

# Swiss literature of today [continued]

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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.*

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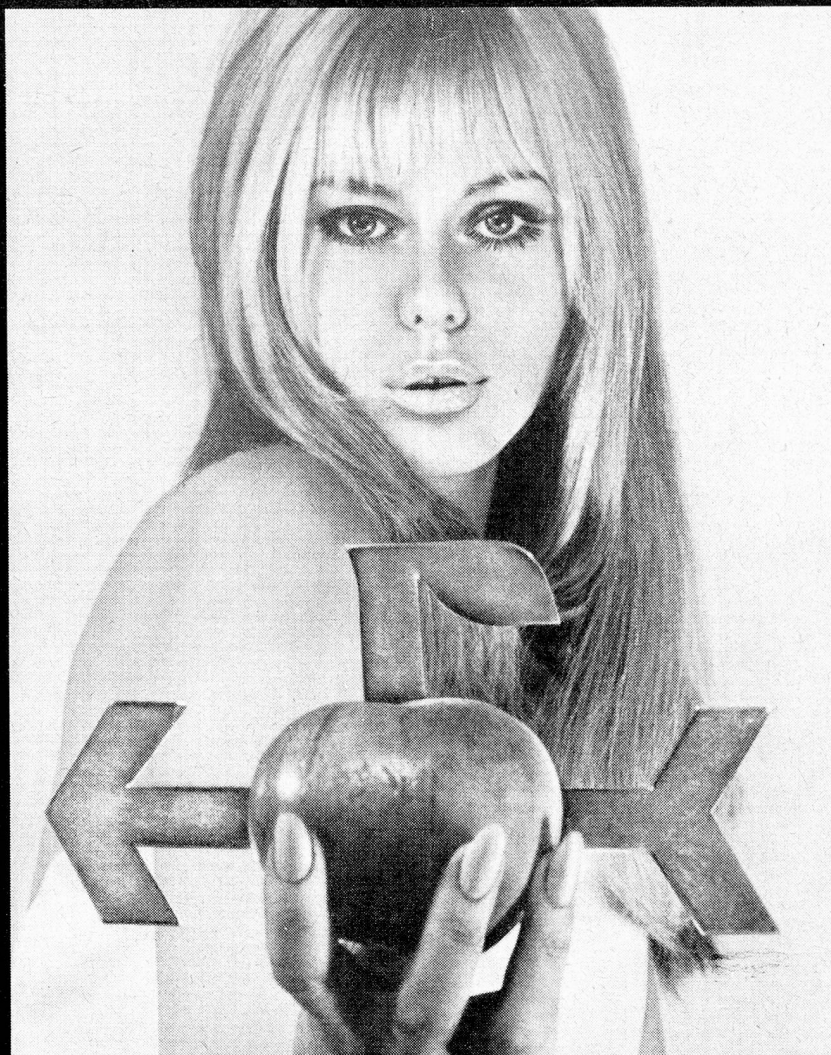
Before dealing with the latest Swiss literature which has cut itself off from this tendency, I should like to mention a literary branch which seems to be in accord with Swiss nature and character in the middle of the twentieth century. If literature means all that opens new worlds by formulated language, we must include part of scientific writing. One only has to mention names like Adolf Portmann, Carl Gustav Jung and Emil Staiger, to show that artistic feeling and factual bearing need not exclude each other. In a wider sense, all those ought also to be mentioned whose centre of creation lies in essay and criticism, represented admirably in the French-speaking part by Gonzague de Reynold and Henri de Ziegler, and in the German-speaking part of Switzerland by the late Fritz Ernst and Max Rychner. Here, too, it is impossible to give an even remotely adequate number of names, but two should be mentioned in this connection, viz. Carl Jacob Burckhardt and Werner Weber. The former's comprehensive historic monographies and biographies and essays on his meetings with artists and personalities of culture, his sensitive and polished, though slightly antiquated tales, reach a standard which satisfies highest artistic demands and which is truly occidental. Werner Weber, *Feuilleton* Editor of the "Neue Zuercher Zeitung", began in a scientific strain and then reverted again and again to lyrical creation and narrative. Above all, he works successfully as an alert mediator of world literature and as critical mentor of young writers.

