. By Julian Schütt



Max Frisch in Rome, 1965

Returning home was a problem for Max Frisch even before he made his first trip abroad to south-eastern Europe as a 21-year-old in 1933. In a newspaper supplement, he describes a hike in the mountains. His walk back to the valley and civilisation alarmed him: it was as though time had stood still. He passed an uninhabited mountain hut and continued his descent crossing alpine pastures, which seemed deserted, as did the first village he finally reached. As he walked along the village road, it felt as though he was passing a row of graves. There was not a person or an animal in sight. Complete desolation. Here Frisch refers, for the first time, to the fairytale of Rip van Winkle, who returns so late after awakening from his enchanted slumber that he cannot find anyone. This age-old figure of alienation pervades Frisch's entire works. He portrays the Rip-van-Winkle experiences repeatedly, with the narrator wondering why all of a sudden he is walking through the streets "as though I was in a foreign place and unable to understand your language". Consciousness means alienation for Rip van Winkle, as it did for Max Frisch.

Switzerland – a mousetrap

The desire to constantly make a fresh start, to leave old chapters of life behind, to shed one's skin and to become unknown permeates through Frisch's biography and works. Abroad he felt truly alive. Similarly, he could only describe his compatriots with the necessary clarity and inexorability once the Hitler era and the associated entrenchment of Switzerland were over and he was able to travel again. He saw alienation as an inescapable part of consciousness.

Not being able to travel abroad for a decade after 1936 was a hardship for Frisch. "More of a mousetrap than a haven" was his description of Switzerland's position during the war. The country had become an endangered "void between war and peace", or, according to modern historical knowledge, a fissure not casually forgotten that was important to the Axis powers between which Switzerland was sandwiched and which it fatefully accommodated economically and in terms of refugee policy.

Distanced from the events of war

The fact that Switzerland was not involved in any acts of war but remained cloistered as

a spared nation was not without consequence. It resulted in closer ties domestically, which was ultimately counterproductive from a cultural point of view. There was "embarrassing familiarity" (Frisch) to relationships in domestic literary circles, where everyone had already encountered one another "in their slippers and nightcaps". This lack of distance fostered appalling apathy over the long term. Most cultural figures left politics to the politicians in power and focused instead on supposedly more essential matters. Pro-government, army-friendly discourse therefore predominated without any real state pressure. Though, if necessary, the censors of the Swiss government armed with far-reaching powers helped bring any insubordinate voices into line.

Strictly-regulated army life, known as "active service", made the most attentive observers passive and dulled the powers of perception. While there was not exactly a fear of being drawn into the war, there was an increasingly apathetic response to the suffering in other countries, despite or perhaps because of the many exercises and simulated emergency drills. Frisch observed: "The news is becoming boring, a list of cities in the afternoon and evening. People don't even bother looking at the map anymore. With no bloodshed, it sounds like a sports report. There is no screaming, no stench, no numb staring, no wheezing, no burning." It was as though Switzerland had been immunised against the realities of war. Not until "Dienstbüchlein" (1974), a book about his life in the army, does Frisch painstakingly explore what he actually knew about the Nazi period, Hitler's attacks and the annihilation of the Jews. Did the void outweigh everything? No, what stayed with him above all was the recollection of "how the uniform takes away our conscience without anyone recognising it as conscience".

Confrontation with Germany

Literature encountered all sorts of confines during and after the war. It was inadequate. How could the incomprehensible be expressed when it lay beyond our own experiences? There was only one feasible way – writers needed to understand their own limitations. Max Frisch came to this conclusion earlier than many other authors. He went to occupied Germany so often after 1945 that he attracted attention. In

Germany, his work was exposed to a completely different environment to that in Switzerland. Germans reacted with great sensitivity to things that mattered little to the Swiss, and vice versa. Writing in and for both cultures represented a risky undertaking. Most contemporaries did not voluntarily expose themselves to the threat of cross-border misunderstandings. Frisch wrote that one had to be capable of “revealing the reality of our time”. This capability involved depicting various realities while they were still “ardent” objects, and presenting them with their diversity and synchronicity as one constellation that was true at least of the moment. That was essentially what Frisch set out to achieve after the war.

Observed and reported

He did not just travel to Germany, but also to countries destroyed by the Germans, such as Poland, to gain as accurate an impression as possible of the changed state of Europe. His travel behind the Iron Curtain did not go down well, particularly in Switzerland. The state protection authorities began to observe and keep files on him. The “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”, with which he had a long association, distanced itself from him, openly pigeonholing him as a Nazi sympathiser and a national traitor.