Whilst there is considerable value in the French, Italian and even Romansh literature of Switzerland, it is the German-speaking authors who have reached a level in the field of German language, with Frisch and Duerrenmatt even in the world, which no writers of the other Swiss linguistic region have achieved. Whilst there is some remarkable poetry in German, it has to be said that the Swiss contribution to world literature of today is in German prose. And it is prose which belongs to the most varied fields from drama to novel, from the short story to the diary and the *Notizenfolge* as a new literary branch which lies between the compact aphorism and the connected essay. As representatives of this last group Max Frisch, Ludwig Hohl and Markus Kutter should be mentioned.

Max Frisch comprises the widest range as seen from the formal. From "Santa Cruz" to "Andorra", his dramatic work covers a field in which man — always subject and object of the drama — either looks for his individuality which he has never yet found or has already lost, or in which he personifies a model of a type recognisable as his own image by every person in the twentieth century who takes the political presence seriously. Frisch's dramas are not tied to any one locality nor are they just placed on the stage. For instance, he says in his comedy "Don Juan or the Love for Geometry" that the place is "a theatrical Seville" and the time "a period of good costumes". By such directions the author expresses the awareness that art is never an imitation of nature, but remains in its own sphere and can only have an effect on reality as model. Thus, the place names of "Santa Cruz"

and "Andorra" which are the titles of two plays, do not refer to the real localities, but simply describe imaginary places. Frisch said "Andorra is the name for a model". Nevertheless, it is evident that Frisch uses exotic names and places his novels partly in more or less exotic surroundings: "J'adore ce qui me brûle" to the Dalmatian coast, "Stiller" to Mexico, "Homo Faber" to Guatemala, New York and Greece. In this exotic alienation, the original and indigenous is acknowledged without being restrained within the idyllic. For the exotic, especially in novels, is put in opposition to the native and national. Whether Frisch is in Zurich, Rome or Berzona, he remains closely bound up with Switzerland. This is evident in his political writing like "Achtung: die Schweiz" or "The new town", in which, together with others, he proposes the creation of a modern town with its own society structure; it is also evident in his novels where he does not shy away from direct attacks on the petty and compromise-ready ways of the Swiss. In this he testifies to his love and his desperate fight to shape his homeland. But the Swiss is not confined to the contents of Frisch's novel or drama. His terse, dry language which in its factual objectivity and precision is quite dazzling, reveals his origin. During the last few years, his inventiveness recedes more and more from romantic alienation. In "Homo Faber" he put the technician in the centre, a representative of the people which has achieved world fame and material affluence through industrial production. Frisch calls "Homo Faber" not a novel, but a report. With this description he indicates the style which corresponds to the Swiss of today who is aligned with reality and efficiency. Inasmuch as the technical man rules the world today, however, Frisch's work is not that of a Swiss but merely of a contemporary. The fact that highly personal tensions have found artistic expression in his work, increases its interesting individuality.

Frisch is an uncomfortable Swiss, uncomfortable above all because he does not remain the pragmatic who is always ready to compromise like his compatriots — or he would never have turned author. The motto of the team product "Achtung: die Schweiz" is the sentence: "One is not realistic by not having any ideas." This could be a *leitmotiv* of Friedrich Duerrenmatt. In his comedy "The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi", he makes one of the chief characters, Count Uebelohe, state that the author's intention was "to examine what happens to people taking certain ideas really seriously when they collide with them" and that "the inquisitive author wanted to find out if the spirit — in any form whatever — could change a world which only exists, but has no ideas". Duerrenmatt's ideas are based on ethical-moral pathos. In "Romulus the Great" he asks the question if the individual, even if he is an almighty ruler, may and can alter the course of history in order to save a nation like for instance the Roman Empire. In "The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi", the point is whether justice can be pursued with all means according to the public prosecutor, or if it is only an agreement, a compromise according to the politician. If one follows the opinion of the politician, there cannot be any justice, only lame jurisdiction. But if one acts according to the tenets of the public prosecutor, life becomes impossible because no man can fulfil such an ideal and consequently, one after the other has to be executed. "The Visit" ("Besuch der alten Dame"), too, questions justice and examines the power of money over human beings. And in "The Physicists" the authoritarian conceit of the mind is portrayed which proceeds unconcerned as to how its discoveries are used, whether they