From this point on, Frisch no longer saw politics as being detached from culture. Quite the opposite, he perceived politics as part of culture and culture as part of politics. He now described his stance as “humanistic socialism”, against dictatorships of all kinds. He became the first German-speaking author to tackle the issue of the nuclear age and its dangers in the 1946 play “Die chinesische Mauer” (The Chinese Wall).

Europe and the USA

In 1951, he went to the USA for more than a year thanks to a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, spending several months in New York and San Francisco. Back in Europe, he was annoyed at the snobbery shown towards the USA by artists, architects and intellectuals. The lecture entitled “Our arrogance towards America” was a response to all those who wondered why Frisch had chosen to spend over a year in the USA. They expected some kind of juicy justification after his return, which he could not see the need for. This arrogance related to culture in particular. Frisch observed that while there was indeed a lack of a cultural middle class in the USA, in its place was a refreshing uninhibitedness. People did not hide behind unfamiliar knowledge of art history. Frisch wrote that a vast number of Americans were tired of being patronised intellectually by “old father” Europe, which they had to look after, and that this situation was of no benefit to anyone. He embraced a cultural globalisation in this 1953 lecture. He said that the world was starting to become round, not just in terms of knowledge but also human experience. He added that this type of global person would primarily be born in America and that it was only natural that such a person would refuse to see Europe as the intellectual epicentre of the world. Frisch later bought an apartment in Manhattan.

...quickly becomes an emigrant

Did he choose to live abroad – he also spent long periods in Rome and Berlin – in order to write? He certainly chose to do so in order to live. The first part of “Tagebuch 1946–1949” (Diary 1946–1949) contains the phrase: “...somehow one is always a

foreigner”, in particular when describing things not experienced personally. And the phrase appears again in the concluding sections in a more radical form: “...one quickly becomes an emigrant.”

During his speech at the Büchner Prize award ceremony in 1958, he spoke at length of a “sense of not belonging”. He said that it was, of course, debatable whether a positive assessment of the emigrant’s situation does not push the compulsive nature of any period of exile too far into the background. The literary results are certainly exciting, the way in which Max Frisch has depicted man’s alienation in post-war society in “Tagebuch 1946–1949”, “Graf Öderland” (1950/51), “Stiller” (1954), “Homo faber” (1957) and “Andorra” (1961).

The first “diary” ends with the vignette “Schinz”, which is about a lawyer of the same name. “Schint’s” (so it seems) is a common colloquial expression in Switzerland used to confirm that one has also already heard a particular rumour. The Word seems to have got around that something is not quite right with Schinz, he feels ostracised at least. It is he who suddenly realises: “One quickly becomes an emigrant.”

Almost immediately after reading “Schinz”, Frisch’s publisher, Peter Suhrkamp, was convinced that it was the draft for a more important work. Schinz is in fact a precursor to Stiller, the “emigrant in his own country”. Both attract the attention of the authorities as they are suspected of being in contact with subversive elements. Suhrkamp recognised a great deal of Frisch in this: “It seems to me that you are having a personal crisis but that is probably a prerequisite for a productive state”, he wrote to Frisch.

The Cold War produced various emigrants. One of these was Frisch. It happened very quickly or, as he writes in “Schinz”: “You see things differently to how they are taught by others; you can’t help it if the newspapers write the opposite...”

It is undoubtedly true that Max Frisch needed to feel like an emigrant in order to write.

NEW PUBLICATIONS

In addition to Julian Schütt’s biography, various publications on Frisch have been brought out in German for the anniversary year.

Beatrice von Matt: “Mein Name ist Frisch”, encounters with the author and his work. Verlag Nagel & Kimche, Zurich, 156 pages, CHF 23.90

Daniel de Vin (ed.): “Max Frisch – Citoyen und Poet”.

Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 128 pages, CHF 30.50

Volker Hage: “Max Frisch – Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten”. Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 257 pages, CHF 37.90

“Nicht weise werden, zornig bleiben”. A portrait in original recordings (edited by Ingo Schulz), Hörverlag, 2 CDs, CHF 35.20

“Max Frisch spricht”, speeches and a chat on the

occasion of his 75th birthday with Hans Ulrich Probst, literary editor of Radio DRS. Verlag Christoph Merian, CHF 26

Most of Max Frisch’s work has also been translated into French, English and Spanish. There were no new publications in these languages for the anniversary year.

JULIAN SCHÜTT, born in 1964, is an author and journalist living in Zurich. His book “Max Frisch – Biographie eines Aufstiegs” (Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin) was published this spring.