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are used politically for mutual destruction or whether the individual sacrifices himself so that his inventions cannot become the instruments to destroy mankind. However much his comedies are flavoured by the idea of moral teaching, Duerrenmatt is far too much anchored in real life and a writer far too full of vitality for his dramas to remain merely illustrative of any given idea. What he uses from life as material for his dramas, however, is thoroughly Swiss. The picture of the last Roman Emperor who considers it wiser to breed hens and eat eggs than to interfere grandiosely in history which he thinks he wouldn't be able to alter in any case, portrays in genial fashion the pragmatism of the Swiss citizen in a world-historic situation. The two layers which form the inimitable comic ingredients of Duerrenmatt's tragic comedies, are shown, for instance in the name of the trouser manufacturer Caesar Rupf — the name of a producer of haberdashery and famous art collector in Berne. In the two names of the Old Lady, the worldliness and the petty bourgeois traits are also projected in one person: Claire Zachanassian is the returning multi-millionairess who had left the fictitious Swiss place of Gullen as poor Kläri Wäscher. Her hangers-on Toby, Roby, Koby and Loby carry the unmistakable Swiss diminutive suffix. All his later comedies, too, show this characteristic. In the "Meteor", Duerrenmatt allowed himself an additional joke with the name of the artistic painter: Hugo Nyffen-schwander. To appreciate this fully, one has to know that there are two painters in Berne, Nyffenegger and Neuen-schwander, who are thus caricatured in a composite name.

But the places, too, in which the comedies occur often have local character. Thus, in "The Visit", Duerrenmatt created a mythical Swiss place. Naturally, Gullen could be a small town anywhere in the world, but its significance which is inevitably confronted with Gottfried Keller's Seldwyla, can only be fully understood by one who knows that *Gülle* is a Swiss word for liquid manure and who will associate with it the corresponding smells, etc. This Gullen is full of exact details, a parody on the Swiss bourgeois town. In the radio play "Herkules und der Stall des Augias", which was made into a stage comedy in 1963, large parts are literally like a Council meeting of a small Swiss Commune. Even in a title this parodistic element appears once: in "Frank V", described as "Opera of a private bank". Likewise, Duerrenmatt's language which has a wide span from the sublime to the commonplace, denotes the dramatist's origin right down to grammar and syntax. As an example: "*Sie kosten mir nichts*" (of flowers) or "*Ich habe dem Blumen-Feuz schon angeläutet*". We need not dwell on the fact that Duerrenmatt's thriller, the tale "Die Panne" and the novel "Grieche sucht Griechin" take place entirely in Swiss environment. This touch which is so notable in all of Duerrenmatt's work, would not be significant if he did not have a sense of over-all structure. This sense lies on several levels at the same time. As regards topicality, Duerrenmatt, like Frisch, appears as critic of the narrow, the petty and the materialistic which he regards as the dangers to all things Swiss. He takes the part of Hercules in the stable of Augeas. In the poetical sense, the Swiss traits appear as concrete opposing principle to the idea, to the abstract. Only when combined, do they constitute Duerrenmatt's comedy. As regards language and style, the same is manifest: the touch of dialect brings the hymnal pathos often prevalent in his comedies, back to this earth. And as playwright, his inclination towards the concrete favours the comedy: The way the person possessed by the

idea stumbles over the concrete detail is an old stock-in-trade of the occidental comedy.

(To be concluded.)

## "SCHLITTEDA ENGIADINAISA"

Many of the ancient beloved local customs of the Engadine Valley have been doomed to extinction, partly because so many young people prefer life in the cities. However, one such custom has survived to this day — the famous "Schlitteda Engiadinaisa". This picturesque wintry sleigh-ride, a tradition going back many centuries, does not take place on a set date but on various Sundays in January and February in the larger settlements of the Engadine Valley. It is the Festival of the Unmarried. The young men ask the girls of marriageable age to go with them on a sleighride. A long row of horse-drawn sleighs, many of them heirlooms made by local artisans, enlivens the snowy scenery. Of course, on this day the couples don their traditional Engadine costumes — the girls fire-engine-red skirts and charming bonnets, the young men clothes dating back to the Biedermeier period of the early nineteenth century, consisting of black trousers, colourful waistcoats, woollen jacket and top hat. Toward evening, when the sleighride is over, the entire village takes part in a swinging dance. This gay sleighride often turns out to be a couple's first ride into their future and has always been the social highlight of the winter for the inhabitants of the Engadine Valley. There is a truly Latin *joie de vivre* in this festival. The fascination which emanates from the "Schlitteda" has been handed down from generation to generation.

[S.N.T.O.]

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